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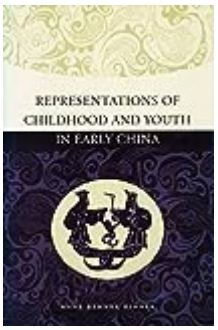

Anne Behnke Kinney. *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. x + 294 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4731-8.

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How and Where Does One "Discover Childhood" in Han Dynasty China?

The word "representations" suggests representative views, not just any views, and imposes a discipline on the author to convince readers that she has mastered the source materials and discerned persistent thoughts from a past world. In the case of "early China" this world is long past, ranging over the first millennium B.C. and the early centuries of the following millennium: the Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties. The source materials for this era are varied, but the ones used in this study are all of a literary quality, whether traditional transmitted texts or recent manuscripts unearthed by archeological excavations. Anne Behnke Kinney has immersed herself in this vast literature, sifted out the passages that pertain to childhood and youth, organized them into patterns, and then evaluated and given context to the patterns. The result is a tour de force, a distinct contribution to Han studies and to the history of childhood.

This reviewer, as a historian of modern China, and particularly childhood in China in the 1890-1920 period, is used to a bewildering array of sources and approaches to history, enabled by the relative proximity of my time period to the present. My own studies have been based on oral interviews, autobiographies, sociological and demographic data, fictional works, and theories of human development as well as conventional historical documents.[1] Many of these possibilities fall away for Han studies; scholars have only the sources that for one reason or another survived the centuries more or less intact, whether texts or artifacts. Kinney uses two different types of surviving text sources to convey a more complex and comprehensive representation of early Chinese views of childhood than one type alone would have produced. The first five chapters of Kinney's book mine literary works–histories, essays, ritual texts, legal treatises, biographies–that produce a view of childhood recognizable to most Western readers: one that emphasizes positive and negative role models and utilizes text-based learning in formal educational settings. The sixth chapter on "the magical manipulation of childhood" is based upon recently dug up Han dynasty manuscripts, unfiltered by post-Han tradition, that add an unfamiliar occult or religious dimension missing in the literary texts. What had disappeared, in received tradition, reappears thanks to modern archeology.

One wonders what else is missing or changed in received tradition. Kinney is well aware of the limitations of the literary material, particularly the histories, which have significant admixtures of myth, fiction, and didactic lessons. She states that it is beyond the scope of her study to evaluate the authenticity of these forty or so received texts, but she utilizes the known distortions in the texts for other useful purposes. For example, the biography of Houji, the Millet King, is discussed as an archetypal myth, not an actual life. The *Zuo zhuan* (*Traditions of Zuo*) is not used as an objective mirror of the history of the Spring and Autumn period but as "a more or less accurate literary rendering of issues that preoccupied Chinese intellectuals in the pre-Qin period" (p. 86). In his works the Han historian Sima Qian mixes in accounts of parental abuses of power by Han emperors, due to his belief in a parent-ruler analogy: that poor parenting was a reflection (and sometimes even a cause) of poor governing. This belief made parent-child relations a charged topic in his dynastic history, for it mirrored, in microcosm, how the ruler treated his people (p. 182). His indirect criticism of Emperor Wu earned Sima Qian castration for "defaming the Emperor." But we as readers benefit from his belief because the treatment of children was pushed to the fore in his historical and biographical work.

Still, Kinney is often engaged in the difficult task of "demonstrating suggestions" about the actual history, because that is the degree of certainty that she can reasonably claim for many of her propositions about the way things were in early China. Her claims are stronger where multiple sources converge, as in her reconstruction of "imperial victims" (pp. 69-84). Of 13 emperors in the Former Han, the reigns of only three were not marred by "the slaughter of children," most of them innocently caught up in the deadly games of adult court politics. The issue of imperial succession and the heir apparent often dominated court politics; Kinney realized she needed to understand in great detail how the rules, practices, and customs of succession evolved through the Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties. Her substantial (and tangential) account of the rules of succession could have stood alone as an article, but it is included in the book as a useful appendix. The more strongly grounded propositions in her study concern educated adult perceptions and changes in attitudes, court practices and ethos, legal norms, and medical and cosmological understandings. The actual lives, families, and educations of ordinary children, especially girls, are simply less knowable from the existing sources, no matter how strong the historian's detective work.

A central proposition in the book is that childhood was discovered, "rather suddenly" (p. 3) during Han times (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). The evidence for this is the appearance of more frequent and detailed references to children and to the childhoods of famous people in the written records of the Former Han dynasty. Frequency alone, with all the vagaries of why and how records survive, would not support the claim, but new cultural conditions in the Former Han help strengthen the plausibility of the argument. Kinney cites the new Confucianist or Ruist emphasis at court, the coming of state-sponsored merit-based education, the popularity of correlative and cosmological thinking, the supposed lessons posed by the fall of the short-lived Qin empire (221 B.C.-A.D. 206), and the educational theories of the philosopher Xunzi. Collectively, these factors help explain how a book like Liu Xiang's *Lienue zhuan*(*Traditions of Exemplary Women*) could appear and be a "best representation" of early Han thought (p. 20). The book projects the transformative power of mothers over children's moral development, and introduces (or popularizes) key concepts such as fetal instruction, concern with the inception of actions, and the need for continuous and gradual transformation of children, as it were, soaking them long and deeply in a positive moral environment (the Han metaphor is that raising children is akin to dyeing textiles).

