THE NATION'S CHILD: CHILDHOOD, CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND
NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MODERN CHINA

A Dissertation in
Curriculum and Instruction and Women’s Studies
by
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2013
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ABSTRACT

In the final decades of the nineteenth century China saw profound changes. Militarily defeated by colonial powers and forced to sign a series of unequal treaties ceding parts of its territory, the thousand-year-old Chinese empire, under the rule of the Great Qing, painfully felt that it was going into decline. Under the threat of national extinction, progressive Chinese called for saving China by transforming it into a modern nation. This dissertation suggests that since the last decades of the nineteenth century China’s modernization has been intricately intertwined with the construction of childhood and children’s literature. I perceive my dissertation as a genealogy of modern childhood in relation to China’s nation-building projects from the late nineteenth century to the present. This dissertation traces three paradigmatic shifts in regard to the correlation between the child and nation in modern Chinese history, by identifying the humanistic “natural” child of the Republican period (1912–1949), the revolutionary adult-child of the Maoist period (1949–1976), and the patriotic modern child of the post-socialist period (1976 onward) as three ideal models of Chinese citizenship. While these models represent different dominant discourses about the child in the different historical periods of modern China, the model itself is not a homogeneous concept. That is, the meaning of each child model is unstable, contextualized by historical conditions marked in terms of nationality, gender, class, and age, as well as their intersections and disconnections. Additionally, it is also important to note that the specified historical periods are not distinctive historical eras having clear-cut boundaries. As I attempt to illustrate, the formation of the concept of the child in a so-called new era often builds on ideas of the past, and the past child usually figure prominently in the discourse of the ideal child of
the present. Furthermore, the modern Chinese child and children’s literature is never a purely indigenous product, but a hybrid of Western and local discourses. This dissertation thus also attempts to show that the local does not necessarily stand in opposition to the global and is often mediated through the transnational.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the personal, professional, and institutional support I have received throughout the course of writing this dissertation. I would like to express my deep gratitude to my dissertation advisor Dr. Gail Boldt, whose unwavering belief in my work not only made this dissertation possible but also sustained me through the most difficult time in my academic life. I am also indebted to my mentor Dr. Daniel Hade. It is him who has led me to the fascinating field of children’s literature and convinced me to follow my heart. I would also like to thank Dr. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh for her helpful suggestions made during the writing of the dissertation. Many thanks go to Dr. Shuang Shen, from whom I have learned a great deal about the topic of cosmopolitanism that has become an important aspect of this dissertation.

I am thankful to the publishers for permission to use revised portions of previously published material. Major portions of Chapter 4 were published under the title “‘Chairman Mao’s Child’: Sparkling Red Star and the Construction of Children in the Chinese Cultural Revolution” by the Johns Hopkins University Press in Children’s Literature Association Quarterly 36.4 (2011): 381–409. © 2011 Children’s Literature Association. Parts of Conclusion were published under the title “Imaginations of the Nation: Childhood and Children’s Literature in Modern China” in Yan Wu, Kerry Mallan, and Roderick McGillis, eds., (Re)imagining the World: Children’s Literature’s Response to Changing Times (New York: Springer, 2013). A Graduate Student Research Grant from the Children’s Literature Association funded my dissertation research in China.

I also own debts to my friends at Penn State. The conversations I had with them about this dissertation made the writing process more enjoyable. My greatest debts are to
my parents and husband. This dissertation would be impossible without their spiritual comfort and unconditional love.
Introduction

“Perhaps there are still children who haven’t eaten men? Save the children . . . .”

This is the last part of Lu Xun’s short story “A Madman’s Diary,” seen as one of the most influential works in modern Chinese literary history. At the outset, the narrator alleges that the following writing is part of a diary written by a sick young man, a friend of his whom he once wanted to visit. The diary narrates the kinds of incidents that lead the young man to believe that the people around him eat people and are also plotting to eat him. Toward the end of the story, the young man realizes that his own brother actually ate their five-year-old sister and the young man himself was also complicit in eating his sister without knowing. He then comes to the conclusion that his unwitting complicity is an inevitable outcome of the four-thousand-year-old tradition that people eat people. But the young man seems to feel a flicker of hope in children, who might have not eaten anyone.

The story was originally published on May 15, 1918 in the flagship journal of the May Fourth movement, New Youth. It was a time when progressive Chinese intellectuals were calling for dismantling Confucianism with the hope to establish a new social and cultural order in China. The cannibalism discovered by the “mad” man metaphorically describes Confucianism’s oppression and erosion of human nature. Those who “eat people” are actually “eaten” by Confucian morals and unwittingly keep the tradition alive. Worth noting is the implicit paradox suggested by the ending. It is clear that the passionate call to “save the children” targets adults, urging them to rescue children from the oppressive tradition. But if adults themselves are complicit in the tradition, how could they save children? Do adults also need to be saved by children, who are not yet
contaminated by the tradition as the “mad” man believes? Then how is this circular rescue possible? And to what end?

This dissertation precisely aims to engage with these questions through examining the entangled relationship among the construction of nationhood, childhood, and children’s literature in modern China. I argue that the figure of the child and children’s literature play indispensable roles in the nationalist-oriented political and social imaginations of modern China. Sharon Stephens makes a connection between childhood and nationhood when she argues that constituting either childhood or nationalism “takes considerable ‘imaginative ideological labor’” (5). More specifically, just as modern constructions of childhood are “neither natural nor inevitable reflections of biological dimensions of sex and age,” national identity does not “develop naturally or inevitably out of pre-existing commonalities of territory, language, religion, customs or world-views” (Stephens 6). Discussing the French Revolution’s engendering of a new republic, Alarlyyes argues that “the child became a symbol of the new citizen. The citizen was to be a child of nature and a child of the state.” Children came to “express the new beginning that is a centerpiece of the ideology of nationalist movements” (74; emphasis original).

Like a growing child, an emerging nation is in an early stage of development. Thus, by analogy, children have become one of the most potent symbols of newly founded nation-states. But the importance of children in China’s nation-building project lies not only in their symbolism but also in the ideological, cultural, and political work they have done to generate sociopolitical transformations.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, a time when China was reinventing itself from an empire into a modern nation, the stories of the child have become entangled with
those of the modern Chinese nation, functioning as a crucial site for the desires, disillusionments, and ideological contradictions of Chinese society. To illustrate the continuous and changing relationship between childhood and nationhood, I identify through the dissertation different versions of the child as ideal models of Chinese citizenship at different historical moments in modern China, including the Late Qing period (1890s-1911), the Republican period (1912-1949), the Maoist period (1949-1976), and the post-Maoist period (1976 onward). It is important to note that these eras are not distinctive historical periods having clear-cut boundaries. As I attempt to show, the formation of the concept of the child in a so-called new era often builds on ideas of the past, and the past child usually figure prominently in the discourse of the idealized child at present.

**Defining the Nation**

In his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson suggests that the nation is “an imagined political community” (15). “True” or “genuine” communities—that is, national essences—do not exist; instead, the nation is constructed from the imaginations of its citizens. The nation, however, should not be simply equated with the state. Ernest Gellner long ago distinguished between the nation and the state in *Nations and Nationalism*: “nations and states are not the same contingency. . . But before they could become intended for each other, each of them had to emerge, and their emergence was independent and contingent” (6). While the “state” is the “institution or set of institutions specifically concerned with the enforcement of order,” the nation is more of “an idea of the nation” (7)—or “an
imagined political community” as Anderson put it. Gellner suggested two important conditions that make the idea of the nation possible. The first is the sharing of the same culture, which means “a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating” (7); and the second condition is that two men of the same nation “recognize each other as belonging to the same nation” (7, emphasis original). It is possible for two men to meet and recognize each other as fellows, as Gellner hypothesized here. But how such recognition is possible for all people within the same territory becomes a difficult question. Anderson’s emphasis on imagination sheds light here.

Anderson argues that the nation is “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (15, emphasis original). For Anderson, the central means to form this image of community is the capitalist print that functions as a unified field of communication. The nationalization of a society is thus not merely the political indoctrination of its members but is a complex sociocultural process that takes considerable collective imagination, which is in turn rooted in and produces material reality rather than pure fantasy.

From the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, Chinese nationalism was rarely the political mobilization of the state and was often formed in opposition to the state. The Republican government, which was founded in 1912 following the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and often seen colluding with Chinese warlords and foreign imperialists, had much difficulty in acting as a forceful and credible national authority representing the interests of its people. In 1919, following the end of
World War I, the Allied victors convened at the Paris Peace Conference to set peace terms for the defeated Central Powers. The Republic of China also attended the conference as an ally to the Entente Powers. However, the Western Allies broke its promise to return to China Germany’s concessions on the Shangdong peninsula as the condition of China’s support for the Allies during the war. The sovereignty right was instead transferred from Germany to Japan. As this news broke in China, it sparked a huge demonstration in Peking on May Fourth, 1919, against the verdict on Shandong and the “traitorous” government which eventually signed the Treaty of Versailles legalizing the transfer of Shandong to Japan. This incident also led to a series of nation-wide protests against Japanese imperialism and the Chinese warlords who had fragmented and weakened the nation to a point where it was forced to sign the treaty to appease Japanese interests (Denton 114). This patriotic protest movement is called the May Fourth movement.

The name of the May Fourth movement is also used to describe the cultural-intellectual activities preceding and following the incident, which are generally seen as the broad cultural dimension of the political protest movement portrayed as “the first large-scale expressions of Chinese nationalism” (Denton 114). Such a broad cultural revolution is also called the New Culture movement, covering a period from the mid-1910s to mid-1920s. The New Culture movement was led by progressive (usually Western-trained) Chinese intellectuals, and characterized by radical anti-traditionalism aimed at transforming China from a Confucian society into a modern nation via borrowing “advanced” Western cultural, political, and scientific knowledge. This movement is generally seen as originating in 1915 with the founding of the journal New
Youth, the leading forum of this new generation of Chinese intellectuals, and as ending in the mid-1920s when many Chinese intellectuals began to move decidedly toward Marxism. The May Fourth movement thus played a pivotal role in conceptualizing and constructing modern Chinese nationhood, exerting a great influence on the Chinese thinking of the modern nation afterward. Therefore, the example of the May Fourth movement demonstrates that nationalism is “not reducible to the pursuit of a political state” (Karl 24). However, it can consolidate into a political state. The Chinese nationalism of the early twentieth century was also a desire to unite the country and establish a democratic state representing the people’s interests. But the relationship between nationalism and the state is “historical, not inevitable,” and “it needs to be specified contingently, not teleologically” (Karl 24). The Chinese Communist Party was the ultimate victor in the political contest in Republican China, leading the Chinese people to found the People’s Republic of China in 1949. In the following three decades, the nation and the state became conflated and both represented by the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese nation-state during the period was imagined as a national family with Chairman Mao Zedong as the nation’s father. But since China ended the Maoist era at the end of the 1970s, the state has redefined Chinese nationalism, which is, however, not necessarily congruent with popular nationalism in contemporary China. I discuss this revamping of Chinese nationalism in the concluding chapter.

Anderson defines the nation as “limited,” “because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has infinite, if elastic boundaries, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations” (16). As suggested here, the nation is traditionally understood as geographically confined. However, this idea has been recently
challenged by critics attempting to expand the definition of the nation. The local and the global no longer stand in binary opposition to each other. As Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih argue, “The national is no longer the site of homogeneous time and territorialized space but is increasingly inflected by a transnationality that suggests the intersection of ‘multiple spatiotemporal (dis)orders’” (6). As my discussion on the May fourth movement indicates, Chinese nationalism has an international dimension, intricately intertwined with the ideas of “good” foreigners, who represent “advanced” Western knowledge that could reform China, and “bad” foreigners as imperialists oppressing the Chinese people. In fact nationalism would not be possible without a perception of “the self” in relation to “the other.” My dissertation foregrounds this transnational aspect of Chinese nationalism, particularly in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. Chapter 2 examines how the imagination of a democratic Chinese nation in the early twentieth century was mediated through the construction of an idealized foreign child epitomized by Lewis Carroll’s Alice. Chapter 3 studies a work for children by a prominent female writer Bing Xin, *Letters to Young Readers*, and explores the function of transnational sympathy in constructing the affective and gendered dimension of nation-building in the early twentieth century China.

Through this dissertation, I also attempt to illustrate that the construction of the nation is not a gender-neutral process. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the Chinese intelligentsia, which constitutes the major force of China’s nation-building, has been predominately male. In comparison with their fellow sisters, most of whom were illiterate under imperial patriarchy, male Chinese nationalists of both Republican and Maoist China often self-represented as the legitimate voice for Chinese women’s rights
and concerned themselves with “the question of women,” which postulates that Chinese women were relentlessly oppressed in imperial China and needed be freed. Ironically, largely due to this women’s emancipation movement led by male nationalists in the early twentieth century, a generation of “New Women” emerged. These women ventured out of their domestic domain into the public sphere, took part in nationalist politics, and pursued careers traditionally only open to men as teachers, writers, political activists and revolutionaries. The text *Letters to Young Readers*, which Chapter 3 focuses on, was written by such a prominent new woman of the May Fourth generation, Bing Xin. I argue that while Bing Xin made an important contribution to the May Fourth thinking of the nation by suggesting that rather than being merely political, the nation-building is fundamentally an affective process and proposing a way to build such a nation in her *Letters*, she was marginalized as a “children’s literature writer.” Chapter 5 focuses on another version of the “New Woman,” Liu Hulan, a young revolutionary martyr. I discuss how her stories were entangled with the socialist construction of New China. Furthermore, in the two chapters I also show that the image of the nation itself is gendered. While the image of a loving mother was often associated with the nation during the May Fourth period, Chairman Mao came to embody the nation-state in New China. Such gendering of the nation has crucial implications for the construction of the ideal child. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 illustrate that the May Fourth ideal child was easily associated with femininity and usually a girl, whereas the development of the ideal proletarian child of the Maoist era was modeled implicitly on that of the boy, as shown by Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.
Toward a Genealogy of Childhood and Children’s Literature

Like the nation, the formation of childhood is also a sociocultural process of “imagination.” In his now classic work *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, Philippe Aries suggests that the concept of childhood is historically specific and socially constructive. This constructive nature of the child raises a difficult question for children’s literature. As Jacqueline Rose suggests in her foundational text *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, children’s fiction is always written by adults who are no longer children themselves. Rose argues from a psychoanalytic perspective that the child inside children’s fiction is always innocent and passive, being a product of the (male) adult’s desire to conceal the precariousness of sexual identity. This innocent and passive child, Rose states, can be traced back to the Romantic conceptualization of childhood represented by writings of Locke and Rousseau.

Rose’s argument has been challenged by children’s literature critics. For example, Marah Gubar’s *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children’s Literature* repudiates Rose’s idea about the innocent child and impossibility of children’s literature. Gubar argues that the Golden Age children’s literature authors, who are often seen as reinforcing the idea of the innocent child, actually resisted this idea and celebrated children’s agency. The innocent child and the agential child came to stand in binary opposition to each other. In “Theorising and Theories: The Conditions of Possibility of Children’s Literature,” Rudd criticizes two troublesome notions of childhood. The culturally deterministic model of constructivism posits the child as passively awaiting inscription by cultural/adult norms. This model’s apparent opposite is the position that argues for “a humanistic essentialism,” which rests upon an “essential” child “whose
nature and needs we can know” (30). Rudd, though, sees a connection between the two seemingly opposite positions: “the two notions are, in fact, impossible to keep apart (just like adult and child), the essential child still being tacitly evoked by constructionists, in that a perennially voiceless child is juxtaposed to a dominating adult” (32). Yet humanistic essentialism predicts not only “a perennially voiceless child,” but also its opposite—a voluntarist child who is a free agent, or a “real” self, capable of divesting herself/himself of external cultural/adult oppression.

What is needed in children’s literature studies, I believe, is a historicized and contextualized critical perspective that does not valorize any particular version of childhood, no matter whether it is the innocent child or the agential child. By studying the construction of childhood across a long period of time from the late nineteenth century to the present in China, I perceive my study as a critical genealogy of childhood that has two features. First, it employs history but is not a conventional history in the sense that it is not linear and progressive. My study is not a history of childhood or children’s literature gradually emerging out of the darkness of repression, mistreatment, and miscomprehension. This is the approach taken by existing studies on Chinese children’s literature (e.g., Farquhar, Jiang Feng, and Fang Weiping). They establish the May Fourth construction of the “natural” child as the “true” expression of “real” children’s literature that was repressed during the Maoist era and needs to be recuperated in contemporary China. My study suggests that Chinese childhood, no matter whether it is in the form of the innocent child, the revolutionary child, or the patriotic child, is historically contingent, fashioned through concrete historical conditions. Furthermore, Chinese childhood and its paradigmatic shifts are inseparable from Chinese nationalism, a form of power that takes
various forms, such as centralized political power embodied by the nation-state and more diffuse forms of nationalist imaginations. However, the child’s entanglement with power does not mean that the child is passively oppressed and incapable of exerting its agency. As Michel Foucault insightfully suggests in *The History of Sexuality*, power is not always repressive in nature, but can be productive. I discuss in detail this productive dimension of power in Chapter 4 by looking at the fashioning of the ideal proletarian child in the Maoist era.

This genealogical method allows us to see not only that childhood and children’s literature are historically and geographically specific concepts, but also to see that their conceptual and material shifts both produce and are produced by large-scale sociopolitical transformations. This idea challenges the conventional assumption both in and outside academia that children and children’s literature are trivial and apolitical. And thus the issues of children and children’s literature deserve more critical attention. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the global could be mediated through the local, and China’s nation-building has a transnational dimension. This is also a feature of Chinese childhood, a topic that has been very much understudied. Chinese childhood, as well as Chinese children’s literature, is never a purely indigenous product. On the contrary, the modern Chinese child has been intertwined with foreign forces, a point I particularly address in Chapter 2. This transnational aspect of Chinese childhood adds a new perspective to childhood and children’s literature studies. That is, ideas of childhood are inherently dynamic and geographically uncontainable social forces that travel from one region to another and interact with the local to create new forms of social imagination and relations. In our increasingly integrated world characterized by unprecedented
economic and cultural exchanges, this approach would offer a non-binary view of the relationship between the local and global—especially between the West and East—as embodied in the culturally hybrid child.

Overview

This dissertation consists of five chapters, structured chronologically. I begin with the Late Qing, move through the May Fourth period and the Maoist period, and conclude with contemporary China. In Chapter 1, I discuss the birth of the modern Chinese child in the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the May Fourth period. In the first half of Chapter 1, I focus on the ideas of a prominent Late Qing intellectual, Liang Qichao. Drawing on evolutionary theory dominant during his time, Liang’s ideas on Chinese youths, the nation, and education exerted great influence on the concept of the modern child and children’s literature formulated later by May Fourth intellectuals such as Zhou Zuoren, who are usually seen as spearheading a radical view of childhood in China. Thus, the second half of Chapter 1 discusses how the earlier thoughts of children and education in the Late Qing evolved into a new theory of modern childhood and children’s literature integral to the nationalist May Fourth movement.

