

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Students of the Nation: Images of the Nationalizing Chinese Child

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To one degree or another, every modern nation values the well-being of its children. Questions of children's health, education, and identity have often gained special importance during and after moments of war, natural disaster, or other societal crisis, when the future of the nation is thrown into particularly sharp relief. China in the middle of the twentieth century was no exception. "The education of children—on the behalf of society, the nation, and the Chinese race—is our great responsibility," the journal *Modern Woman* reminded its readers in 1945 (Fang 1945, 11). Indeed, in the years following the devastation of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), as the future of the Chinese nation hung in the balance, children's lives increasingly came to serve as critical battlegrounds for redefining what it meant to be Chinese.

The images in this photo essay, which supplement my research article, "Imagining China's Children: Lower-Elementary Reading Primers and the Reconstruction of Chinese Childhood, 1945–1951" (also in this issue of *Cross-Currents*), aim to shed new light on the changing contours of this conceptual battleground by exploring one of the forms of media through which mid-twentieth-century children learned to think and be "Chinese": textbooks. Drawn from lower-elementary reading primers targeted at children in the first and second grades (in particular, a textbook series produced in the former Andong Province, where over the span of about five years a generation of children was successively introduced to Japanese, Nationalist, and Communist educational regimes), these images capture a unique moment of transition that dramatically rewrote the terms of children's relationship with the nation (Andong 1946). Most pronounced was a shift to envisioning children as laboring, collaborative members of a modernizing nation, through a range of agricultural, industrial, and military roles that cast them

as contributing members of society and rhetorically moved them out of the confines of their natal families and into the national sphere.

The images of textbook lessons, students' own drawn and written responses, and depictions of actual children at work highlight several key issues. Most important among these is a cluster of questions surrounding children's transition to becoming national subjects: When and how do children come to think of themselves as members of the nation? What are the practical and discursive strategies that states adopt to help turn them into national subjects, and how do children engage with these efforts? Despite an extensive body of scholarship on histories of adult and youth nationalism, both in China and elsewhere, the place of younger children in this process is still poorly understood. It is my hope that these images and the accompanying research article can help stimulate further research in this direction.

Methodologically, I also aim to highlight the utility of thinking more concretely about the materiality and visuality of ostensibly literary sources, exploring not only the kinds of images to which textbooks exposed students but also the kinds of images, written responses, and marginalia that students themselves authored in reaction to the content that they were expected to learn. What parts did they color in, and how? What did they leave blank? What did they scribble in the margins? The lessons they studied, as well as their own written and illustrated responses, appear in these images. Their reactions provide rare clues about how children engaged with the prescriptive adult world into which they were being introduced. As I argue in my article, the new ideal of the Chinese child as an active, industrious, and future-oriented member of a national community of peers was produced in part by the material practices of reading—through chanting lessons aloud, studying together with peers, and other embodied processes. For historians, it has always been easier to write about childhood than about children, largely due to the paucity of materials that can reflect directly on children's experiences, away from the mediating gaze of parents or other adults. It is my hope, however, that through greater attentiveness to children's reading practices and engagement with the expectations that were increasingly thrust upon them, we can begin to gain clearer insight into children's experiences and especially the processes by which children come to envision themselves as co-participants in the affairs of the nation.

Finally, these images also raise broader questions concerning the limits and possibilities of understanding children as historical actors in their own right. Children rarely take center stage in history; that distinction is typically left to adults. Yet even the youngest of children can hold

tremendous embodied power: childbearing and childrearing are fixtures of daily life, and children also stand at the center of a range of questions concerning families' economic and social capital, lineal and inheritance practices, and cultural traditions. Children think differently and experience the world differently than adults do. If we wish to achieve a fuller understanding of societal change and experience, whether in China or elsewhere, we should not long leave children out of the story.

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