Yet, does all this add up to a "discovery of childhood" a la Philippe Aries' classic study *Centuries of Childhood*? Aries' 1960 argument is based on a dense social history of pre-modern and modern times, the latter period a time when companionable marriage becomes a middle-class ideal in the West and when children begin to be appreciated more in their own right as actors.[2] In Confucian circles, whether among idealistic or realistic thinkers, the emphasis was on shaping children, in stages, to adult moral standards of what it meant to be fully human. Children were malleable, passive, and vulnerable, needing constant guidance, instruction, and protection. Correlative and cosmological thinking applied mechanical schemes to children, whether based on physical features, numerology, or yin-yang thinking. The Daoists idealized the unformed possibilities of the fetus, yet saw an inevitable corruption via civilization after birth. It is a stretch to believe that this pervasive environmental determinism was broken in Han times. The evolution towards standards of considerate parenthood in the modern era was long in coming in China. Kinney herself, as editor of an earlier volume *Chinese Views of Childhood*(1995), noted various breakthroughs in several pre-

modern eras: the Six Dynasties (386-589 A.D.), when Daoist ideas facilitated positive portraits of "immoral" child behavior, and the Song (960-1279 A.D.), when children were sometimes represented in art and poetry apart from adult preoccupations. The earlier changes in the Han were also a breakthrough, with the advent of elite schooling and the attention to the development of children, but these changes are not a "discovery of childhood" in the modern Western sense. Kinney, to her credit, put the word "discovery" in parentheses in a heading in chapter 1, but not in the chapter title itself.

Children, in Han times, typically meant boys. So where do scholars find information on girls, who are fully one half of the story of childhood and youth? In chapter 5 entitled simply "Girls," Kinney argues that the category of "women" often provides insight on girls, as girls were married off young, typically between ages 13 and 16. Court women in particular offer a rich vein of insight in the Former Han dynasty. The Yellow Gate into the imperial palace was more open to common girls than in pre-Qin China, but they entered only as palace servants, entertainers (sometimes slaves), and concubines. Some parlayed this opportunity into power, usually by catching the Emperor's fancy or better yet, producing a male heir; once in power, their families rose with them. One such powerful consort clan, the Huo family during the reign of Xuandi (74-48 B.C.), attempted to seize imperial power in 67 B.C.; they failed, but the attempt so alarmed reformist Confucians that they initiated a debate about how to control evil female influence at court. Their solution was educating court women in Confucian ways, which meant women learning to subordinate themselves to their husband's family. Liu Xiang's *Lienue zhuan* (ca. 18 B.C.) was a key literary work in promoting this end. Kinney masterfully sums up the unfairness of it all: "men were never asked to deny the importance of their natal families, to remain faithful to a spouse with multiple live-in partners, to die rather than remarry, or to limit their scholarly attainments to acknowledging their inherently inferior status in family, state, and cosmos" (p. 149). So, some educated girls and women did indeed appear in court circles hereafter, and some common women were honored by the state as chaste widows and obedient daughters. But the educating and the honoring proceeded always within the prescribed social hierarchies that bound all Chinese, boys and men as well as girls and women. Girls who learned this lesson acquired survival skills, whether for the brutal politics of the imperial court or for "the alien territory of their husband's family" (p. 150).

This story on girls in chapter 5 is indeed a cautionary tale about female advancement. What Kinney saw as a promising if narrow opening for common girls helped provide the setting for a discourse that "perhaps ultimately depressed female status for the next two millennia" (p. 131). She sees both dimensions. Indeed, "inquiring into the costs and benefits for children" in supposedly naturally ordered social hierarchies is an explicit goal of her book (p. 1). Like May Fourth (1919) scholar Hu Shi, Kinney wants to turn the hierarchies on their head and see how social inferiors like women and children fared at the hands of their privileged superiors. She finds gender-bias, adult-bias, infant abandonment, predatory patriarchal and imperial practices (sometimes also by women at the top). But the strength of this book is that it does not moralize simplistically. It uses the historical approach to dampen the righteous impulse to condemn the past (much of it of course meriting condemnation). Positive moral advances come slowly and unpredictably, whereas moral reverses seem an ever-present danger. We trust her next book on Han dynasty women will bring the same steady and balanced perspective to this subject; her readers will benefit from a deep look into the human condition in its Chinese guise.

Notes

[1]. Jon L. Saari, *Legacies of Childhood: Growing up Chinese in a Time of Crisis, 1890-1920*(Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1990).

[2]. For a recent synthesis putting Aries work in context with subsequent scholarship, see Peter N. Stearns,*Childhood in World History*(New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 43-72.