The emerging Chinese children’s literature, however, largely comprised of adaptations of foreign children’s stories. Chapter 2 focuses on the issues of translation by examining three children’s texts, the first Chinese translation of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in 1922, the first Chinese adaptation *Alice’s Adventures in China* in 1928, and a later retelling *Miss Alice* in 1931. While a theory of the modern child characterized by its “inherent” qualities of imagination, curiosity, and innocence was laid out by May
Fourth intellectuals, these three texts attempted to concretize the theoretical child by constructing Alice as an ideal innocent child embodying a radically new Chinese nation. But these three texts differed considerably in their representations of the foreign girl. While the first Chinese translation was an experiment of the May Fourth nationalist politics, its validity for transforming China was challenged by the following two adaptations, ironically, through re-employing the figure of Alice.

In Chapter 3, I explore the affective dimension of the May Fourth nationalism by examining Bing Xin’s work for children, *Letters to Young Readers*. This work constructs a “natural” loving relationship between the mother and innocent child that formed the very basis of the desired national community during the time. While the feminization of the nation embodied by the loving mother was a means to dismantle patriarchal Confucianism in which the father ruled, the innocent and weak child embodied by Bing Xin herself became the ideal representative of sympathetic fellow countrymen bound by “love.” I also suggest that Bing Xin’s imagination of the nation was mediated through a feminine cosmopolitanism and the critical reception of Bing Xin revealed the contradictions of the May Fourth politics inflected by gender.

Chapter 4 shifts the discussion from the Republican period to the Maoist era. I investigate the construction of the ideal proletarian child in relation to that of New China by examining a revolutionary children’s film produced in the period, *Sparkling Red Star*. I employ Judith Butler’s concept of performativity to argue that the ideal child citizen in the Maoist era was produced through the child’s performative replication of the nation-state/Party while simultaneously deviating from it. The Maoist nation-state thus celebrates an agential child actively making contributions to the proletarian cause.
The last chapter looks into the representations of the ideal girl Liu Hulan in revolutionary works produced in the Maoist era in order to surface the gender politics of the socialist nation-building project. The various tales about this historical figure did not form a consistent image of the girl, who is sometimes portrayed as a child and at other times as a woman. These various representations of the girl signify different mechanisms employed by the socialist nation-state to produce its female subject. I suggest that age plays a decisive role in constructing the girl’s relation to the socialist nation-state. The heroine’s childhood conflates with that of the ideal proletarian child discussed in Chapter 4. But as she grows into adolescence, she is refashioned from a genderless child into a female subject devoted to the masculinized nation-father. At last, I conclude with a discussion on the revamping of Chinese nationalism and childhood in contemporary China.
Chapter One

“Save China”: The Making of the Modern Child

Until the mid-nineteenth century, China was an empire. China was not yet a nation, but the world. As Haiyan Lee explains, “The rulers of powerful Chinese dynasties situated themselves at the pivot of ‘All under Heaven’ (tianxia) and ruled the imperium with a universalist ideology: imperial Confucianism” (unpaged). In the second half of the nineteenth century, China encountered aggressive foreign powers and experienced a series of devastating military defeats. It was during this time that China contracted from the world to a nation (Levenson). The military prowess of European powers squeezed China to the periphery of a globe comprised of competing nation-states. As European imperialism intensified, there was a growing sense among the Chinese that China would become extinct someday. As the political situation was deteriorating, progressive Chinese intellectuals called for institutional reforms. Under this historical condition the fashioning of a modern Chinese nation became intricately entangled with children. This chapter explores the development of the mutually implicated relationship between the nation and the child from the late Qing period to the May Fourth period. A dominant view in Chinese children’s literature studies is that modern childhood and children’s literature came into being in the May Fourth period in China.¹ A problem with this line of argument is that it unwittingly aligns itself with the May Fourth iconoclasm. May Fourth intellectuals saw themselves making a clean break with the past and ushering the Chinese people into a new era. But May Fourth intellectuals’ self-perceived radicalism had deep connections with the past. This chapter suggests that the new concept of the modern child and children’s literature, conventionally seen as originating in the May Fourth movement,
should be traced back to the late Qing, when progressive Chinese intellectuals began to see that a stronger Chinese nation rested on a new citizenry. This chapter first discusses this new kind of imagination of China as represented by late Qing intellectual Liang Qichao (1873-1929), and then examines how the late Qing ideas of the nation and child gradually developed into the May Fourth thinking of the modern child and children’s literature.

**Imagining a Youthful Chinese Nation**

In the late nineteenth century, Liang Qichao proposed to the declining Qing court a series of reform measures, such as revamping classical education, developing capitalism, and modernizing the army, with the hope of transforming China from an absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy modeled on Meiji Japan. The proposal was eventually adopted by the reform-minded Guangxu Emperor in the 1898 Reform. But the reform was violently crushed by the conservatives led by the Empress Dowager Cixi, and lasted for only one hundred and three days. The failed reform forced Liang to flee to Japan where he continued to meditate on ways to modernize China. In 1900 Liang wrote an essay, “On Youthful China.” Liang began the essay with the then popular saying among Westerners and Japanese that China is an old empire. In the following discussion Liang both provided a rationale for such a label and repudiated it. Liang first reasoned that to answer the question of whether a country is old or young is first to discuss whether its people are old or young. Liang then set up a chain of opposites between the old and the young. Old people are described as indulgent of the past, conservative, pessimistic, cowardly, and timid, whereas young people are future-oriented, progressive, optimistic,
heroic, and adventurous. The old are thus compared to the setting sun, and the young to the rising sun. The old also refer to the corrupt, aging, and weak Qing officials, who governed the country but nevertheless were incapable of defending their country against foreign invasions. Since the old as representative of the country are dying, China, in this light, seems indeed an old and dying empire. However, Liang rejected this idea, arguing that China is not a dying old empire but a youthful nation. Central to this idea is Liang’s definition of “guo” (nation). “Guo” means “a territory and its people”; and “the people administer the affairs of the territory, create and obey law, and exercise sovereignty while simultaneously under subjection” (410). Liang stated that those countries that met such standards are fully established nations, and that the nation had been an invention in the past one hundred years. While fully established nations such as European countries are like a matured adult, Liang suggested, those countries not yet fully formed into nations are like a youth. And China belonged to the latter. What Liang was doing here is not so much redefining China as inventing a new China. Conventionally understood as an old empire, China here was imagined as a modern republic in the making.

Liang thus argued that China of the past is not a true nation, though it is named as such. That is, China had been a “nation” of clans, primitive tribes, feudalist nobles, and despotic emperors. The development of a nation, Liang reasoned, resembles an embryo’s development into an adult. China was at the embryonic stage before it entered its infanthood of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties (before 771 BCE). From the time of Confucius (around 551 BCE-479 BCE) to the present, Liang wrote, China is in childhood. Liang believed that China is now about to become a youth (above fifteen-year old). Liang believed that the reason why China had developed so slowly is because the past rulers
had obstructed its growth. This also explains why China, only in its childhood now, already looks old and dying. In this light, China was misnamed as an old empire, for it was in fact a sick child. As for how China can develop into a real nation, Liang turned to the youths of China. As he wrote, “It is the responsibility of Chinese youths to create a youthful China in the future.” While Liang made it clear here that a youthful China was in the process of becoming, it was also important to note that the Chinese youths Liang so passionately spoke of were not an existing demographic group but another social category, like the nation, waiting to be made. This is further illustrated by Liang’s *The New Citizen*, originally published as a series of essays in the *New Citizen Journal* from 1902 to 1906.

In *The New Citizen*, Liang argued that the creation of a new system, a new government, and a new nation depends on a new citizenry. According to Liang, only a few progressive leaders would not fundamentally transform China. The reform failed because the Chinese blamed each other and were indifferent to the enterprise of building a new nation. Liang proposed that the most urgent mission for China is not to learn advanced technologies or political systems from the West, but to forge the masses of Chinese into new citizens who would help each other, and defend their country out of love. To illustrate what makes a new Chinese citizenry, Liang discussed five racial groups in the world, black, red, brown, yellow, and white, from a social Darwinian perspective which, since Yan Yu’s 1898 translation and exposition of T. H. Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*, had been a major theoretical framework for the Chinese to understand why China had lagged behind Western powers in the newly discovered world. Based on the evolutionary principle of the survival of the fitted, Liang presented in his
Five Races Chart the white race as the strongest and the black weakest. The Chinese race, the yellow race, was placed next to the white, being the second strongest race. Liang employed this essentially racist discourse only to make a point that a renewal of the Chinese people would lead China to catch up with the white race.

Liang then analyzed the different national characteristics of the five races, for they were seen as the deciding factor in the racial ranking. Based on these findings, Liang concluded that the ideal Chinese national character should have traits such as progressiveness, adventurousness, self-respect, physical prowess, and gregariousness. Sadly, Liang noted, the reality is that the Chinese people had acquired exactly the opposites of these desired national characteristics. In the same way he theorized the old and young in “On Youthful China,” Liang constructed a series of binaries between the Chinese and the imagined new Chinese citizens. Interestingly, though Liang’s new citizen was not explicitly associated with a specific age group here, the ideal characteristics nevertheless echo those of the Chinese youths described in “On Youthful China.” The significance of Liang’s imagination of a new China embodied in the youth is not merely symbolic. As I will illustrate later, these desired national traits would gradually materialize in Chinese children seen as the ideal model of a new citizenry in Republican China.

The intertwined relationship between a youthful Chinese nation and children was founded on evolutionary thinking. Like many other reformers in the Late Qing, Liang situated China within a tumultuous and complex world composed of different species, races, and nations struggling for survival and competing for limited resources. The recapitulationist perspective, which undergirds Liang’s discussion of the parallel between
the development of a nation and the growth of an embryo mentioned earlier, was also the theoretical basis of Liang’s education reform. Liang saw education as a fundamental means to transform the Chinese national character, and explicitly linked the education of children to the formation of a Chinese nation. Liang considered children “the nation’s true assets” (*The New Citizen* 121)—the seeds of the new citizens. In fact before the 1898 Reform Liang had already published several articles on education in his *On Reforms* consisting of a series of essays.³

In *On Reforms*, Liang connected the education of Chinese children with China’s fate. Liang argued in “On the Education of Children” that Westerners frequently created new ideas, new technologies, and new theories, whereas the Chinese had none of these. This is because the Chinese people’s intellectual and creative power was inhibited by the existing Chinese education as they were growing up. Children were forced to memorize Confucian classics and lacked real comprehension. Memorization hinders the development of the child’s brain and makes it obtuse.⁴ And, such rote learning also produces a negative side effect. That is, children dislike learning and their teachers because of all the hardships they have to endure in the process of memorizing obscure classical texts. Only by understanding the content first, Liang believed, can children’s intellects be properly developed. Liang thus proposed that textbooks should be written in rhyme so that children could easily chant and enjoy the texts. Liang pointed out that some classical primers are indeed rhymed. But this was not enough. Liang believed that all subject matters should be written in rhyme, ranging from classical learning, to history, and to Western scientific subjects such as geography, physics, and biology. Liang was promoting an expansion of the existing school curriculum—which had exclusively used
dense classical texts—to include more practical subject matters. Besides the above mentioned subject areas, Liang also proposed to teach children music, mathematics, foreign languages, and calisthenics that would make children more physically strong and militant. Worth emphasizing here is that Liang was not rejecting classic learning but reforming it in a way that children could grasp its essence more easily. Integrating Western culture with Chinese culture is a key to Liang’s new education and citizenry, a stance which differs significantly from the later May Fourth iconoclasts, who argued for wholesale destruction of traditional Chinese culture.\(^5\) Liang’s another important idea is to use the vernacular Chinese to write new primers. Liang faulted the recondite literary Chinese—the official written language separated from the colloquial Chinese closely connected with folk culture—for producing a high rate of illiteracy in China. Compared with the classical texts written in the literary Chinese, Liang suggested that new primers written in the vernacular Chinese would be not only easily understandable but also singable and enjoyable for children.

Liang’s emphasis on education as a way to transform China was in fact not a new idea. In imperial China, education was “highly valued for teaching people and transforming society” (Bai “Children's and the Survival of China,” 128). But what was unprecedented here is that Liang employed social Darwinism to reinterpret an old ideal. The infusion of indigenous knowledge with Western theory gestured to a gradual paradigm shift in thinking about human nature and children, which is best illustrated by Liang’s interpretation of fetal education. Liang discussed fetal education in the essay “On Girls’ Education” in *On Reforms*. Liang rejected the traditional idea that women without talent are virtuous, arguing that mothers’ illiteracy is detrimental to their children’s
growth. Confucianism dictates that women are dependent on and subordinate to men, governed by the ethics of “three obediences and four virtues.” That is, a woman is expected to obey her father as a daughter, obey her husband as a wife, and obey her sons in widowhood. These are the guiding Confucian principles for Chinese women to cultivate themselves into virtuous women in all aspects—morality, speech, manner, and domestic work. Liang argued that such Confucian morals prevent girls from receiving proper education and becoming literate, and that as the girls become mothers, they could teach their children little. Liang believed that the root of education lies in the mother’s education of her children, which is again rooted in girls’ education. Liang thus argued that girls’ education was a crucial factor in making the country strong or weak, surviving or extinct. To further demonstrate the importance of female education, Liang discussed fetal education.

Liang first traced fetal education to the classical texts *Dadai Rituals* (*Dadai liji*) and *The Balanced Inquiries* (*Lunheng*). Fetal education “taught that a mother’s conduct in the first months had a particularly strong influence on the child’s appearance, talent, or temperament” (Furth 170). The traditional idea of fetal education was closely connected with that of human nature. In Confucian cosmology, the universe was constituted by three interactive, interconnected, and interpenetrating forces, heaven, earth (nature), and humans. The unifying element of the cosmos is qi, the fundamental energy-matter of the universe whose dynamic pattern is the interaction of yin and yang. Yang is associated with “qian” (heaven), with origins, with “qi,” and with the masculine, whereas yin is associated with “kun” (earth), growth, blood, and the feminine. The two cosmic forces, yin and yang, produce human beings. Conception is the intermingling of yin and young,
male essence (qi) and female blood—“a moment of fusion between cosmic creativity and embodied humanity” (Furth 161). The human body is thus a critical site of the interactions of cosmic forces. Worth noting is that yin and yang are complementary opposites and capable of mutual transformation. Accordingly, “female/male was a relative, shifting aspect of the yin/yang relationship and not a fixed bipolar structure” (Furth 160). Yin-yang interaction and alternation propel bodily growth and development (Furth 160). Human qualities, such as intelligence, appearance, and temperament, were not conceived as innate faculties in a Western humanist and anthropocentric sense, but as originating from qian and kun, or as the product of environmental influences. In traditional Chinese cosmology, nature and culture are not in a binary relationship but are an organic whole. The most important environmental influence on the developing fetus was the uterine environment. So mothers were believed to hold primary responsibilities for the development of the fetus.

Interestingly, in “On Girls’ Education,” Liang did not follow this traditional thinking of fetal education, despite his evoking the two classical texts on the subject. Liang instead used the evolutionary theory to reinterpret the importance of fetal education. Liang stated that the individual organisms of a species have limited life spans but produce offspring continuing their life, and that this is how species evolve and progress. According to Liang, this explains why Western scholars of eugenics placed fetal education first. Liang wrote that Western countries asked women to practice calisthenics so that they would produce strong and vigorous children. Liang thus concluded that female education essentially aimed at continuing and improving the Chinese race. Liang’s reinterpretation of fetal education from an evolutionary perspective was
significant in two aspects. First, like children, “women” also became implicated in the nation-building of modern China. Since women were seen as mothers of future citizens, they readily came to embody the nation itself, a topic I will explore in Chapter 3. Second, Liang’s employment of evolutionary thinking gestured toward an epistemological shift in thinking about human nature. The human being was no longer seen as originating from cosmic forces, but imagined via Western scientific discourses as a biological organism possessing hereditary qualities. Though Liang valued greatly children’s education, he did not proffer a theory of the child in particular, which, however, would be further developed by the next generation of Chinese intellectuals such as Zhou Zuoren. As I will discuss in the following, while being further examined, closely studied, and theorized, the child was gradually fashioned into a “natural” being possessing unique characteristics, which was later idolized as the ideal citizen in Republican China.

Also worth mentioning here is the emergence of a new kind of textbooks, magazines, and journals intended for children in the late Qing period, which functioned as a public forum for disseminating the new educational ideas. Elementary School Journal (Mengxue Bao) (1897-1899) and Illustrated Journal of Elementary Education (Qimeng Huabao) (1902-1904), for example, were among the earliest children’s periodicals. These periodicals share several key educational ideas with Liang Qichao’s educational reform. For example, they promoted a wide range of subject matters such as history, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and calisthenics. And a lot of materials were written in the vernacular Chinese and had a story-telling style, the qualities which were believed to make the content more accessible to children. The emphasis on the value of stories in developing children’s intelligence is particularly
important in the subsequent formation of Chinese children’s literature. An anonymous article, titled “Children’s Reading Mentality” published in 1909 in *Education Magazine*, made especially clear that stories advanced children’s intellectual development. The essay argued that myths and legends would nourish children’s intellect because childhood corresponds to the legendary period of the society. Therefore, the essay concluded that newly compiled texts for children should take into consideration children’s reading interests. In his preface to the children’s book series *Fairy Tale* (*Tonghua*, 1909-1919), the editor, Sun Yuxiu, also stressed that “children naturally love stories” (17). The series translated and adapted both Chinese and Western folktales and legends. But among the total one-hundred-and-two works of the series, sixty-four came from the West (Zhu 132). These new children’s periodicals fundamentally operated within the dominant discourse of “developing children’s intelligence” and “strengthening the nation” in the period. They all connected children’s intellectual development, or education in general, with China’s fate from an evolutionary perspective. Despite being brief, these periodicals’ mention of children’s interests in stories, particularly folktales and fairy tales, opened up a new scholarly area that later came to be called “children’s literature.” Equally important is the recapitulation theory as the theoretical underpinning of the correlation between the nation and the child in the period. In the following decades, evolutionary thinking continued to influence the Chinese thinking of children, functioning as a convenient tool for a new generation of Chinese intellectuals to theorize childhood.
“(Re)Discovering” the Child

In 1911 Chinese revolutionaries overthrew the Qing Dynasty and ended the imperial system that had lasted for more than two thousand years. In the following year the Republic of China was founded. But as Peter Zarrow suggests, “The new ‘Republic of China’ was not republican; many of the old Qing bureaucrats simply stayed in their jobs. Nor did culture, society, and the economy appear to change, even with the collapse of the imperial political structure” (30). Transforming China into a modern nation was still the urgent mission for educated Chinese. Education continued to be a primary means to achieve the goal. Along with the endeavor to develop a modern education in China, some progressive Chinese began to devote attention to studying children themselves. In 1912 Zhou Zuoren (1885-1968) published an essay, “Preliminary Investigation on the Issue of Children.” This essay began with the already familiar saying that whether a country is prospering or declining depends on whether its people value children or not, because children are the future citizens of the nation and continue its development. Zhou then criticized the Chinese tradition for valuing the old and slighting the young. Having provided textual evidence for such tradition, Zhou concluded that there is not any scientific study on children in China and what had been written about children was merely traditional medical books on fetal education. At first glance, Zhou’s reasoning was not surprising given that a close link between the growth of children and the development of the nation had already been established by late Qing progressives like Liang Qichao. But unlike Liang who saw China’s decline rooted in the way by which children were educated, not the entire Confucian system, Zhou’s criticism targeted the core moral principle of Confucianism—filial piety—which dictates children to obey and
devote themselves to their parents and the well-being of patrilineage. Zhou’s criticism of Confucian morality adumbrated the soon-to-come iconoclastic New Culture movement, which further deployed the child for its nation-building project. “Preliminary Investigation on the Issue of Children,” as the title suggests, was Zhou’s first step to study children. His second step was the 1913 article, “Introduction to Child Studies.”

In this 1913 piece, Zhou first pointed out that child studies is committed to studying the physical and mental development of children, and that it is applicable to education, which should comply with children’s “natural” development. Zhou then briefly discussed the educational ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Frobel, and Stanley Hall—as scientific authorities—to illustrate the “naturalness” of children’s growth. Zhou called the kind of education promoting children’s “natural” growth “evolutionary education.” What Zhou did here is to massage different schools of Western thought into a coherent theory of childhood largely couched in evolutionary theory. Zhou defined childhood as the period from birth to twenty-five year old. Such a conclusion was deduced from Zhou’s comparison of the different life spans of the humankind and other species like mouse, cat, lion, and camel. Zhou further divided childhood into four stages, infancy (0-3), childhood (4-8), adolescence (9-14), and youth (15-25). Each stage has its own intrinsic characteristics. The first stage is when the baby develops its organs and starts play. At the second stage the child becomes more active and develops a stronger inclination for play. And thus toys and folktales are its learning materials, according to Zhou. When the child grows into an adolescent, imagination and curiosity become even stronger. And sexual differences become apparent at this stage. While males become combative and fond of stories of fighting and heroism, females develop a liking for
domestic affairs. In the last stage, the child fully forms its personality and comes to understand personal and collective responsibilities. Zhou’s conceptualization of the child at the last two stages is reminiscent of Liang’s discussion of the Chinese youths characterized by heroism, adventurousness, and progressiveness. However, such characteristics are the “essential” qualities of males, as Zhou suggested here, whereas females are “naturally” domestic. The core attribute of female domesticity is to produce heirs, i.e., male citizens for the nation as Liang discussed. Zhou here endowed Liang’s imaginations of the young with a biological and “scientific” reality. But Zhou was most interested in the second stage, childhood in its narrow sense. This might be due to Zhou’s interest in folklore studies.

As discussed earlier, progressive Chinese in the late Qing period already started to see fairy tales as promoting children’s intellectual development, a connection which, however, was only briefly mentioned, not seriously studied. In the same year he wrote “Introduction to Child Studies,” Zhou Zuoren published two essays on fairy tales, “Fairy Tale Studies” and “Brief Discussion on Fairy Tale.” These two articles attempted to establish fairy tale studies as an area of anthropology. Zhou particularly mentioned Andrew Lang’s anthropological approach to fairy tales and argued that fairy tale studies can be applied to child studies. Zhou stated in “Brief Discussion on Fairy Tale” that fairy tales, mythos, and saga all originated from primitive society. While myths were primitive people’s faiths and legends their histories, fairy tales were their literature (25). Zhou argued that since ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, primitive people and children share the same interests and mentality. Thus primitive people’s literature is also the literature of children. According to Zhou, fairy tales are aesthetically beautiful in the sense that they
were natural, not artificial, expressions of primitive people’s awe toward nature and that they were often about birds, animals, and plants, being close to nature. Another two characteristics of fairy tales are imagination and simplicity. Zhou suggested that fairy tales are best suitable for children aged three to ten, because children at this stage are most imaginative and best match the characteristics of fairy tales. These characteristics of fairy tales in turn foster children’s imagination and develop their intelligence, which are the cornerstone of future learning.

Zhou Zuoren’s ideas on children and fairy tales inherited the earlier thoughts on the topic in the late Qing period. But Zhou shifted the focus from reforming the curriculum to studying the child and its literature. More importantly, children’s growth was conceptualized as following a series of “natural” stages, each of which possesses intrinsic qualities. These ideas were eventually reworked into a discourse of “discovering” children in the May Fourth period from the mid-1910s to 1920s. During this period, Chinese intellectuals attempted to dismantle Confucianism seen as obstructing China from progressing toward a modern nation. That is, China’s problems were believed to be rooted in Chinese culture seen as repressive and backward. Thus a new culture needed be invented to replace the old Confucian culture and would form the basis of a new kind of libertarian politics.

This New Culture movement is also dubbed the Chinese Renaissance, signaled by Chen Duxiu’s launching a new magazine, New Youth, in 1915. Employing the dominant evolutionary thought, Chen believed that if society was going to flourish, it must follow the natural way of the new replacing the old. He thus urged young readers to be “independent, progressive, aggressive, cosmopolitan, utilitarian, and scientific—and not
servile, conservative, retiring, isolationist, formalistic, or introverted” (qtd. in Zarrow, 133). Chen attacked Confucianism for all these negative qualities, while promoting Western ideas of democracy, science, and individual autonomy as the essence of Western modernity. Chen’s emphasis on the importance of the young in renewing Chinese culture ironically echoed Liang Qichao’s idea on the same subject. But unlike Liang, Chen’s anti-traditionalism was “uncompromising” (Zarrow 133). Inventing a new culture fundamentally rests on constructing an “old” culture as its antithesis. Confucianism came to represent all the social evils of the period and stand in opposition to Western modernity. And the self became a major site of the “new” battling against the “old.”

A central theme of the New Culture movement was the celebration of a “genuine” self in contrast to the artificial self made by Confucianism. In one of his most celebrated essays “Literature of Man,” published in 1918 in New Youth, Zhou Zuoren stated, “Now we should promote a new literature, simply put, ‘a literature of man.’ What should be discarded is inhuman literature” (100). Zhou argued that Europe discovered the truth of “man” first in the Renaissance and next in the French Revolution, and that women and children were discovered relatively late in the nineteenth century, whereas China had never touched on the issue of man, let alone that of women and children. Zhou urged his countrymen to “discover ‘man’” and to “open up the wasteland of man,” although “it sounds ridiculous” because man in fact came into existence four thousand years ago (101). Zhou defined “man” biologically as “an organism evolving from animal” (101), repudiating classical Chinese philosophy that man was made of qi of the heaven and earth. Zhou believed that man as the most complex organism possesses intrinsic nature and follows natural law. Confucian rituals, Zhou stated in the essay, repressed human nature
and promulgated asceticism suppressing natural instincts. “Literature of Man” fundamentally promoted a kind of “humanism” tantamount to individualism. Zhou argued that humanism is “a kind of individualism” and illustrated it through a metaphor. As Zhou explained, “An individual’s relationship to humankind is analogous to that of a tree to the forest. If the forest is flourishing, so is each individual tree. But a flourishing forest nevertheless depends on the exuberance of each tree” (103).

Especially important here is Zhou’s idea of children as most dehumanized in imperial China. As part of the human race, children, according to Zhou, had never been “discovered”. In other words, children’s “true” nature had not been recognized. He restated this view in the 1923 article “Children’s Books”—“China has never discovered children” (186). This is because, Zhou explained in the 1920 essay “Children’s Literature”, the ancients had evinced an incorrect understanding of children in treating them as “miniature adults” and “incomplete adults.” Children were indoctrinated in Confucian classics, and their physical and psychological needs were completely ignored. In reality, Zhou believed, children are “complete individuals,” although “physiologically and psychologically different from adults” (122). What Zhou implicitly attacked here is Confucianism that “eats” children by cruelly ignoring their nature and prematurely indoctrinating them in Confucian morals such as “filial piety, respect for seniors, self-restraint, and compliance” (Zhou Yiqun 339).

In imperial China, children were not seen as essentially different from adults, indeed, an “incomplete” version of the adult. As Zhou Yiquan suggests, “Confucianism, with ancestor worship and all, was about the opposite of a child-centered world” (344). Children were seen as not only “incomplete” but also ignorant beings subject to
educational training. The ideal child in the imperial period is one “who is successfully brought up to take delight in the Confucian rituals and moral teachings and to exercise his freedom in living under the ancestors’ shadow” (Zhou Yiqun 344). The Confucian education of children is essentially a process of ritualizing the child’s body in accordance to Confucian propriety and ethics. This can be illustrated by Confucian reading materials for children, which consist of an eclectic collection of texts including “ritual texts, family rules, didactic handbooks for women, children’s primers, school regulations, official instructions, and legal stipulations” (Zhou Yiqun 345). Zhu Xi’s Children Should Know and Chen Chun’s Rituals for Children in Rhythm, both adapted from Record of Rites, for example, were important educational texts for children in the imperial period (Bai Shaping the Chinese Child, 73). These texts prescribe a set of appropriate behaviors for children in terms of demeanor, clothing, school manners, table manners, and bedroom behaviors. For example, children have to look at their fathers’ feet when their fathers stand before them; as a son to his parents and a pupil to his teacher, he should speak with a soft and submissive voice; and when a boy has a drink with his superior, he should kneel down to accept the drink given by the superior (Bai Shaping the Chinese Child, 74-76). Confucian ethics is thus embodied and practiced through bodily behaviors. In imperial China, the child was not seen as an essentialist being in a humanist sense, nor did its growth follow its own biologically determined developmental trajectory. The growth of the child was a process of shedding its ignorance and of acquiring and embodying Confucian ethics.

As Zhou Zuoren was critiquing Chinese ancients’ “mistreatment” of children in “Children’s Literature,” he was actually reframing the traditional concept of the child
within the May Fourth binary of humanism (modernity) and Confucianism (tradition) and shifting the epistemological paradigm of the child. Zhou was constructing a modern child in opposition to the pre-modern child, or the Confucian child. While the Confucian child was a synecdoche for the repressive Confucianism, the modern child represented the advent of modern China. The task for May Fourth intellectuals was thus to “discover” — invent — the modern child. The “true” self would emerge, once the child, or man in general, is freed from Confucian shackles. For Zhou, a crucial means to liberate human nature is “humane literature.” Based on his concept of humanism, “humane literature” was a stark contrast to Confucian texts suppressing human nature. In this light, Zhou’s “Children’s Literature” was not only an effort to “discover” children but also part of the endeavor to promote “humane literature.”

Mao Dun noted that the Chinese term “ertong wenxue” (children’s literature) originated from the May Fourth period, more specifically marked by Zhou Zuoren’s essay “Children’s Literature” (qtd. in Jiang, 1998, p. 96). Zhou in fact used the term “literature of children” in his earlier essay “Fairy Tale Studies” in 1913. But “Children’s Literature” is the first Chinese article systematically outlining a theory of children’s literature. This essay expanded Zhou’s earlier thoughts on children in relation to fairy tales, reiterating that children’s mentality resembles that of primitive people and that fairy tales are children’s literature. But this familiar idea was reworked into a May Fourth discourse of liberating human nature. Zhou argued that Chinese children had never been allowed to develop “naturally” and were inducted into Confucian moral system at a young age. The “truth” about children, Zhou stated, is that childhood possesses its own intrinsic value and children live different lives than adults. Based on his evolutionary
theory of childhood, Zhou explained that since all children worship totems, it was natural for them to believe that plants could think and animals could talk. If adults were to correct children’s this belief, it would hinder their imagination and harm their development. Imagination was thus for Zhou a crucial characteristic of children aged three to ten and should be respected. While childhood has its own value independent of adulthood, Zhou argued that children would also grow and change. When children believe that animals could talk, adults should tell them stories of talking animals. This stage is inevitable but will pass eventually. Thus when children grow into the next stage in which they come to really understand what animal is, adults then teach them biological knowledge about animals. But if adults continue to supply children with stories of talking animals at this stage, it would be detrimental to children. Children’s literature thus promotes the “natural” characteristics of children.

Following Zhou’s steps, many other leading intellectuals of the time, such as Ye Shengtao, Zheng Zhenduo, and Guo Moruo, also turned their attention to children’s literature. In 1921, Ye Shengtao published three articles urging Chinese writers to create children’s literature, “Quickly Create Literary Works for Children,” “Children’s Imagination and Feelings,” and “Create More Works for Children.” Ye Shengtao particularly emphasized that children are naturally curious about the world and imaginative, and that children’ literature thus should contain elements of children’s curiosity and imagination. Guo Moruo’s 1922 essay “On Children’s Literature” argued that literature cultivates and edifies human nature, and that since children’s literature develops children’s “creative impulses” it is especially capable of achieving this goal. For Guo, children’s literature encourages children to “create and express freely” (203). Since
“today’s children are tomorrow’s citizens,” Guo wrote, “promoting children’s literature is for our society and citizens a miracle medicine that brings the dying to life” (203). Guo believed that the essence of children’s literature is “purity and authenticity” (206). Guo particularly cited William Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” and Tagore’s “Baby’s World” to illustrate a “pure” children’s world that has “mythical light,” “gentle and graceful shadows of dreams,” and “all natural phenomena filled with life and human qualities” (206). For Guo, these are children’s senses and imagination. Such “pure” children’s literature requires children’s literature writers to be familiar with child psychology, or retain the “child-heart”—to maintain a child-like mentality and freely express child-like feelings and imagination.

Fashioned out of a mixture of Western evolutionary, humanist and romantic thinking, the modern Chinese child in the May Fourth period was thus an essentialized human being possessing a set of innate characteristics, such as imagination, curiosity, purity, and innocence, and was made biologically and psychologically different from adults.9 Such a concept of the child was not limited to the discussions on children’s literature. Other disciplines such as child psychology or child studies were also emerging in this period and operated within similar discourses of the modern child. Ling Bing, for example, published his book Introduction to Child Studies in 1921. This book attempted to establish child studies as a scientific inquiry and explored its definition, history, methodologies, and children’s physical and psychological features. For instance, the book described children’s various “natural instincts,” including gregariousness, sympathy, playfulness, rivalry, combativeness, and curiosity (98-116). Children’s literature was seen as a “natural” outgrowth of children’s psychological and emotional needs. Dai Weiqing,
for example, defined children’s literature as a kind of literature being childized. That it, it embodies children’s essential characteristics. What Dai listed as natural characters of children, such as curiosity, playfulness, combativeness, courageousness, gregariousness, and compassion (93), precisely correspond to those outlined by Ling Bing. But for May Fourth intellectuals, the kind of “real” children’s literature embodying children’s “natural” characteristics had not come into existence. As mentioned earlier, Zhou argued in “Children’s Literature” that traditional reading materials for children merely indoctrinated children in Confucian morals. Zheng Zhenduo similarly critiqued the didactic nature of traditional reading materials in “Analysis of Chinese Children’s Reading Materials.” Zheng believed that Confucian education is merely “mechanic,” aimed at “making subservient subjects, loyal officials, or filial sons” (65) and completely ignoring children’s “natural” interests.

Indispensable to the discovery of the child was therefore the need to create children’s literature. According to May Fourth intellectuals, there were three ways to form children’s literature—collection and compilation, translation, and creation (Wei 83). The first refers to collecting indigenous folktales and ballads and editing them into children’s reading materials. Zhou Zuoren started to collect ballads for children around the country in 1914 and continued the effort after the May Fourth period. Meanwhile, Zhou also introduced and translated foreign folktales and fairy tales and particularly hailed Hans Christian Andersen as the best fairy tale writer (“Brief Discussion of Fairy Tales” 29). Foreign children’s books were thus another important source of the emerging Chinese children’s literature. In 1921, Zheng Zhenduo, for example, created a new magazine, Children’s World. This magazine published adapted foreign stories around the
world, such as the Grimm Brothers’ folktales, Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales, Indian myths and legends, and W. B. Yeats’ Irish fairy tales and folktales (Zheng 67). Zheng made it clear in his “Manifesto for Children’s World” that the magazine aimed at evoking and appealing to children’s interests by providing them with “real” children’s stories. Although the earlier children’s periodicals such as Elementary School Journal and Illustrated Journal of Elementary Education also published adapted folktales, they were promoted as part of the school curriculum reform and operated within the late Qing discourse of developing children’s intellectual power. Unlike the late Qing children’s periodicals, Children’s World employed the May Fourth discourse of releasing human nature and positioned itself as radically different from traditional education seen as merely instilling in children “dead knowledge and morality” (Zheng 65).

Li Li suggests that “modern Chinese children’s literature traveled a path beginning with translated foreign children’s literature, then followed by local creation. Translated foreign children’s literature had a great impact on the formation and development of Chinese children’s literature” (Production and Reception, 1). More specifically speaking, it was foreign fairy tales that had a great impact on the emerging indigenous children’s literature. The stories published in Zheng Zhenduo’s Children’s World are retellings of foreign folktale. Zheng informed readers that they retold—not just translated—foreign stories in order to appeal to local tastes (“Manifesto for Children’s World” 65). What Zheng signaled here is that the boundary between translation and creation is often blurry. Zheng’s magazine also solicited indigenous children’s stories by Chinese writers. Ye Shengtao was such an important contributor to Zheng’s magazine. Ye’s Scarecrow, a collection of fairy tales published in November
1923, is the first original Chinese children’s book and usually seen as the landmark of Chinese children’s literature. The fairy tales in the collection were in fact first published successively in Zheng Zhenduo’s *Children’s World* from 1921 to 1922 (Ye “Me and Children’s Literature”, 3-4). Ye once remarked that it was under the Western influence that he started to write fairy tales and that he was particularly influenced by the Grimm Brothers, Hans Christian Andersen, and Oscar Wilde (3-4). Adapting foreign children’s stories to construct a new culture and a new nation is an underlying theme of the native creation of children’s literature in the May Fourth period, a topic which I examine in Chapter 2. Worth noting here is how Chinese intellectuals reconciled the “impossible” relationship between the adult (writer) and the child (reader/character) perceived as so different.

In the May Fourth period Chinese writers tended to position childhood in opposition to adulthood. In “To My Children,” Feng Zikai, prominent cartoonist, for example, contrasted his children’s spontaneity, sincerity, and compassion with the “so-called adult virtues of reticence, reserve, and depth,” which he deemed as “unnatural, moribund, and hypocritical” (8). As discussed earlier, Guo Moruo also saw an opposition between the “innocent” and “pure” children’s world and the contaminated adult world. Ye Shengtao’s very first fairy tale “The Little White Boat” was an attempt to construct an “innocent” children’s world. Set in a beautiful countryside, the story is about a boy and girl playing happily in a white boat. But a strong blast of wind blows the boat away, and the children lose their way. Suddenly a little white rabbit hops out of the bushes and jumps to the children. The rabbit is unwilling to leave and becomes the children’s good companion. Later the children run into an adult, who claims that they have stolen his
rabbit. The boy argues that the rabbit came to them by itself and that they like anything lovely. The adult does not blame the children but snatches the rabbit away from the girl. The boy ventures to ask the adult the direction home. The adult promises to take them home on the condition that they answer his three questions correctly. The last question is that why they were riding a little white boat. The girl responds: ‘because we are innocent, and only we deserve to be riding in the little white boat’ (9). The adult is satisfied and takes the children home. The girl’s answer about their innocence ironically betrays her innocence. But the story obviously tried to construct innocence as an essential virtue of children lacking in the adult. Diametrically opposite to the turbulent reality, the children’s space in the story is a dreamlike world in which fish play music, frogs sing along, flowers dance, and children themselves sing delightful poems in harmony with nature. The images of the little white boat and little white rabbit also signify children’s “purity” and “innocence.” Even though the adult claims that he owns the rabbit, the rabbit is naturally only fond of the children. The adult’s action of taking the rabbit away from the children symbolizes his own desire to reacquire innocence. But that the rabbit does not really connect with the adult only further attests to the adult’s very lack of the much desired quality supposedly inherent in children.

The perceived opposition between the child and adult brought up a question: if children are so different from adults, how could adults create stories appealing to children? For Chinese intellectuals, this gap can be bridged by the adult’s “child-heart” (tongxin). Zhou Zuoren used the term “child-heart” in “Brief Discussion of Fairy Tales” to describe Hans Christian Andersen’s personality and what makes his fairy tales the best: “It is difficult to create fairy tales, which cannot be attempted by those not conversant with
child psychology and cannot be mastered by those not possessing the child-heart. Among all European fairy tales, Andersen’s stories are the best, for he is spontaneous and retains the child-heart, despite his being seventy” (29). The term “child-heart” represented a childlike consciousness through which the adult writer could think, speak, and write like a child. And the precondition is that the child possesses easily and universally recognizable characteristics ready for the adult to imitate. The idea of the “child-heart” became an undergirding principle for the translation and creation of children’s literature in China during the period. That is, only those who retain the “child-heart” were able to create children’s literature embodying children’s “true” nature. The term “child-heart” not only spoke to a methodology of literary creation for children, but more importantly, signified a “natural” child as both produced by and producing the May Fourth nation-building project.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a time when the Great Qing Empire was coming to terms with its weak national status in a competitive world following the natural rule of “survival of the fittest” dominated by the West, Liang Qichao, along with other Late Qing reformers, endeavored to reshape China into a strong and democratic nation that came to closely associate with Chinese youths. Rather than an existing demographic group, Chinese youths had yet to become. After two decades of sociocultural sedimentation, the May Fourth generation, who took on the responsibility of fundamentally transforming China from a “backward” Confucian society into an “advanced” modern nation, articulated a clear theory of childhood framed within the humanist tradition of “essential” human nature. This “modern” child, characterized by its “inherent” qualities of innocence, imagination, and curiosity, stood in opposition to the
Confucian child supposedly oppressed by Confucianism and came to embody the desired new Chinese nation. It was also during this period that the concept of children’s literature came into existence in China. As May Fourth intellectuals argued, children’s literature fundamentally differs from children’s reading materials in imperial China in that it appealed to children’s “true” nature, whereas Confucian reading materials indoctrinated children in “saints’ classics” and made them “miniature adults.” Dismissing these traditional materials as “repressive” and “didactic,” May Fourth intellectuals, concerned with a radical departure from the past, turned their attention to foreign children’s literature. Thus the emerging Chinese children’s literature was largely composed of translations and adaptations of foreign children’s stories, especially fairy tales. These children’s stories were believed to be examples of “real” children’s literature embodying the “child-heart.” And one of the most popular and exemplary children’s works of the period was Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the topic of the next chapter.
Notes

1. A few examples include Andrew Jones’ “The Child as History in Republican China,” Mary Ann Farquhar’s *Children’s Literature in China*, and Jiang Feng and Han Jin’s *History of Chinese Children’s Literature*.

2. Bai Limin points out that as early as 1877, an article in *Chinese Scientific Magazine*, founded by John Fryer, included a chart of Western classification of five races as a way to introduce mission school students to Western scientific knowledge. The mission schools during the 1890s in China taught their students about different racial groups. Yan Fu adapted the idea of the racial groups in his translation of *Evolution and Ethics*. Liang Qichao was influenced by this trend of thought during the time. See Bai’s “Children as the Youthful Hope of an Old Empire.”

3. Bai Limin suggests that Liang Qichao’s view on education reflected the intellectual milieu of the second half of the nineteenth century. In fact in the early Qing, Bai suggests, education reformers already saw the importance of education in transforming Chinese society. Those reformers blamed the collapse of the Ming Dynasty on the traditional education, which produced pedantic literati only having knowledge of Confucian morality but having no practical skills beneficial to other people in the daily life. To some extent, Liang’s view of education inherited this idea. For more discussion on Liang’s views on education before 1898 in relation to other reformers, see Bai’s “Children and the Survival of China.”
4. Bai Limin suggests that the Chinese understanding of the brain underwent a change in the seventeenth century. Before this time the Chinese believed that the heart was the organ for thinking and the brain “like the marrow and the bones, was one of the storing organs produced by the earth and hence belonging to the Yin” (“Children and the Survival of China”, 132). The change in the Chinese thought of the brain was associated with the mission publications on Western medicine in the seventeenth century China. According to Bai, Joannes Terrenz published in 1643 *A Western Account of the Human Body*, which explained that human intellect was not stored in the heart but was connected with the development of the brain. However, this idea did not widely spread until the nineteenth century, when Western knowledge of anatomy was systematically introduced to China. Liang’s idea of “zhinao,” which means “blocking the brain’s development,” was influenced by this new trend of thought on the human body.

5. For a detailed discussion on Liang Qichao’s synthesis of Chinese and Western learning, see Bai’s “Children and the Survival of China.”

6. Mei Jialing, Xia Xiaohong, and Chen Pingyuan, in *Ertong de faxian*, edited by Xu Lanjun and Andrew Jones, provide detailed discussions on these children’s periodicals in terms of their dissemination of new educational ideas.

7. Zhou’s definition of the four stages of childhood was slightly modified later. In his 1920 article “Children’s Literature,” Zhou stated that infancy is from one to three, childhood from three to ten, adolescence from ten to fifteen, and youth from fifteen to
twenty. Zhou’s changed view on the four stages of childhood suggests that childhood, in its broad sense, is essentially a construct subject to changing interpretations and historical conditions. Childhood in its narrow sense roughly refers to elementary school aged children.

8. I argue that Zhou’s such view on children was indirectly influenced by American philosopher John Dewey, who visited China from May 1919 to July 1921. For a detailed discussion on the topic, see Xu’s “Translation, Hybridization, and Modernization: John Dewey and Children’s Literature in Early Twentieth Century China.”

9. Compared with the widely circulating evolutionary and humanist discourses, the influence of Western Romanticism was less explicit in the May Fourth thinking and more difficult to trace. But major writings for and about children during the period had discernable traces of Romanticist thinking. One way to detect such influence is the Chinese writers’ frequent references to representative European Romantics. One example is Guo Morou’s “On Children’s Literature” in which he cited Wordsworth, as discussed earlier. Zhou Zuoren is another example, though his Romanticist impulses are often ignored. Zhou clearly had knowledge of European Romantics. For example, he mentioned Rousseau in “Introduction to Child Studies” to make a point about the child’s “natural” development, and referenced William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in “Literature of Man” to illustrate his humanism. Liu Haoming’s “From Little Savages to hen kai pan” is a helpful study on Zhou Zuoren’s Romanticist impulses around 1920s. While these Western systems of thought provided the Chinese with new
ways of understanding the child, the modern child was also indigenized and needs to be understood within its unique historical context.

10. As I suggest in “Translation, Hybridization, and Modernization,” the term “child-heart” underwent semantic transformation in the May Fourth period. According to Pauline C. Lee, the term “child-heart” can be traced back to the ancient text Commentary of Zuo (Zuo Zhuan), a canonical text chronicling the history of the Spring and Autumn period from 770 to 477 BCE. The narrator used the “child-heart” in a derogatory sense to mean the adult’s naivety and immaturity (Lee 64). Ming Dynasty scholar Li Zhi (1527–1602) employed the term “child-heart” to express his ethical vision of genuine feeling and authentic conduct. Li Zhi used the term as a metaphor for the original state of being as fully moral and perfect, but the “child-heart” can be obscured by vices such as phoniness and hypocrisy as one develops (Lee). In imperial China the term “child-heart” was deployed as metaphors for adults’ moral conducts and feelings rather than representing children themselves. But the term was revived during the May Fourth period and attached with new meanings. It simply became literalized and associated with children.
Chapter Two

Translating Alice: Politics of Childhood Innocence

In January 1922, the Commercial Press in Shanghai published the first Chinese translation of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The translator is the prominent Chinese linguist, Zhao Yuanren. The book was a great success. In his review of the book, Zhou Zuoren informed Chinese readers that “This is a book for children” and that it is an “unprecedentedly brilliant text” (“jueshi miaowen”) (140). Even for adults, Zhou advised, the book is a must. Zhou lamented that “Too many adults, who were once children themselves, lost their child-heart, just as caterpillars have transformed into butterflies, [the former and latter becoming] completely two different stages” (140). Because those “unfortunate” adults forget their feelings from childhood, according to Zhou, they are unable to understand, nourish and cultivate children’s feelings. Zhou was afraid that if these adults become parents or teachers, they would impede children’s natural development. Therefore, Zhou strongly recommended the book to Chinese adults, who, Zhou hoped, would also let their children read it.

In this light, Carroll’s Alice book was not merely an inconsequential children’s book, but became a *national* text in the Chinese context. It was intended for the Chinese people, including both children and adults, who were being forged into a modern citizenry. As the ideal Chinese citizen was embodied by the modern child, “contaminated” Chinese adults were especially in need of re-education through reconnecting to their “child-heart” and reacquiring the “lost” child self. Also important is that Carroll’s book was not directly consumed by Chinese readers, but mediated through translation. The book’s success was largely indebted to Zhao Yuanren’s skillful translation. Zhou Zuoren
expressed in his book review that he “greatly admired” Zhao’s translation, and especially praised Zhao for adopting the vernacular Chinese and using John Tenniel’s illustrations in the original. Even the most valued quality of the book—“playful nonsense”—would be merely nonsense, literally, if without Zhao’s smart adaptation. This chapter suggests that Zhao Yuanren’s translation played a crucial role in constructing the national Chinese identity during the May Fourth period. Lawrence Venuti argues that “the national status of a language and culture is simultaneously presupposed and created through translation” (178). Translation is not simply a transparent process of rendering a foreign text intelligible to domestic readers, but a process of recreation and indigenization. But rather than being simply assimilated into the existing national parameter, Zhao’s translation was also creating a new national culture. As discussed in the previous chapter, foreign children’s books enabled the creation of indigenous children’s literature. Li Li argues that “Without the introduction of foreign children’s works there would have not been Chinese children’s books” (“Influences of Translated Children’s Texts” 101). I suggest that Zhao translated Carroll’s Alice into a concrete and adaptable version of the May Fourth modern child underlying the emerging Chinese children’s literature.¹

Zhao’s translation inspired the growth of native children’s fantasy novels (Jiang 333). In the decade following the publication of the Alice book in China, there were two attempts to adapt the book, Shen Congwen’s Alice’s Adventures in China (1928) and Chen Bochui’s Miss Alice (1931). But both books were written after the May Fourth movement, a time when more and more Chinese became disillusioned with the May Fourth model of modernizing China. This chapter also surfaces the tensions between Zhao’s translation and the later adaptations in terms of the modern child, and explores the
question of how the modern child was challenged and revised in the Chinese adaptations in relation to the shifting politics of China’s nation-building in the early twentieth century.

**Becoming the “Innocent” Child**

In his preface to the translation, Zhao Yuanren saw Lewis Carroll as “a friend of children” (7). Although he did not have his own children, Zhao stated, Carroll “has many intimate child friends and thus understands children’s dispositions better than their parents” (7). By describing Carroll as “a friend of children,” Zhao was employing the dominant discourse of the “child-heart.” As Carroll was seen as an exemplary adult with the “child-heart,” his book was also read as an exceptional example of “real” children’s literature in the Chinese context. In other words, the book embodies the child’s “natural” characteristics.

One of such characteristics is children’s “natural” language— the vernacular Chinese. Zhou Zuoren’s book review particularly stressed that one crucial factor in making the book outstanding is Zhao’s use of the vernacular Chinese (142). Zhou once commented on Chen Jialing and Chen Dadeng’s translation of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales, *Nine out of Ten* published in 1918. Zhou criticized the translators for “using the classical Chinese to preach morals” (94) and thus ignoring children’s unique linguistic and psychological features. While the classical Chinese was seen as the medium of Confucianism and associated with adults, the vernacular Chinese was believed to be the language of primitive people and children, the “natural” language uncontaminated by Confucianism (Zhou “Andersen’s *Nine out of Ten*” 95). As commonly known, the language revolution—replacing the literary Chinese with the
vernacular Chinese—is an integral part of the New Culture movement. Hu Shi’s “Some Modest Proposals for the Reform of Literature,” published in 1917 in *New Youth*, was a rallying call for the literary revolution, and was followed in the next year by a series supporting articles, including Chen Duxiu’s “On Literary Revolution,” Liu Bannong’s “My Opinions on the Reform of Literature,” and Hu Shi’s another article, “On Instructive Literary Revolution” (Hu Rong 426). Zhou Zuoren’s “Literature of Man” was also part of this movement. This literary revolution was also a language revolution. In “Some Modest Proposals for the Reform of Literature,” for example, Hu Shi called for an end to imitation, allusiveness, floweriness, and pedantry characteristic of the classic literary tradition and promoted a new lively language closer to the spoken language. According to Hu, for a long time the spoken and literary languages in China have been turning their backs on each other, whereas the rise of European literary giants began with a “living literature” written in their own “vulgar language” to replace a dead literature in Latin (138). Hu thus advised Chinese writers not to avoid “vulgar diction,” two imitable examples of which are *The Water Margin* and *The Journey to the West*, popular vernacular novels debased as “vulgar” by traditional Chinese literati. In the following years Hu Shi put his theory into practice, and published in 1920 *The Experimental Collection*, the first collection of poems written in the vernacular Chinese. One year later, Zhao Yuanren, Hu Shi’s close friend, finished his translation of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

Translating the Alice book was a challenging experiment. As Hu Rong observes, “It looked like a mission impossible to put such a book full of ‘nonsense’ into Chinese, the vernacular Chinese particularly, since no one had succeeded in the last half century”
But Zhao succeed it beautifully, as illustrated by the enthusiastic acceptance of his contemporaries such as Zhou Zuoren. Zhao’s success lies in the use of not only the vernacular Chinese but a particular version of the vernacular—Beijing dialect, a “living dialect.” Zhao explained in the translator’s note that he adopted Beijing dialect in order to make the conversations more lively, for Beijing dialect is “very rustic,” “easily understandable,” and suitable for lively conversations (15). Zhao included a glossary of “special words” used in the book. These “special” words are local expressions different from the standard vernacular Chinese, Mandarin. For example, Zhao translated the English word “snake” into Beijing dialect, “changchong” (long worm), rather than “she” (snake) in Mandarin. Zhao also heavily used the rhotic vowel “er” (儿) characteristic of Beijing dialect. Zhao’s use of Beijing dialect changed Alice’s formal language style in the original text into a colloquial one. One example is the moment when Alice finds herself growing after she eats up a cake. Since Alice’s head and feet grow so far from each other, she wonders if she would be able to put on shoes and stockings for her feet. In Carroll’s text, Alice addresses her feet “dears” (20). Zhao did not translate it literally into “qin’ai de” (“亲爱的”), but used “baobao” (“宝宝”) (15), meaning “baby.” The difference between the original and the translation is not merely a linguistic difference. In Carroll’s text, Alice’s style of expression reveals her upper-middle class identity and trained propriety. As Alice finds herself growing, she “was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English” (Carroll, 20, emphasis mine). Carroll’s text was actually written in “good English,” and Alice also tries hard to speak polite and proper English in the rest of the story. But Zhao’s translation reads that “because Alice was so surprised she quite forgot how to speak” (15). Alice’s concern
with speech refinement was dropped in Zhao’s translation, and the “rustic” style of
Zhao’s translation made Alice an uncultivated child. But it was exactly this “vulgar”
child that represented the May Fourth “natural” child.

As the above instance of “good English” suggests, Zhao tended to suppress the
cultural specificity of the foreign words and use words that were more familiar to Chinese
readers. Such examples abound in Zhao’s translation. Another example is Zhao’s
translation of the word “pig.” In the chapter “Pig and Pepper,” Alice meets the Duchess
and her baby. While nursing the baby, Alice finds out that it “had a very turn-up nose,
much more like a snout than a real nose” (Carroll 63). The baby turns out to be a pig.
Zhao translated the word “snout” into “ba jie” (八戒), not “zhu bizi” (猪鼻子). “Ba jie”
is the pig character in the popular Chinese novel Journey to the West, which Hu Shi
mentioned as a good example of vernacular literature. Zhao explained his translation
methodology in the translator’s note: “The translation method of the book is that after I
read a sentence in the original text, I first think about how we say it in Chinese and how
to make it sound authentically Chinese; and then write it down and check it against the
original. I try my best to reach the standard of ‘word-to-word accuracy’ and keep revising
it. But I stop right before it begins to sound like a foreign language, and this is an
extremely dangerous moment” (16).

Zhao thus believed that semantic accuracy should not outweigh the natural flow
of the narrative in the native language. Zhao’s rule to make the foreign text “sound
authentically Chinese” had a strong nationalist effect. By effacing the foreignness of the
original text, Zhao made the translation extremely fluent and immediately recognizable to
Chinese readers. As Venuti suggests, “The easy readability fosters an illusion of
transparency where the second-order status of the translation is effaced and the reader comes to feel as if he or she were reading, not a translation, but the original” (182). Such transparency invites Chinese readers to identify with a national culture defined by everyday and commonsensical knowledge rooted in a specific geographic location. But the national culture Zhao attempted to forge through the translation is not the thousand-year-old Confucian tradition, but its ideological antithesis—vernacular culture—closely associated with children.

In Zhao’s version, the vernacular speaking Alice embodies a new social order, being what the submissive Confucian child is not. She is curious, active, brave, playful, and adventurous, the characteristics associated with the May Fourth “natural” child. She is also innocent—innocent of Confucian tradition. Just like the self-created image of May Fourth intellectuals, she is anti-traditional. But Alice’s uncompromising radicalism is the effect of Zhao’s translation. In the original text Alice’s identity is more ambiguous, straddling both conventional Victorian England and rule-breaking Wonderland. This can be illustrated by a scene in the second chapter “The Pool of Tears.” After Alice finds that she has grown abnormally large, she becomes uncertain about who she is and tries to retrieve her old self. Her method is to distinguish herself from Mable, who Alice believes, knows very little. Alice first tries to recall what she knows about multiplication and geography, and then to recite a poem “how doth the little—,” whose words, however, “did not come the same as they used to do” (Carroll 23; emphasis mine). Zhao’s translation made two changes to the scene. The first is about the poem: its words came from “Elementary Mandarin” (“Xiaoxue yu”) (20). And the second difference is that in
Zhao’s version the words of the poem “seemed to come out involuntarily” (“字说出来亦好像不由自主似的”) (20; emphasis mine).

The two seemingly small changes changed the meaning of the original text significantly. In Carroll’s text Alice intends to recite Isaac Watts “How Doth the Little Busy Bee,” a popular didactic poem of industriousness well known to Carroll’s contemporary readers. But the words coming from Alice’s mouth turn the moralistic poem into a nursery rhyme about a self-entertaining and sluggish crocodile, a parody of the original poem. Alice’s reciting the poem in a “wrong” way represents the clash of two contrasting worlds, Wonderland and Victorian England. As the poem contains elements of both worlds, Alice herself also traverses the boundaries between dominant social scripts and their defilements. On the one hand, as Alice cannot make sense of the symbolic order that regulates Wonderland, she resorts to applying familiar scripts to what she discovers there” (Jenkins 80). As the above scene illustrates, when Alice finds herself growing into an abnormal size after eating the cake, she tries to use the knowledge acquired in her own world—Victorian England—to clear up the confusion, but nevertheless fails. Thus, Alice also performs an unconventional self in Wonderland, signified by her “false” memorization of the poem. But Alice’s ambiguity is lost in Zhao’s translation. Rather than being a parody of social convention, that the poem came from *Elementary Mandarin* is a reference to the undergoing language education reform in Republican China. In 1919, Hu Shi, Zhou Zuoren and Liu Bangnong proposed to the Republican government that China should adopt a unified “national language” (guoyu) and that the movement should start from elementary schools. That is, they saw elementary school textbooks as a means to promote the new national language—
standardized vernacular Chinese, Mandarin. They suggested all schools to change textbooks written in the literary Chinese (guowen keben) into those written in Mandarin (guoyu keben). The proposal was approved by the Ministry of Education, and the subject area Chinese, “guowen” (literary Chinese), was officially renamed as “guoyu” (vernacular Chinese) in 1920. This language education reform was an extension and actualization of the language revolution staged by the same group of intellectuals a few years earlier. The crocodile poem from *Elementary Mandarin* in Zhao’s translation signifies its radicalness, rather than conventionality. No contrasting social orders are suggested in Zhao’s translation. Zhao skillfully rendered the crocodile poem in vernacular Chinese, successfully maintaining the form of the original poem. The poem’s simplicity, rhythm, and entertaining nature made it a perfect example of “natural” children’s literature. That Alice recited a piece of “modern” children’s literature precisely positioned her in a new social order imagined by May Fourth intellectuals. In this light, it was no surprising that in Zhao’s translation the words of the poem “seemed to come out involuntarily.” Therefore, unlike the original Alice carrying traces of social convention, Zhao’s Alice became a radical modern child embodying a new China.

Alice’s “queer” adventures in Wonderland, however, turn out to be Alice’s own dream. The final paragraphs portray a peaceful and innocent little Alice telling her “wonderful dream” (125) to her sister, who pictures to herself:

how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; and how
she would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago; and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days.

(127; emphasis original)

Critics in the West regard this ending as Carroll’s compromise with Victorian social convention. Jennifer Geer argues, for example, that the “final paragraphs of Wonderland. . . . are nostalgic, gently teasing, and ostensibly serene—and they stand in sharp contrast to Alice’s unsentimental, chaotic, and often violent adventures” (1). While the adventures indulge the child’s desire to resist adult domination and construct Alice as a powerful girl rebelling against Victorian domestic ideology, Geer suggests, the final paragraphs turn Alice back into a submissive girl and reinforce Victorian domesticity and the conventional idea of the Romantic child as the adult’s desire to control the child. But such a conflicting image of Alice turns out to be a perfect embodiment of the “natural” child in the Chinese context. This time Zhao did not make any changes to the final paragraphs, but accurately and fluently translated them into Chinese. The final paragraphs’ emphasis on child(like) innocence did not conflict with the adventurous and brave Alice in the Chinese context. On the contrary, the word “innocence” rather well summarized the essence of Alice’s anti-traditionalism—her divorce from Confucian tradition. Furthermore, while in its original context the novel’s fairy-tale quality made it implicit in Victorian convention (Geer 3), such fairy tale quality was exactly what May
Fourth intellectuals promoted. That Alice dreams such a strange dream precisely attests to the child’s “inherent qualities”—imagination and curiosity—in the Chinese context. And the Alice book in turn cultivates the child’s imagination and curiosity. As Zhou Zuoren wrote in his book review, the Alice book “entertained children through its innocent and wonderful ‘nonsense’” (141) and stimulates children’s imagination (142). But what would Alice look like when she grows into an adult? Will she still be innocent? The above cited paragraph sends a confirmative message: Alice will maintain her “child-heart” as she grows up. In this light, the adult Alice is exactly the child-like adult—the new citizen—imagined by the May Fourth nationalists.

**Losing Child Innocence**

In the preface to his translation of the Alice book, Zhao Yuanren half-jokingly said that someday there might come out a book called *Alice’s Adventures in Beijing*. Six years later, a book came out, entitled *Alice’s Adventures in China*, by well-known writer Shen Congwen. As Zhao predicted, Alice finally had a chance to visit China. The story transports Alice and her friend Mr. Rabbit to China where they experience all sorts of “strange” adventures. The story was divided into two volumes, published in the journal *New Crescent Moon* from July to October in 1928. An apparent difference between the two volumes lies in the locale of Alice’s adventures. In the first volume, Alice and the rabbit travel in a bustling port city in China, whereas in the second volume Alice travels, mostly alone, in rural areas. Like his contemporaries, Shen saw *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as an “innocent” children’s book, and his own work an imitation. As Shen said in the epilogue of the first volume, “I wanted to write something like Alice’s
Adventures in Wonderland for my younger sister, and wanted her to retell it to our sick mother and make her happy” (3). It is interesting to note that New Crescent Moon was not a children’s journal, while Alice’s Adventures in China was imagined as a children’s book. But as the writer explained, he hoped that his story could cure his mother’s illness. Thus the story was intended not only for children but also for adults, who should learn to become the child.

Shen’s understanding of the Alice book and his own work was framed within the dominant discourse of the “innocent” child and children’s literature. That is, children’s literature cultivates the child’s “natural” instincts and creates a happy and innocent children’s world, a new social order having a clean break with the past. And the Alice book was hailed as an exemplar in this regard. A particularly adaptable aspect of the Alice book is its dream structure, which Shen attempted to replicate. Shen’s story frames Alice’s curious adventures in China within an “innocent” child’s dream. Importantly, this structure made the story an instance of the child’s rich imagination, a core principle of the newly established children’s literature in China. This is illustrated by the beginning of the text in which Alice is preparing her trip to China and having a conversation with her aunt before going to bed.

“Alice, what’s wrong with you? Are you sick? Tired today?”

“No, I’m not, Aunt. Let’s go to bed early. Aren’t we going to have a good long dream, will we?”
“But your Aunt dreamed many good dreams in only one-hour sleep.” When this kind mid-aged woman was reading to Alice and her sisters stories from *Andersen’s Fairytales* during the day, she often turned herself into a pod of peas or the match girl!

“But I’m afraid I will miss something!”

As Aunt heard the child talk nonsense, she wanted to laugh. She thought that Alice must have remembered the story of Gulliver’s travel she told her during the day and wanted to go to bed early to visit the kingdom of small people. Aunt also dreamed such a dream when she was a child. So she well understood how innocent a child could be. (44)

The scene strongly echoes the last paragraph of the original text in which Alice’s sister imagines that a grown-up Alice will still maintain her child-heart and tell curious stories to her own children. In Shen’s story the aunt becomes the ideal adult with the “child-heart.” As the aunt is telling stories to the children, her own child self is reenacted. Furthermore, the aunt perfectly understands children’s sentiments and feelings, as she was once one of them. Not only is the aunt child-like, but the children, Alice and her sisters, are also perfect embodiments of the ideal child. The children are “naturally” interested in fairy tales, which is shown by their readings such as *Andersen’s Fairytales*. And the most notable child, Alice, talks “nonsense”—going to bed early in order to dream a long dream of adventures—from the adult’s perspective, but it nevertheless signifies her childishness. In the rest of her conversation with the aunt Alice reveals that
she is not going to the kingdom of small people, as the aunt guesses, but will travel to China. Having heard Alice’s secret, the aunt is not surprised at all. She rather nods her head and asks Alice to send her greetings to the Chinese emperor. Then Alice plunges into her dream, seeing Mr. Rabbit coming to join her. In a moment, Alice and the rabbit arrive in a port city in China, which very much resembles the 1920s Shanghai.

For the following adventures in the city, Shen adopted the perspective of Alice, an “innocent” British child, who has no local knowledge of Chinese events and sees them as “interesting” and entertaining. Alice’s adventures there should be more accurately described as “sightseeing.” As Alice settles down in a hotel, she asks her servant to recommend places of interest. The Chinese man tells Alice that a blind man nearby can magically tell people’s whereabouts and locate missing things. The hotel’s many foreign guests, the man said, trust the blind man and consult him when they lose anything. The blind man would accurately point out the thief, who usually turns out to be a Chinese chef or rickshaw puller. Alice finds what the man said is “as interesting as the stories in The Arabian Nights” (52). Alice continues to ask for interesting places to visit. This time the Chinese man suggests Alice to go to a dance court where she can also watch Chinese operas. The man explains to Alice: “in a Chinese opera actors not only sing and dance with their faces painted in different colors, but they also hack at each other using real swords and spears” (54). This makes Alice think that “all she sees in China are also like interesting plays” (54), and that “all of these are wonderful stories, much better stories than those told by her aunt!” (55).

As the above examples show, Shen tried to endow Alice with “a simple heart” and equate what she hears and sees in the city with the fairy tales she likes. Furthermore,
writing from the perspective of an “innocent” foreign child, Shen made the familiar unfamiliar, namely that Chinese culture is rendered “strange” and “curious.” And China becomes another Wonderland. But the irony is that the “curious” things in Shen’s story are not innocent imaginations but mirror the then Chinese reality. This adds a satirist effect to the text, which complicates this “innocent” children’s story as intended by the writer. From the perspective of a contemporary Chinese reader, the examples of the blind man and Chinese opera are never “interesting” as Alice thinks. They are harsh parodies and criticisms of Chinese superstition and “uncivilized” cultural tradition. As the “interesting” stories about Chinese society become parodies of its backwardness—also a central criticism leveled by May Fourth iconoclasts, the “innocent” foreign child’s perspective also turns into an orientalist gaze. As Alice enthusiastically said that “the Chinese opera must be fun” (54), the hotel servant goes on to elaborate from his foreign host’s perspective:

“Of course. Many people [watch the Chinese opera]. Foreign ladies like you also like to watch this. There are private boxes. The opera is exactly intended to entertain idle rich gentlemen and ladies. And you, Miss, really should go there! . . . In the Chinese opera men play women’s roles and do it pretty well. All those who play such roles are good-looking, and are liked by both men and women. They speak in a feminine voice. The more high-pitched their voice is, the more famous they become. They sing on the stage while others play instruments next to them. When the actors are thirsty,
someone else will come to them and feed them tea. If they perform fighting scenes, there will be cotton cushions on the floor. Actors won’t get hurt. (54)

Having heard this, Alice tells the man that there are also plays in her country but admits that “they are not as interesting as the Chinese opera” (54). The Chinese opera is portrayed as “strange”—perverse, random, and cruel. On the one hand, the cited passage is another attack on traditional Chinese culture represented by the Chinese opera. But the passage also highlights that the audience tend to be “foreign ladies.” Alice’s positive comment on the Chinese opera positions her among those “foreign ladies,” who take pleasure from observing a “strange” culture drastically different from their own.

The Chinese opera, or China itself, serves as “an illustration of a particular form of eccentricity” (Said 103). As Edward Said powerfully argues, “The Orient is watched, since its almost (but never quite) offensive behavior issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached, always ready for new examples of what the Description de l’Epypte called ‘bizarre jouissance.’ The orient becomes a living tableau of queerness” (103). Rey Chow also argues that “the ‘Third World,’ as the site of the ‘raw’ material that is ‘monstrosity,’ is produced for the surplus-value of spectacle entertainment, and spiritual enrichment for the ‘First World’” (84). The above scene—a spectacular eccentric Chinese show watched and consumed by Westerners—renders the idea of orientalist spectatorship even more vivid.
A more disturbing example of China’s eccentricity put on display in Shen’s story is the “bustling scene of wars.” As Alice stays in the hotel on the first day in China, Mr. Rabbit, Alice’s travel companion, goes out for a morning stroll. He sits down in a tea house and chats with the owner. Like Alice, Mr. Rabbit also tells the owner that they come to China for sightseeing and asks him where to go. The tea house owner suggests that the currently ongoing wars are a great bustling scene. As the owner explains, “Other people may not know. They are a new phenomenon. Foreign gentlemen like you all love watching them. I believe that that girl who comes with you will not be afraid to watch them” (61). The “wars” could be a reference to all kinds of wars ravaging the 1920s China, the incessant fighting among Chinese warlords colluding with different foreign powers, the Nationalists’ massacre of Chinese communists, and intensified foreign invasions.

Also worth noting is the native informants, the hotel servant and the tea house owner. While caricaturized, the servile attitude of the Chinese men, who “deferentially” (53) wait on the foreign guests and speak from an orientalist perspective, also speaks to the prevailing imperialism in semi-colonized Shanghai and colonial subjectivity. This colonial subjectivity may be interpreted not only as the Chinese characters’ internalization of colonialist ideology but also read as the writer’s self-exoticization. But Shen’s self-exoticization in the text is not merely an expression of colonialist ideology, but a critique of it achieved through satire. A better example of the city’s colonial condition is a later conversation between Alice and his servant regarding Mr. Rabbit’s whereabouts. Since the rabbit goes out alone in the early morning and has not come back yet, Alice gets worried about his safety. But the servant assures Alice that “foreign
gentlemen will never get into any trouble” (50). “If Mr. Rabbit’s car runs over and kills someone, he just needs to pay fifty yuan to solve the case,” as the servant informs. He further explains that this is how foreigners in China solve cases of killing Chinese, and, “of course, Mr. Rabbit is no exception” (50). What the servant says alludes to the extraterritorial rights Westerners enjoyed in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century in China. But more important to my analysis here is that Alice and Mr. Rabbit, originally innocent characters from a children’s book, are constantly aligned with the European tradition of orientalism and imperialism. The writer seemed to be struggling over this conflict. In the rest of the first volume Alice and Mr. Rabbit do not follow the Chinese men’s suggestions to see the Chinese opera and wars. But their alternative plan does not absolve them from being implicit in the imperialist tradition.

On the next day Alice and Mr. Rabbit take a car ride to explore the suburb. They encounter a poor man, who tries to rob them first but fails. The reason for his robbery is, strangely, that the poor man wants to be killed by his “victims.” As the man tells Mr. Rabbit, “Please kill me. I really can’t live any longer. It is said that foreign gentlemen are very willing to help the Chinese people by killing poor Chinese. I believe that you, sir, can do it. So I am here to rob you” (70). Mr. Rabbit refuses to do it, but the poor man insists. And he speaks to Mr. Rabbit: “one newspaper article says that the English people are especially willing to shoulder the task. Aren’t you an Englishman?” Having heard this, Mr. Rabbit gets embarrassed and wants to say no. He then remembers something from his book *The China Travel Guide* and tells the poor man that “he is a rabbit from a small town in Scotland, not an English gentleman” (70). *The China Travel Guide* is a gift Mr. Rabbit has received from his English friend who had also travelled in China. According
to his friend, this book is for “Western whites who want to travel in China” and “more reliable than three guides” (31). The book provides detailed introduction on all sorts of eccentric Chinese customs and provides advice for travelers. For example, the book informs readers that killing Chinese people is an everyday phenomenon in many places in China and the heads of the killed Chinese are hung in populated areas for people to watch. And the book advises readers that foreigners can take pictures of them as they wish (37-38). Giving intelligibility and identity to a Chinese world characterized by eccentric cruelty, this travel guide is the kind of texts that form what Said defines as Orientalism—an archive of ideas produced by the West about the East as its inferior Other. By citing the book Mr. Rabbit unwittingly subscribes to the orientalist discourse of eccentric and barbaric China, despite that he tries to disentangle himself from the colonialist practice suggested by the poor man.

In the same scene Alice also converses with the poor man. But her conversation—seemingly a portrayal of her “simple and innocent heart”—also turns into a satire of her class privilege and imperialist ignorance. When the poor man tells Alice that he is starving, she responds:

“Why don’t you eat?” Miss Alice thought that the man’s remark was strange. “You must have just got here and can’t find any restaurant.”

“No.”

“Then you must not like the taste.”

“Neither.”

“Then—”
“I don’t have money.”

“They won’t let you eat without money?”

“No.”

Alice thought that it was even stranger. Why did food have to be bought with money? But if this was true, where did pet dogs’ money come from? She had never seen a dog having a money pocket. Neither her dog nor her uncle’s dog had such pocket or money. But they could eat as they wanted. . . . all people had money. Why not the man? It must be that the man didn’t want to spend his money. (68)

When transported from her fairytale-like English home to semi-colonialized and war-stricken China where the majority of the people were destitute, Alice’s “ignorance” jars with the harsh reality. Alice’s thought of the dogs is an allusion to the popular colonialist discourse during the time that the Chinese were comparable to dogs in rank and even worse than them. Unlike the “innocent” characters in Zhao’s translation, Shen Congwen’s Alice and Mr. Rabbit do not seem very different from Western imperialists in Chinese reality. No wonder that the writer felt that he failed to write the kind of story intended. As Shen stated in the epilogue of the first volume, “I got Alice wrong. . . I made Mr. Rabbit into a character who fails to incite laughter from children, and Miss Alice also lost much of her innocence under my pen” (3).

Shen’s “failure” says much about the shifting politics in contemporary China. Despite being only a few years apart, the historical condition in which Shen wrote the story differed greatly from that in which Zhao Yuanren translated Alice’s Adventures in
When Zhao published his translation, the May Fourth movement was in full swing. The May Fourth generation confidently believed that a cultural-linguistic revolution, through borrowing Western philosophical, cultural and scientific ideas, would fundamentally transform China into a modern nation. But the political violence in the mid-and-late 1920s, especially the May Thirtieth movement in 1925 that officially ended the May Fourth movement and the Nationalists’ massacre of Chinese communists in 1927, forced May Fourth intellectuals to “adjust their ideas of enlightenment to the changing needs of China’s nationalist revolution” (Schwarcz 148). The cultural revolution of more than a decade did not transform China as May Fourth intellectuals hoped. What followed was a more, if not equally, brutal social reality. As the national crisis was firmly sealed on the consciousness of the Chinese people, especially progressive intellectuals, it seemed impossible to “recreate children’s innocence and write about their transcendental mind,” as Ye Shengtao put it (qtd. in Zheng, 34).

Situated in this historical condition, Shen Congwen’s *Alice’s Adventures in China* surfaces a tension between the desire to reproduce the innocent child seen as the national savior, and the urge to directly respond to the social problems of imperialism and social injustice, not addressed by the May Fourth movement. And these social problems deprived the Chinese and foreigners, including children, of any trace of innocence. What is also questioned by Shen is thus the validity of the May Fourth nationalist politics. Shen devoted a chapter in the first volume to ridiculing the vanity of Westernized May Fourth intellectuals and hollowness of their contentions. One day Alice reads from a newspaper that Dr. Mynah, “a rare talent in politics and economy among the Chinese bird race and also a profound scholar of linguistics and literature” (83), will give a lecture. Alice
decides to attend the lecture. But it turns out that Dr. Mynah’s “academic lecture” does not touch on any sociopolitical or economic issues but focuses on “romantic love.” The “educative” lecture is portrayed as a farce filled with obscene sexual jokes, heated arguments, and bitter personal attacks among attendees—all sorts of Chinese birds. It was actually a popular practice during the time in China that well-known Western scholars, or Westernized Chinese intellectuals who had received degrees in the West, were invited to give public lectures aimed at introducing “advanced” Western thoughts to the Chinese public. The scene of Dr. Mynah is a reference to one of those public meetings. Dr. Mynah is possibly a caricature of a May Fourth intellectual, and the various birds represent the Chinese public from all walks of life. The Chinese people are mocked as chirping birds capable of doing nothing but idle and trivial chitchat. Interestingly, Dr. Mynah and all other bird participants do not simply “talk” but sing “new poems.” “New poetry” (xinshi) was the brainchild of the May Fourth cultural-linguistic revolution, and differs from classical Chinese poetry in its employment of the vernacular Chinese and depiction of new subject matters under Western influence. What Shen suggested here is that the so-called new poems the birds sing are merely a fad and do not provide practical solutions to the social problems. This is represented by the subject of Dr. Myhah’s lecture, “romantic love,” only a fashionable Western import interesting to idle sentimentalists. The lecture scene not only reveals the so-called intellectual leader’s hypocrisy and inability to spur the Chinese public into meaningful action and to bring out real social changes, but also criticizes the Chinese masses as mindless trend followers and shallow criers of hollow slogans.
Re-envisioning the “Innocent” Child

For Sheng Congwen, the first volume was a complete failure, for he made the lovable Alice lose her innocence. While Shen critiqued the May Fourth model of nation-building, he did not lose the faith in the child as the transformer of Chinese society. To correct his “mistake,” Shen wrote a second volume, which more successfully “blends the deep social bitterness into a kind of innocent humor” (Shen 3). In his preface to the second volume, Shen stated, “I changed Alice’s character, and found my creative power in the chaos of illogic. To me, this is a precious discovery” (161). In the second volume Alice assumes her innocence and spontaneity. More importantly, it is the child’s nonsense and innocence—“the chaos of illogic”—that exposes the faults of adult nationalist politics and functions as an alternative social order.

While the first volume is set in a cosmopolis fraught with social ugliness, in the second volume Alice travels in rural areas teeming with talking animals and objects. Unlike the little imperialist in the first volume, Alice is free from any ideologies in the second volume. In the opening scene, Alice converses with a river. The river wants to know Alice’s thoughts about China, because “every foreigner traveling in China has an idea about it” (163). Alice answers: “But I am not every foreigner” (163). Shen seemed to imitate Carroll’s language game and play of nonsense in the original. Alice’s answer can be read as a child’s nonsense. But it also literally speaks to her difference from any other foreigners (read imperialists).

A later scene further illustrates this point. After the conversation with the river, Alice feels bored, but in a few moments finds a way to entertain herself—splitting herself into two and arguing with each other. One of the Alices proposes to watch a
Chinese opera: “Go to the best theatre in China, sit in a private box . . . watch them doing flips and shouting on the stage, and also watch the audience applauding loudly, spitting, and coughing” (165). This proposal echoes the conversation between Alice and the hotel servant about the same subject discussed earlier. But readers are told that “of course Alice gained such knowledge from Mr. Nuoxi [the rabbit]” (165). Contrary to the Alice in the first volume implicit in Western orientalism, the Alice here is denied such knowledge, at worst being an innocent mouthpiece. Moreover, having heard the idea, the other Alice “determinately” denies the proposal. Then Alice stays by the river and kills time by counting numbers and talking to herself again.

Worth noticing here is that Mr. Rabbit, Alice’s travel companion in the first volume, stays in the city and has his own adventures there. While Alice is exploring rural China, Mr. Rabbit is learning to “enjoy sitting on the Chinese fauteuil” (a symbol of social status and power) (227), “dawdle with upper-class Chinese gentlemen in the parks as other foreigners do” (229), and “speak long Chinese sentences” (234) to imitate the way educated and upper-class Chinese talk. Additionally, a “famous Chinese scholar” (231), who addresses Mr. Rabbit as “Doctor,” invites him to visit the bird association and give a lecture. Though not used to the new title at first, Mr. Rabbit nevertheless accepts it after a barrage of compliments from the scholar. Readers are not told how exactly Mr. Rabbit attends the meeting and passes the time, but are assured that he can talk about anything, for “even a mule who returned from the West can talk nonsense about literature, philosophy, and isms and thoughts, let alone a handsomely addressed, good-looking, and pureblooded Western gentleman” (235). Therefore, as Alice recovers her innocence in the second volume, Mr. Rabbit, on the contrary, becomes more identical with the
negative image of Westerners during the time in China, who were self-interested power brokers colluding with the Chinese ruling and elite classes. That Shen made the two characters take on different journeys denotes that the rabbit is an adult figure and Alice is a child. Shen Congwen made this point clear in a metafictive passage.

Having spent some time talking with herself, Alice is transported into a drawer of a Chinese girl, Yi Bin. Yi Bin and Alice have a happy conversation in which Yi Bin tells Alice to visit her hometown down south, a region of the ethnic minority Miao (which is Shen Congwen’s hometown). Yi Bin also tells Alice that her second-eldest brother is the best person to take Alice there. And this man is quite possibly Shen Congwen himself, as the man’s life described in the story resembles that of Shen. Like Shen, the girl’s brother once joined the army and later went to Beijing to pursue study; he finally found his life goal in literature; and came to believe in “friendship and sympathy among humankind” (198). Readers are also told that it is this man’s idea to keep Alice here and let her stay in a drawer, although the man could have made Alice travel with Mr. Rabbit. The young man believes that Alice should not see what other foreigners, including Mr. Rabbit, see in China. If Alice wants to see this China, “she just needs to learn her own language well. . . . and then read The China Travel Guide from Mr. Rabbit’s friend” (201). The reason why the young man has made Alice and Mr. Rabbit go on different journeys is that Mr. Rabbit is “an old man and enjoys living that kind of life, which is, however, not suitable for Miss Alice” (200). Thus Alice’s child status makes her innocent of any adult politics in which Mr. Rabbit becomes deeply involved.

The idea of the innocent child in contrast to the corrupt adult was an essential component of the May Fourth discourse of the modern child. As the child became an
object of national interest in the early twentieth century, “children” also became a generic term. Children’s universal(ist) characteristics are solely determined by age. While Shen subscribed to this discourse of the May Fourth child, he also paradoxically challenged it by revealing the inconsistencies and hierarchies inherent in the seemingly universal and natural category of “children” who had been recently discovered. When Alice is transported to Yi Bin’s dark drawer, she cannot see anything. Nor does she know where she is. If Alice was “a Chinese child,” the text says, “she would wail so loudly that everyone knows that she is suffering” (203). And loving to cry is “a unique feature of all Chinese girls, old and young” (217). In addition, Chinese girls not only like to cry, but also know how to “talk to all kinds of ghosts and gods and coax them to realize their otherwise unrealizable wishes” (203). But this is also applicable to all Chinese children. Even if they “do not know a single Chinese character, they would remember at least a hundred god names and even their nicknames” (203). And Alice is “of course not so capable” (203). Under Shen’s pen, Chinese children—actually meaning Han children—also came to be a target of satire. As I will discuss later, Shen’ text foregrounds the ethnic tensions between Hans and Miaos, and constructs Miao children as an epitome of the innocent child as their foreign counterpart Alice is.

What Shen suggested here is that Chinese children were not innocent, for they had already been steeped in traditional Chinese culture and its superstition. Shen’s comparison of Alice and her Chinese counterparts also has a gender dimension. While Chinese girls are emotionally vulnerable and sentimental, Chinese boys are engaged in all sorts of gambling in the following story (244-245; 277). However, Alice is sympathetic with Chinese girls except their lachrymose nature (217). On the contrary, the gambling
Chinese boys embody social ugliness and corruption. These differences among the different groups of children point to multiple components, such as class, race, gender, and nationality, that construct children’s identity.

Since Alice is a foreign child, she is the best incarnation of child innocence. But in Shen’s story Alice’s innocence is not premised on an idyllic children’s world insulated from the adult world, which May Fourth writers strove to create. Childish innocence rather collides with dominant ideologies and exposes their repressive nature. This is demonstrated by the scene in which Alice talks with two waterwheels in Western Hunan, the hometown of Alice’s Chinese friend Yi Bin. As suggested by Yi Bin, Alice goes to visit her hometown. At first glance this small town seems idyllic, decorated by vine-covered stone houses, swimming ducks, and spinning waterwheels. But the idyllic picture turns into a dark one, as the narrative moves to focus on the waterwheels. The waterwheels are depicted as tireless laborers: “not afraid of cold and heat, [they] help people all day long. But if they make any loud noise, people beat their chests by an iron hammer or add a wooden screw” (251). These waterwheels are called “stupid things,” just because they are honest and hard-working. They never complain, get angry, or ask for rewards. And the number of “these stupid things in this place is the same with that of stupid people in the world” (251). It is not hard to tell that the acquiescent waterwheel is a metaphor for oppressed people—merely reduced to “things.” The master of these “stupid things” is “people,” which signifies power and dominance rather than humanity and compassion. But among these waterwheels are two talking waterwheels, with which Alice interacts.
When Alice approaches the two waterwheels, they are discussing their views on existence. One of the waterwheels is new, energetic, and full of hope, whereas the other is old and has a hoarse voice. The old waterwheel tells the young one that he is tired of life and what he has gained after working for a lifetime is loose bones and aching pains. The young waterwheel, on the contrary, believes that work is “an enjoyable thing” (259) and that life is interesting and playful. The old waterwheel dismisses this talk as “childish” (259), and goes on to lament the tragic life of waterwheel. This weather-beaten waterwheel compares waterwheel’s existence with that of other “things” like windmill, animals, and “people,” and concludes that waterwheel is most oppressed and subservient. We waterwheels are not, the old one says, “tigers which can jump around and growl menacingly to scare other animals “(261). Nor can they become eagles who soar high (261). The old waterwheel mourns that “although we waterwheels are big, strong, and sturdy, we do not own our own body,” and that “we cannot use our strength to do what we want” (261). The old waterwheel’s talk alludes to the social hierarchy and colonial condition in China. The tiger and eagle represent respectively the British and American empire that dominated parts of China. The hard-working waterwheel allegorizes China itself, which had a vast land and long history but exercised no sovereignty over its own land. Unlike the silent waterwheels having no consciousness of resistance which Alice has seen earlier, the old waterwheel well understands sufferings. But his deep pessimism fails to offer any way out of the impasse.

The young waterwheel’s opinion is not better, for it represents another extreme. The young waterwheel idealistically believes in an unrealizable utopia, and this view interestingly echoes the May Fourth theory of children’s literature itself. That is, the
uncontaminated playground of children’s literature represents a new social order, the antithesis of the corrupt adult world burdened with hard toil and unhappiness. In the new social order, the young waterwheel believes, work is play. Alice “apparently agrees with the young waterwheel on its life attitude” (260), and compares the old waterwheel to one of those birds fond of talking philosophies she met at Dr. Mynah’s lecture. But Alice and the young waterwheel have different responses to the old waterwheel’s views of life. The young waterwheel is stirred by the old waterwheel’s talk and obviously persuaded, for it also comes to feel that life is “meaningless” (261). Unlike the young waterwheel who well understands the philosophies and metaphors in the old waterwheel’s talk, Alice “does not quite get it,” but knows that she does not agree with the old waterwheel in that its body does not belong to itself. Alice “firmly believes that the body belongs to oneself” (262). Alice tells the waterwheels that though her aunt takes care of her, her body still belongs to herself. The old waterwheel deems Alice’s talk nonsense and laughs at her.

Alice’s childish and literal thinking about her body actually challenges the old waterwheel’s fatalistic philosophy by emphasizing that one can control his/her/its own body. Unlike the “knowledgeable” waterwheel, Alice obviously does not make such a claim based on any philosophical tradition but simply on her own lived experience. Furthermore, the waterwheels’ worldviews are not really theirs, for “actually it is the people’ idea to let these waterwheels speak one or two sentences” (256; emphasis mine). If “people” merely represents ruling classes, these two talking waterwheels, seemingly superior to their silent fellows, are merely parrots of dominant ideologies and possess no critical thinking. Alice’s failure to grasp the full meaning of the waterwheels’ conversation precisely illustrates her freedom from the influence of the philosophies and
ideologies promulgated by the talking waterwheels. Alice’s “nonsense” is the very means for Shen to challenge the ideology-laden nationalist politics. As Shen made it clear in his preface to the second volume: “Because I take literature as a way to express oneself, not limited to things like isms, time, and theory, I wrote a few books that broke the norms and rules. Alice’s Adventures in China especially attests that I walk on my own path” (159). Shen’s remarks cannot be read as evidence of his escapism, for his Alice book was squarely situated in the Chinese historical context and engaged in dialogues with the dominant schools of thought in the period. Although influenced by the May Fourth thinking of the child, Shen’s innocent Alice is not the same innocent Alice promoted by May Fourth writers. In Shen’s story Alice not only functions as a critical mechanism but also signifies moral agency and purity, which Shen regarded as desirable national characteristics for surviving a difficult time. Alice’s further thought on the old waterwheel’s talk illustrates the point.

After the old waterwheel’s talk, Alice is not as excited as the young waterwheel and has her own thought: “It was impossible to imitate the jumping and growling tiger, but this was not really a big deal. It was such a tiring thing. And growing wings to fly was fun, but it would never happen to her. She believed that the time had not come yet and she would fly out someday” (262). Interestingly, Alice speaks from the perspective of the oppressed waterwheels and imagines a way out of the miserable life depicted by the old waterwheel. Unlike the easily persuaded young waterwheel, Alice has a firm belief that she will be free—“fly out someday.” Alice’s solution, however, is not any resistant action against oppression. As the above quote suggests, Alice is waiting for the good time to come. But Alice’s solution should not be interpreted simply as passivism,
for Alice believes that she has control over her own body—“that the body belongs to oneself.” Shen endowed Alice with a kind of moral agency—self-belief and confidence under political uncertainty.

Shen’s stance differed both from Westernized May Fourth intellectuals and a growing number of Chinese communists during the time. Against the idea of “total Westernization” promoted by Hu Shi that is fundamentally premised on a perception of national inferiority, Alice advises not to imitate the tiger or eagle—metaphors for Western powers. But that Alice can control her own body does not necessarily lead to a fierce proletarian revolution overthrowing ruling powers, a position which Shen was clearly against. As Shen wrote:

After the first volume was successively published in New Crescent Moon, some people pinpointed some of my sarcastic, but actually true, remarks in the book, and said that I was intentionally against some people, and that because I hold red or green [flags] I spoke like a certain group of people—this group, clearly speaking, is the so-called revolutionary artists. I don’t know if there will be revolutionary artists after a revolution abroad and if such a name is self-defined or given. But I know in China, putting words like “proletarian” before “revolutionary artist” is to merely make them sound more shocking and frightening.

(159)
Shen attempted to distance himself from all sorts of theories and “isms” (including Marxism) as various solutions to building modern China. But Shen’s seemingly apolitical stance, as embodied in Alice, was nevertheless a direct response to the political and social uncertainty in China and an alternative form of nationalist politics. However, Shen’s imagination of an alternative social order is not nationalist parochialism but what Homi Bhabha calls “vernacular cosmopolitanism” that honors affective intersubjective connections on an everyday basis. Such cosmopolitanism should be distinguished from the conventional version of cosmopolitanism that claims “universality by virtue of its independence, its detachment from the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives” (Robbins 1). Haiyan Lee argues that this universalist cosmopolitanism has always been entangled with “the history of conquest and colonization in Europe’s twin process of nation building and empire building” and thus “legitimizes colonial expansion in the name of the ‘civilizing mission’ which reduces non-European societies to a particularistic status, stagnant and inward-looking” (unpaged). The new kind of cosmopolitanism is based on historical situatedness. That is, cosmopolitanism is “local and embodied”—“a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance” (Robbins 3). Therefore, the transnational is “not bound by the binary of the local and the global and can occur in national, local, or global spaces across different and multiple spatialities and temporalities” (Lionnet & Shih 6).

Shen’s imagination of an alternative social order rests upon affective intersubjectivity beyond national boundaries. Alice’s identification with the oppressed waterwheels is an enactment of such intersubjective identification. This point is again
illustrated in the last chapter in which Alice meets the Miao children. Like the waterwheels, the Miao minorities only “look like ‘people’,” reduced to “slaves” and “things” (281; emphasis mine). Shen revealed that the subjugation of the Miao minorities had been integral to the nation-state building in both imperial China and the newly founded Republican China:

All Miao are not allowed to go to school, nor work. They are not allowed to live in the city and are driven to deep hills. They lead a simple life, but still have to pay taxes and buy military bonds that are never deemed. They are burdened with work and toil until death. This is indebted to the Han people. Because of the heavy taxes and poor harvests, they have to sell their own children as slaves to Hans at extreme low prices. . . . That they are Miao, not people, is indebted to the high-ranked Chinese mandarins of the past era, who took these things as different species, massacred them, and used their blood to create law that has been inherited and followed. . . . The Republic after the successful revolution cannot allow the existence of slaves, Miao, and this is true. Their fate is extermination, for their existence carries a shameful history. All Republican citizens must feel this way. (285)

Shen explicitly discussed the long and bloody history of the relationship between the Miao people and the Chinese central government of the Ming and Qing periods, which
was “marked by displacement and various extermination and pacification campaigns” (Ng 86). And the newly established Chinese Republic continued such bloody history and contradicted its founding principles of democracy and freedom. The “inhumaness” of the Miao people unveils the fundamental contradictions and repressiveness of the nationalist politics. The “humans,” the Han people, were oppressors. Shen is usually known for his native-soil literature, “a genre that is thematically defined by a search for a rural utopia as an alternative to the urban experience” (Ng 83). In such a genre, the urban space of wickedness is contrasted with the rural world of innocence. Shen indeed presented two different worlds in his two-volume Alice book. But Shen’s rural world in this children’s story is not free from social evils, as the above discussion on the hostilities between the Miao and Hans demonstrates. Furthermore, Shen’s representations of the Miao people are more nuanced than simply romanticized “noble salvages” (Hung).

At first glance the Miao people seem indeed morally innocent and superior to the crafty and greedy Han people. Alice is told that she does not have to pay tips to Miao, for they have no such knowledge, whereas the Han people know how to solicit tips from foreigners and make a fortune (282). But the innocent image of the Miao is contradicted by that the Miao parents sell their own children as slaves to Hans. Complicit in the Hans’ subjugation of their people, the Miao adults are not as innocent as they first appear. But the Miao adults are contrasted with the Miao children, who are like “lambs,” “innocent and simple” (283). Sharing the same qualities with the Miao children, Alice “naturally” connects with them. Alice witnesses how such slavery trade works in the market. After being sold, a Miao girl “only embarrassingly smiles” (285). As Yi Bin’s brother finds that Alice feels sad for the slave girl, he asks her to leave the market. But Alice refuses and
also “smiles, in an embarrassing way, just like the way that girl smiles” (286). A few moments later Alice meets another Miao girl. This Miao girl is asked to sing a song, “a Miao song, a song of seeing off spring” (288). And “only Alice deeply understands the song the child sings, although it is also her who does not understand the meaning of the song” (288). Alice does not understand the song literally because she is foreign. But paradoxically Alice understands the song well, affectively and psychologically.

The Miao children and Alice, who function outside the adult mainstream, constitute a cosmopolitanism that opposes a parochial idea of the nation, defined by geographical boundaries. However, Shen’s cosmopolitanism is premised on the idea of the innocent child—a legacy of the May Fourth nationalist politics, despite that not all children, according to Shen, are qualified as “children.” But how such affective intersubjectivity could actually save China from entangled wars was a difficult question never answered by Shen. Having depicted Alice’s identification with the Miao girls, the book abruptly ends with a short paragraph telling readers that Alice wants to go home and tell her aunt about her experiences in China. Alice’s affective identification with the Miao children is transient, never translated into any political action. This may further illustrate Shen’s reserve toward political activism and support for an ethical approach to the social problems. But in the turbulent reality, Shen’s subtle voice was easily lost amid boisterous political bickering and violent military antagonisms.

**The Advent of the Proletarian Child**

In 1931 a young writer called Chen Bochui finished a children’s novel, *Miss Alice.* The book also employed a dream structure in which Alice has adventures in an animal
kingdom. Like Shen Congwen, Chen was impressed and inspired by “the innocent, spontaneous, lively, brave, intelligent, and lovely” (5) Alice. The writer wanted her to visit China and tell what she sees and hears to Chinese children, with the hope that Chinese children would “recognize the reality of the motherland, develop a clear sense of love and hatred, right and wrong, and know where they head for and how to walk on their own paths” (Chen 5). It is paradoxical that the writer wanted a foreign child to lead Chinese children to “see” and “hear” what was happening in China. Then what was suggested is that Chinese children had not yet become the modern child, embodied by Alice, as required by the new era. This implied idea points to an interesting phenomenon I have been discussing. That is, Alice, a foreign child, served as a model citizen for the Chinese to emulate. In this light, reading the Alice book was a process of learning to become the child. Miss Alice is similar to Alice’s Adventures in China in its metaphorical representation of China. But the 1930s China was witnessing dramatic changes. In the same year that Chen was writing Miss Alice, Japan launched its military invasion of China and occupied the Northeastern part, known as Manchuria, in which Japan established a puppet state, headed by the abdicated last emperor of China, Puyi. Japan’s occupation of Manchuria, also called the “September 18 Incident,” prepared its full-brown assault on China in 1937 that led to the eight-year Sino-Japanese War, which occurred as Nazi Germany was ravaging Europe. Chen admitted that when he heard the news of the “September 18 Incident,” he was greatly disturbed and decided to turn Alice from “a normal and healthy ‘everyday girl’ into a ‘fearless little soldier’ resisting violence” (5). This is reflected in the last chapters in which as the animal kingdom is
invaded Alice becomes a brave solider strenuously resisting the attacks and fighting for the interests of the citizens in the kingdom.

But even in the first half of Chen’s story, Alice is not as “ordinary” as Chen put it. As the writer hoped, Alice has “a clear sense of love and hatred, right and wrong.” That is, Alice is endowed with a class consciousness. What Alice sees and experiences in the animal kingdom is exploitation. For instance, Alice goes to a candy store. The store advertises, “Cheat No One.” But the clerks always ask more than the prices suggested on the price tags. Later Alice runs into a bee worker, who is carrying two full buckets of honey. As Alice shakes hand with the bee worker, she finds his hand tough with callus. At first the bee worker is afraid that he has a serious disease. But Alice assures him: “Don’t worry. It’s not a disease. It’s callus. The more, the better! Very honorable!” (79).

Then Alice closely studies this diligent worker: his feet are bare, red and black, weathered, and strong; he is wearing thin pants and a blue shirt soaked in sweat; and his face has the same colors with his feet, black touched with red, spirited (80). This amiable worker also makes Alice think of those “hateful” faces she encountered: the treacherous bourgeois, villain police, python emperor, drowsy judge, etc. These characters are portrayed as parasites; their materially comfortable lives rest on exploiting the poor. These different groups are lumped together as the exploited class, which stands in opposition to the hardworking and honest working class. Alice, moved by the diligent workers and disgusted by the exploiters, is determined to become a brave and strong worker. Having seen her arms being snow-white, Alice summons all her strength and determinedly says: “I will make my arms as black and strong as steel!” (82).
In Chen’s story, Alice is thus not only a “fearless little soldier” but also a proletarian revolutionary. She positions herself as a member of the proletariat and resists exploitation from the ruling class, no matter whether it is the bourgeoisie, the colonialists, or the government officials. *Miss Alice* signified a fundamental shift in the national politics and thinking of the child in the 1930s and 40s. As the May Fourth movement ended in the mid-1920s and China’s political situation was worsening, more and more Chinese saw the limitations of the liberalist and individualist approach of the May Fourth generation to modernize China and turned to Marxism seen as a better way to revolutionize the “semi-colonized and semi-feudal” China. As early as 1922, in the essay “The Origin and Impact of Individualism,” Deng Feihuang offered “one of the earliest sophisticated critiques of individualism as bourgeois ideology” (Lydia Liu 97). Having traced the political and economic development of individualism in Europe, Deng acknowledged the necessity of individualism for emancipating men but also criticized individualism’s negative effects, such as the development of a free market and its oppositional capitalist and proletarian classes. As Deng suggested, the proletarian class was exploited by the capitalist class and had no freedom. Deng concluded that it was time for socialism to replace individualism and to emancipate all human beings instead of a handful of capitalists. Deng’s Marxist evolutionary view of history and its accompanying critique of bourgeois individualism “introduces a rhetoric of social collectivism” (Liu 98) that became the core of leftist politics. Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in 1921 and gradually emerged as a major actor in the following Chinese history. To facilitate the communist revolution, Chinese communists advanced revolutionary literature, including revolutionary children’s literature, which promoted the
negation of the self and the acquisition of class consciousness through learning from workers and peasants. Chen Bochui’s Alice represented the typical proletarian child celebrated in the revolutionary children’s literature in the 1930s. As the Second Sino-Japanese War fully broke out in 1937, the importance of children in saving their agonized motherland was even more explicit. As Mao Zedong wrote in 1938 in his own hand the headline for the first issue of *Children of the Border Areas*, one of the new revolutionary journals for children created by Chinese communists during the war time, “Rise up, children, and learn to be free, independent citizens of China, learn how to wrest this freedom from the yoke of Japanese imperialism and transform yourselves into the masters of a new era” (qtd. in Farquhar 175).

As Chinese intellectuals were creating a Chinese children’s literature in the early twentieth century, they borrowed foreign ideas. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was first translated into Chinese in 1922 during the May Fourth movement. Rather than being merely a transparent act, this translation consolidated the May Fourth idea of the modern Chinese nation. More importantly, Alice concretized the modern Chinese child being theorized by May Fourth intellectuals. This foreign girl became the ideal Chinese citizen, inspiring Chinese writers to produce similar works for Chinese children. However, the two Chinese adaptations revealed great tensions between the model of the innocent child and Chinese reality troubled by national fragmentation, warlordism and imperialism. The Chinese Alice books attempted to reconcile the tensions by endowing Alice’s innocence with new meanings. The Chinese writers of the two adaptations were thus both challenging and reinforcing the Westernized model of the innocent child as a means to critically reflect on and find solutions to the Chinese social problems. Occupying a
central position in the May Fourth intellectuals’ imagination of the modern Chinese nation, this innocent child was ideally embodied by Alice, a foreign girl, who was not immersed in the Chinese culture. One interesting question is that if this innocent child was materialized in a real Chinese girl, what new issues would arise in relation to China’s nation-building? This is what I attempt to answer in the next chapter.
Notes

1. Although Ye Shengtao’s fairy tales collected in Scarecrow were published before Zhao Yuanren’s translation, Ye’s stories did not form a consistent image of the child. Ye himself admitted that the stories in Scarecrow are not consistent and many of them described the harsh social reality and were far from being beautiful fairy tales for children. See Ye Shengtao “Children’s Literature and Me.”

2. Jenkins uses Julia Kristeva’s idea of abjection to interpret Alice’s indeterminate identity and the relationship between the governing scripts and those that threaten a secure Victorian symbolic order. See Jenkins’ “Imagining the Abject in Kingsley, MacDonald, and Carroll.”

3. For a detailed discussion on the language education reform, see Zhang Xinke.

4. There are numerous instances in which Zhao translated Alice into a more anti-traditional child. For instance, Zhao translated the phrase “ventured to say” (Carroll 95) into “rebelliously asked” (“造次地问道”) (140). In the same fashion, Zhao changed the original title of the last chapter “Alice’s Evidence” into “Alice Created Havoc in the Court” (“阿丽思大闹公堂”). While the original title places emphasis on factual information, the translation highlights Alice’s rebelliousness.

5. As the tension between factory workers and their bosses increased in Shanghai in 1925, there were frequent workers’ strikes. On May 30 a demonstration was held, resulting in
the British Sikh police firing into the crowd and killing many workers and students (Zarrow 206). This provoked nationwide anti-foreign demonstrations and garnered sympathy for China from around the world. The incident is usually called the “May Thirtieth movement.” Importantly, as Zarrow points out, “the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist emerged from the movement as newly legitimate national representatives of China’s future” (209; emphasis original). In comparison, May Fourth intellectuals, who had focused on a cultural revolution, were “ill-prepared” (Schwarcz147) for such violence. They came to realize that transforming China should not be limited to the cultural front, and many of them like Lu Xun turned themselves into Marxists. This signaled a major shift in the national politics I will discuss later.

6. The “failure” to reproduce the innocent child in the emerging Chinese children’s literature seemed symptomatic of May Fourth writers. Ye Shengtao, for example, also gradually shifted his tone while writing Scarecrow. As Zhen Zhengduo noted in his preface to Ye’s Scarecrow, “As we read his ‘The Little White Boat,’ ‘The Fool,’ ‘The Swallow,’ ‘Fanger’s Dream’ . . . , we clearly see that he worked hard to immerse himself in his childhood dreams and wanted to render such beautiful dreams on the page. However, gradually, his tone unwittingly changed direction” (34). Ye’s later fairy tales in the collection became increasingly pessimistic. For instance, the last story “Scarecrow” is no longer set in the picturesque countryside, as the first fairy tale “The Little White Boat” is. “Scarecrow” narrates from the perspective of a scarecrow the tragic fates of three women: white caterpillars eat up the crop of a poor old peasant woman already stricken by the deaths of her husband and son; an exhausted fisher woman desperately tries to
catch fish on a cold night for her seriously sick and hungry child; a hopeless woman, sold by her merciless husband to pay his gambling debts, drowns herself in the river. No matter how sympathetic towards the women, the scarecrow cannot offer any help, simply because he is a scarecrow, unable to move and talk. The scarecrow is last seen lying in the fields, motionless.

7. Zhao Yuanren’s translations of the poems in Carroll’s Alice book are also such “new poems.”

8. Farquhar’s *Children’s Literature in China* provides a helpful discussion on Chinese revolutionary children’s literature in the 1930s and 1940s.
Chapter 3

Love That Binds Us All: Feminine Cosmopolitanism in Bing Xin’s Letters to Young Readers

In 1919, Lu Xun published an essay in New Youth, “How Should We Be Fathers Today.” This was Lu Xun’s attempt to study “how to revolutionize the family” (22). Lu Xun attacked the traditional father-son relationship that embodies the ethical core of male-centric Confucianism, filial piety. This principle values the old rather than the young, and establishes that the latter should devote oneself to the well-being of the parent and patrilineage. In accordance with the ethical principle, the father-son relationship is bound by “benevolence” (“en”); the parent bestows benevolence toward the child in return for filial devotion. In this light, the parent’s raising the child is a kind of debt which the child should repay when he grows up. Lu Xun regarded this familial relationship as “unnatural.” The “natural” way of being a father, according to Lu Xun, should be based on the phenomenon of the biological world: “to preserve life; to continue life; and to develop life (this is evolution)” (21). If organisms can do this, Lu Xun argued, fathers should do it too. Couched in the evolutionary discourse of “natural development,” Lu Xun’s argument for being a “natural” father was not merely to “revolutionize the family” but to revolutionize the nation. In imperial China, the bond between the parent and son was posited as the metonymic equivalent to that between the emperor and subject. As Haiyan Lee puts it, “a filial (xiao) son is necessarily a loyal (zhong) subject and vice versa” (Revolution of the Heart, 27). This constitutes the “affective dimension of orthodox Confucianism” (Lee 26). However, the father-son and emperor-subject relations are not reciprocal, but hierarchical. The emperor and father are superiors whom the son
venerates and obeys. In the words of Lee, “reciprocity is secondary to hierarchy, and it is loyalty and filiality that constitute the foundational moral sentiments in orthodox Confucianism” (27).

Lu Xun’s proposal for revolutionizing the family was meant to revamp the existing hierarchical social structure and construct a horizontal (equal) social relationship binding a new democratic Chinese nation. This social relationship models on a new kind of familial relationship, which is “love” (“ai”). As Lu Xun stated:

The arrangement of nature, despite its own limitations, is infallible, governed by the law that the young continues the life of the old. It doesn’t use “benevolence,” but endows biological creatures with an instinct, what we call “love.” Except those that have too many offspring and are unable to love each one like fish, animals always love their young, never act out of self-interest, and even sacrifice their own lives for the development of the next generation. (25)

While filiality is repressive, retrogressive, prescriptive, and artificial, Lu Xun suggested, “love” is “natural,” “instinctive,” “genuine,” “deep,” and “everlasting” (29). The instinct of “love” became an index of the “free” individual promoted in the May Fourth period.¹ Despite the dominance of the “unnatural” parental relationship of Confucianism in China, Lu Xun found an alternative to it: “When a village woman is nursing her baby, it never occurs to her that she is bestowing benevolence” (25). The village woman is not “spoiled by ‘Confucianists’” and “innocent” (25). Like the child, the illiterate and
underrepresented village woman was seen as uncontaminated by the dominant ideology. Furthermore, Lu Xun argued that to love their children parents should love themselves first, because “parents’ shortcomings can be fatal for their children” (26). This is illustrated by an example, a scene from Henrik Johan Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, in which Oswald Alving, suffering from syphilis inherited from his father, is asking his mother to euthanize him. Because Oswald’s father never loves himself, which is shown by his philandering, he is unable to love his son and proves unqualified as a father. Interestingly, while the subject of Lu Xun’s study is “fathers,” it seemed quite difficult for Lu Xun to imagine a new father-son relation concretely. Being the only examples in the essay, the discussed two instances both highlight an affective relation between the *mother* and child. It is clear in the first example that the desired affective relation is embodied in the village woman and her child. In the second example, the father is unloving and absent, whereas the ambivalence demonstrated by both Oswald and his mother precisely originates from love. At first Oswald wants his servant to help him administer morphine pills, because he “loves his mother” and does not want to see her suffer (Lu Xun 26). But since the servant has left, Oswald has to ask his mother for help. This is because “no one else is better than her” (Lu Xun 26). Mrs. Alving is desperate and hesitant about taking away the life she has given to her son (Lu Xun 26).

As Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua put it, the May Fourth period was “an unprecedented era of patricide in Chinese history” (3). The May Fourth movement is a cultural and ideological revolution against patriarchal Confucianism—a symbolic act of patricide. While the Confucian tradition is the culture of the patriarch, the new culture is that of the rebelling son. The May Fourth culture is thus the result of the son’s rebellion
against the two-thousand-year old father’s culture (Meng and Dai, 4). If the father is killed and so is the Confucian father-son relation, what would replace them in the new culture? Lu Xun, undoubtedly one of the most rebellious sons, gestured toward a loving mother and her relation with her child. But such a “loving” relationship between the mother and child was never really “natural.” As I have been arguing, constructing the “real” and “natural” was the very theme of the May Fourth movement aimed at dismantling Confucianism seen as repressive and hypocritical. Thus, the construction of “love” as “instinctual” was also integral to the May Fourth nationalist movement. However, Lu Xun, the foremost modern Chinese writer and May Fourth intellectual, did not further develop his idea of familial love elsewhere, or in the rest of his life.

As a model of the affectionate human relationship constituting the modern democratic Chinese nation imagined by the May Fourth generation, the loving mother-child relation was best rendered by a prominent female writer of the period, Bing Xin, in her work for children, *Letters to Young Readers*. I suggest that in this work Bing Xin uses her own intimate relation with her mother to construct and naturalize a desired (inter)national community bound by “love.” I also suggest that Bing Xin’s national community is mediated through a feminine cosmopolitanism constituted by innocent and sympathetic children. I argue that Bing Xin envisioned this feminine cosmopolitanism characterized by everyday trivialities and sentimentality as a critique of and an alternative to the politicized and war-driven nationalist politics.

Bing Xin was thus in an ambivalent relationship with the May Fourth generation, which, however, she belonged to. Parallel to the formation of “rebellious sons”—May Fourth male nationalists trying to destroy the Confucian patriarch—was the emergence of
“new daughters” breaking Confucian domesticity, venturing out into the public sphere and taking up professions that had never been opened to them before. Bing Xin was such a notable daughter of the May Fourth New Culture, endeavoring to transform China with her pen as her male counterparts did. Therefore, Bing Xin enthusiastically responded to the call for transforming China through her construction of the affectionate mother-child relation. But seeing the limits of male-dominated nationalist politics, this female writer also built a constructive critique into her imagination of the feminine (inter)national community. Toward the end of this chapter, I will also discuss how the ambivalent critical acceptance of Bing Xin as a “children’s writer” and her embodiment of the innocent child reveals the inherent contradictions of the May Fourth nationalist politics inflected by gender.

**Constructing “Natural” Maternal Love**

Bing Xin, whose real name is Xie Wanying, was born in 1900 to a wealthy family. Her father was a marine officer. She spent most of her childhood in the east coast city Yantai and moved to Beijing with her family in 1913. In the following year Bing Xin went to a mission high school. Determined to become a doctor, Bing Xin was admitted to the pre-college science program at the North China Union College for Women (which later became part of Yenching University). A few months later, the May Fourth movement broke out. Bing Xin was then a member of the Propaganda Group of the Beijing Female Student Union and enthusiastically plunged herself into the movement. She first published essays supporting the patriotic students of the movement in the influential newspaper *Morning Post*, and then began to write short stories and novellas under the
pen name “Bing Xin,” meaning “ice heart,” a metaphor for “innocence” or “authenticity.” However, as Bing Xing graduated from the pre-college program, she decided to pursue a bachelor degree in arts rather than medicine and entered Yenching University. In the 1923 summer Bing Xin graduated from the university and received a fellowship to pursue a master degree in British literature at Wellesley College in the United States. Before Bing Xin’s departure, *Morning Post* supplement launched on July 24, 1923, a new column, *Children’s World*, which became a major publication in China’s new children’s literature. It was actually Bing Xin who made it possible. Bing Xin proposed to the newspaper several times that it should add a column exclusively for children. On August 3 in the same year, Bing Xin left for the U.S. and arrived at Wellesley on September 17. Three years later, Bing Xin received her master degree from Wellesley and returned China.

*Letters to Young Readers* (abbreviated as *Letters*) is a collection of twenty-nine letters originally serialized in *Children’s World* from 1923 to 1926, a time when Bing Xin was studying in the U.S. The first letter was dated July 25, 1923, the second day after *Morning Post* launched its new column, and the last one August 31, 1926, the day when Bing Xin returned to Beijing. *Letters* reads like the writer’s autobiographical accounts of her sojourn in the U.S., sprinkled with her reminiscences of her childhood back home. All the letters were addressed to “little friends,” implied child readers of the column.

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson associated the origins of national consciousness with the capitalist print, especially the novel and newspaper as two related cultural products. Anderson argued that fundamental to the formation of nationalism is a new perception of simultaneity, which replaced the “medieval conception of
simultaneity-long-time”—“a simultaneity of past and future in an incessant present” (30). The new conception of simultaneity is a “homogenous, empty time,” “transverse, cross-time, marketed not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (30). According to Anderson, the newspaper played a crucial role in developing this new perception of simultaneity and forging “an imagined community.” When reading a newspaper that connected and juxtaposed in an imaginative way essentially arbitrary local events and phenomena at a specific time on a specific day, Anderson suggested, readers were immediately plunged into calendrical time and a familiar landscape. The newspaper reader, “observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life” (39-40). In other words, via reading the newspaper, which is essentially vernacular, mass-oriented and printed daily, the reader came to imagine that there are thousands of fellow-members like him in the same community.

While the question of whether it was the idea of simultaneity that forged the national consciousness needs further study, Anderson nevertheless helpfully pointed out the importance of the newspaper in constructing a national (vernacular) culture. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, periodical-publishing blossomed in China. As indicated previously, important new ideas in regard to the nation and child were circulated via emerging periodicals, and the earliest children’s stories, such as Ye Shengtao’s Scarecrow and Shen Congwen’s Alice’s Adventures in China, were all first serialized in periodicals. The importance of Bing Xin’s Letters thus should be, first of all, understood in relation to this sociocultural function of the newspaper in the early
twentieth century China. But unlike any work for children produced in the early twentieth
century, *Letters* was addressed directly to “young readers.” The “young readers,”
however, “points to a readership that is neither ready-made nor naturally existent” (Yan 84). That is, a new type of child citizens were simultaneously presumed and created
through the newspaper. Through addressing to “young readers,” or “little friends,” Bing Xin’s *Letters* renders the interpellative process explicit.

The seemingly disparate subjects of *Letters* are tied by an underlying theme of
maternal love. In the letter of December 5, 1923, for example, Bing Xin vividly portrayed
her intimate relationship with her mother. The letter began with the depiction of a story-
telling scene: “I often liked to sit by my mother, hold her sleeves, and beg her to tell
stories of my childhood” (44). The writer retold to her “little friends” what her mother
told her: “Being only three months old, you had already been very sick. When hearing the
footsteps of the person delivering medicine, you already felt scared and started to cry.
Many people surrounded your bed, but you did not look at anyone but me, with a pitiful
look. It looked like that you already recognized your mother among a crowd of strangers!”
(44). By the time the mother finished this story, “tears had already dampened the corners
of our eyes, both of us,” as Bing Xin wrote (45). The mother continued: “You were only
seven-month old. We were all in the sea-boat, and I held you in my arms standing by the
railing. In the sound of sea waves, you already knew to utter ‘mama’ and ‘sister’” (45).
The next story similarly describes the inseparable bond between the fragile child and her
caring mother: Bing Xin was awakened from a nightmare in which her mother was taken
away by some women beggars; child was frightened and sobbing ceaselessly; and then
the mother came to her, and it took lengthy explanation and comfort to get Bing Xin to
sleep again. The mother then told the child: “From then on, I never dared to leave you alone in bed, even during the time when you were sound asleep” (45).

All the childhood stories the mother told Bing Xin happened before she was four years old, a time when Bing Xin began to develop her own sense of love. As Bing Xin wrote, “Before I knew and acknowledged my own existence in the world, she [the mother] had already loved me. Only since the age of three, I have gradually come to find myself in the universe, love myself, and recognize myself” (48). The mother’s love for her daughter not only predates the time when the child came to love her mother back, but also extends well into infinity. Bing Xin narrated that even if she changed every aspect of her identity and no one in the world recognized her, her mother would still love her, her body and soul—“she loves every component of me, of the past, the future, and the present” (51). Bing Xin’s personal experiences endowed the stories a sense of “realness,” making her mother’s love “natural,” despite that the writer herself did not remember the stories her mother told her. The factuality of the stories is questionable, as they might just be the mother’s inventions. Having told readers the story of the seven-month-old Bing Xin calling her mother in the sea-boat, the writer admitted that her parents still often argued with each about this matter. While her father argued that no seven-month-old child in the world could ever talk, her mother insisted that the story was true. And the story had become a “suspicious case” in the family.

All the stories were intended to illustrate the mother’s love as unconditional and everlasting. The mother’s love cannot be explained by any external factors except by love itself as an “instinct.” Such “naturalness” of love is further illustrated by another story the writer retold. The child Bing Xin once approached her mother and asked her why she
loved her (48). The mother “put down the needlework, touched my forehead with her cheeks, and said gently and unhesitatingly: ‘There is no why—just because you are my daughter’” (48). Unlike the “hierarchical” benevolence, “love” is reciprocal. As the writer’s childhood stories illustrate, she “naturally” identified with her mother even before she developed her own consciousness. In addition, the stories feature a sick child. Bing Xin inherited hematemesis from her mother, but she was grateful for the illness. This is because hematemesis is a “natural” bond—“a direct tie” (33)—between the child and her mother: “Hematemesis is our heart, our love; I love my mother and therefore love our illness” (33). Illness, bodily and physiological, is thus also employed to naturalize maternal love.

While the kind of mutual love between Bing Xin and her mother is “natural,” paradoxically, it also can be cultivated. The affectionate child Bing Xin, oblivious to her own childhood, actually came into being through her mother’s stories. The mother told Bing Xin that she once had an intimate playmate called Baojie. But Bing Xin did not remember her: “Baojie is a mysterious friend of mine, for I have never remembered her, nor recognized her” (46). However, Bing Xin “felt deeply in love with her, through the mother’s mouth” (46). The moving childhood stories the mother told not only constitute Bing Xin as a loving person but also construct an affectionate relationship between the mother and child:

When she talked about these stories, I always wore smile on my face, and my eyes were filled with tears; having heard her stories, I used her sleeves to press against my eye corners, and quietly
leaned over her knees. At this moment the universe disappeared; there only left my mother and me, and then I also disappeared and there was only my mother, because I am originally part of her! I gradually discovered and completed myself through my mother’s mouth; how surprising it is!” (47).

Since the mother’s stories were re-narrated by the writer to her young readers, storytelling is doubled and then the young readers could also be made into affectionate subjects through the stories. Furthermore, if the mother’s stories as well as the act of storytelling created an intimate relationship between the mother and the child, the same effect can be also achieved between child readers and their mothers. And this is indeed Bing Xin’s advice for her “little friends”: the writer encouraged her child readers to find their mothers as soon as they finished her letter and to ask their mothers to tell them their own childhood stories (52). Bing Xin also made a suggestion for her readers in regard to how they should behave in order to maximize the desired effect of their mothers’ storytelling: “As she sits down, you go sit on her laps, and lean over her chest; you can hear her pulse beating gently and regularly. You draw back your head, and then there will be countless stories about you, those wonderful stories you do not know, singing from her mouth harmoniously” (52).

This picture which Bing Xin painted for her readers suggests that storytelling is an important means to construct the desired affectionate relationship between the mother and child. The way the child sits by her mother, the posture the child takes up while listening to her mother, and the content of the stories the mother tells all constitute an
affectionate relationship that is imitable and replicable. It is worth emphasizing that the
stories being told need to be “children’s stories,” if storytelling is to serve the right
purpose. Otherwise, storytelling could be exactly the opposite of what was promoted—a
“feudal” practice. For example, in “Children’s Imagination and Feeling” originally
published in 1921, Ye Shengtao began the essay with a portrayal of the storytelling
practice in an ordinary Chinese family:

    After dinner, the family members sit in a circle, and the soft light
sheds on each person’s face, and makes it peaceful and gentle. An
old woman, usually a servant, utters a soft sound, telling stories to
the child. With its lips compressed and eyes squinted, the child
quietly leans over the mother’s knees, slowly falling into asleep.
This is what usually happens in every family. These memories
seem to transport us back to childhood, and that pure feeling is
satisfactory and intoxicating. (54)

The writer’s romantic sentiments toward childhood are easily detectable. Such a portrayal
of childhood was not surprising, given that Ye Shengtao was the inaugurator of Chinese
children’s literature and created the very first Chinese fairy tales featuring “innocent”
children and their idyllic world. What Ye described here seems to correspond to Bing
Xin’s description of storytelling. But with a sudden shift in tone, Ye in the following
paragraph dismissed those stories told by the old woman as superstitious, for those stories
“contained gods and monsters and elements of moral education” (54). According to Ye,
what the woman told was scaring and grotesque stories aimed at moralizing and
controlling children. For example, the woman told the child that he would be eaten by the
monster in the story if he did not stop crying. Ye then proposed that arts for children
should possess a quality of “affection.” While indoctrination is emotionless, creating
distance, Ye stated, affection generates sympathy (55). Ye associated storytelling with a
“feudal” practice. Ironically the warm picture of storytelling quoted above, especially the
scene of the child leaning over his mother’s knees, gestures toward the “affectionate”
quality Ye proposed. But since storytelling was closely associated with an old woman
storyteller—a symbol of traditionalism—and didactic stories, storytelling’s potential for
developing “affection” is never discussed in Ye’s essay. Conversely, Bing Xin reinvented
storytelling into an affectionate practice and assigned the mother a new role of storyteller.
More importantly, the stories in Bing Xin’s Letters are no longer scaring and
“superstitious” folktales, but the child’s own moving stories, which automatically became
“good children’s literature” imbued with the “child-heart.”

For Bing Xin, the affectionate relationship is not merely a private property of the
mother and her child. But maternal love, which is unconditional and unselfish, should be
the very substance of human relations beyond domesticity:

Her love not only encircles me, but also surrounds all the people
who love me; and because she loves me, she also loves her
children in the world, and loves all the mothers in the world. Little
Friends! Let me tell you a few words, which are extremely simple
for children but extremely difficult for adults to understand, “This is how the world is built!” (51; emphasis original)

Love transcends the confines of selfhood, reaches others, and connects each other in “a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 16). This horizontal relationship based on affectionate bonding differs fundamentally from the vertical (hierarchical) relationship organizing China in which social and familial relationships were built on Confucian mores and rituals. As the above passage suggests, Bing Xin imagined that the affectionate relation is not limited to family members but extends to strangers from around the world, signified by phrases such as “children in the world,” and “mothers in the world.” But if maternal love is “determined by blood” and “unconditional” (116), what kind of love would bind strangers and fellow-members who never met in person? How is “love” translatable across familial confines and national boundaries? And why would the writer speak “love” in such paradoxical terms, as both private and universal?

**Sympathetic Nationalism beyond National Boundaries**

Lee argues in *Revolution of the Heart* that “From the ‘sharing, diffusion, or impregnation’ of national identity modeled on family and love, one derives the ‘national feeling’ or ‘national sympathy’ that binds the national community together in space as well as in time” (226). If the national community is built on its members’ sympathetic identification with each other, then the inability to feel sympathetic with fellow countrymen could be an index of failed nationhood. And this was allegedly the case with the Chinese people, who were “cruel,” “callous,” and “unsympathetic.” These qualities,
as Lydia Liu suggests, are staple categories of a long-standing missionary discourse about Chinese character (46). One often-cited example is Arthur Smith, a missionary from North America who spent many years in China during the latter part of the nineteenth century and wrote a number of books on the subject of Chinese people (Liu 51). Smith’s *Chinese Characteristics*, which was first published in 1889 in Shanghai and enjoyed great popularity among Westerners in Asia (Liu 51), enumerates myriad moral and cultural defects of the Chinese people, which seemed to rest on the “absence of sympathy:”

China has many needs, among which her leading statesmen place armies, navies, arsenals. To her foreign wellwishers it is plain that she needs a currency, railways, and scientific instruction. But does not a deeper diagnosis of the conditions of the Empire indicate that one of her profoundest needs is more human sympathy? She needs to *feel with childhood that sympathy* which for centuries has been one of the choicest possessions of races and peoples which once knew it not. She needs to feel sympathy for wives and for mothers, a sympathy which eighteen centuries have done so much to develop and to deepen. She needs to feel sympathy for man as man, to learn that quality of mercy which Christianity has cultivated until it has become the plant that ever bloomed upon the earth. (Qtd. in Lee, 224-25; emphasis mine).
Sympathy was conceived as a fundamental criterion of putatively universal humanism—“to feel sympathy for man as man.” In this light, the Chinese people’s perceived failure to feel sympathetic denies the Chinese race as part of the “human” race. Smith’s characterization of Chinese national character is imperialist in nature. But Lydia Liu insightfully suggests that such a myth of Chinese national character was co-authored and employed by Chinese intellectuals themselves to justify the May Fourth movement as essentially an enlightenment project targeting the Chinese masses. In other words, May Fourth intellectuals intercepted the discourse of China being unsympathetic for their nation-building project.

It was quite possible that Bing Xin’s conceptualization of “love” was premised on the widely circulating discourse of China’s unsympathetic character during the May Fourth period. Bing Xin’s idea of “love” then was a timely response to the call for transforming Chinese national character. Also worth noting in Smith’s characterization of China are two details especially relevant to Bing Xin’s concept of “love.” One is that Smith referred to China as “she.” While “semi-colonized” China was easily emasculated and feminized vis-à-vis aggressive foreign powers in the imperialist discourse of the period, Bing Xin elevated the mother to the nation-mother whom her child citizens love unconditionally. Second, Smith indicated that sympathy is an attribute of children—“She needs to feel with childhood that sympathy.” Interestingly, compassion was seen as a “natural” attribute of children in the 1920s China, as discussed in the previous chapters.

What Bing Xin proposed in Letters is that maternal love is translatable into sympathetic love, which is best embodied in children. But while naturalizing compassion as a feature of children,Letters also foregrounds that sympathy is cultivable. And, it is the image of
the ailing girl in *Letters* that functions as a crucial mechanism of developing sympathy in the Chinese people.

As mentioned earlier, Bing Xin portrayed herself as a physically weak and vulnerable girl. Illness was not only a feature of her childhood but also accompanied her youth. In fact during her three-year study at Wellesley, Bing Xin spent most of her time in hospital, and the majority of her twenty-nine letters sent back home for publication are about her life and thoughts there. For example, a few months after she arrived at Wellesley College, Bing Xin suffered from her old ailment and was hospitalized. In the following days, the ailing girl was enveloped by care and love. Her classmates and professors came to visit her and brought her letters and flowers, despite that Bing Xin did not know all of them; the amiable nurse and doctor made great efforts to ensure a quiet and restful environment for her; and an acquaintance of her, Mrs. B, traveled a good distance to see her on Thanksgiving Day. With her watery eyes and pale face, Mrs. B assured Bing Xin that they would have another wonderful Thanksgiving as she recovers. Watching Mrs. B’s disappearing back and sensing her “motherly love” (37), Bing Xin shed tears. However, this scene of illness is not negatively associated with anguish and pain but with love and care. The warm feeling and comfort Bing Xin felt in the hospital even led her to say that “I am willing to be sick here” (35).

While the “fragile and weak” Bing Xin elicited care and love from many people, the stories of her and other ailing girls were also meant to evoke sympathy in her child readers. In one letter addressed to “benevolent little friends,” Bing Xin wrote: “If there is any space in your generous hearts, I would like to introduce you to a few lovely girls for you to remember and sympathize” (79). These girls, M, R, E, R, A, came from different
places and lived in the same hospital with Bing Xin. Like Bing Xin, these girls were weak, sick and in need of others’ care. But they were also mutually sympathetic to each other. M, for example, is an "innocent" but "mentally unstable" girl (79). Any shock and surprise would disturb her. Although she had been hospitalized for four years, her health condition did not improve. Bing Xin came to know that M had a happy family but was separated from her family due to her illness. She often muttered that her father loved her, her mother loved her, and she, herself, loved her. Her "innocent and miserable look often gained tender affection from the other girls" (80). D was an Irish girl with an unfortunate childhood. Her father was an alcoholic and often abused his children. Whenever others talked about their fathers, D shed tears. So when Bing Xin received a letter from her father, she told D that it was from her mother. Bing Xin described D as "a pitiful sick child with a burdened soul" (81). E was another "thin and weak" (80) girl, who did not have parents. The observant Bing Xin saw through that E longed for love and care from her family but had to hide her sadness under her apparent happiness and liveliness. Each example Bing Xin described is filled with sorrow and sadness because of a lack of love. But the writer believed that "love exists in life for these people" (82). That is, "these suffering souls need infinite sympathy and remembrance" (82). But Bing Xin believed that she alone was only a small force. So she called for help from her "innocent and great little friends from thousands of miles away" (82). Bing Xin advised her "merciful" little friends to remember and think about these girls. Although these girls all lived abroad, Bing Xin told her readers, you could use your imagination and heart to think of these poor children (83).
Bing Xin emphasized the vast geographical distance between her child readers and the ailing girls. That is, the Chinese children did not and could not meet those girls in person as Bing Xin did. This requires the Chinese children to exert their imagination to empathize and sympathize with those suffering souls. In this light, the stories themselves function as an intermediary between the sick strangers and Chinese children. Bing Xin believed that her compassionate little friends should and would take the responsibility of caring for the suffering girls (83). What we could do, Bing Xin advised, is to start from small things—“a flower, a card, a soothing wish, a genuine visit, and even a pitiful glimpse” (83). All of these would console the lonely and suffering patients; and even after the visit paid and flowers withered, there would be timeless appreciation and remembrance (83). More importantly, these “small things” are not really “small.” As Bing Xin wrote, “Little friends, do not say that compassion from thousands of miles away is futile. . . . It is precisely these bits and pieces of care that forge your compassion essential to your future great enterprise” (84).

Bing Xin’s portrayals of the ailing girls aimed at cultivating her child readers’ sympathetic imagination, which forms the basis of the national community. In other words, transnational compassion enables the Chinese children to direct their attention inward toward their own country. Only through sympathetic identification with those foreign girls could Chinese children really “see” and care about their fellow countrymen experiencing similar sufferings. In this light, the “future great enterprise” is the future Chinese citizens’ building a desirable nation. This is illustrated by what Bing Xin said in the following. Those sick girls Bing Xin befriended at the hospital represent “only a small corner of the world populated by the young, the weak, and the sick” (83). The little
readers, Bing Xin stated, “must have seen more than I did” (83). Those whom the Chinese children saw are the disenfranchised near them in their own country—the poor, the wounded, and the sick—devastated by ongoing wars and power struggles at the top level. This is shown in an earlier letter in which Bing Xin explicitly discussed contemporary domestic politics, for the first and only time throughout Letters:

Adults’ thoughts are unfathomable, not what we can understand. I don’t know why their rights and wrongs are always in opposition to ours. They are usually indifferent to what makes us anguished; but what we see as trivial is made by them a world-shaking event. For example, wars and canons killed and wounded thousands and millions of people, making them badly mutilated and bleeding on the ground. We don’t need to see it, and just hearing people talk about it will make us abhorred, lose sleep or talk in sleep at night. But not only do they not care but they are very fond of manipulating such things. Take another example. No matter who is the president, as long as he is honest, maintains peace, and does not interfere with our play, we will be satisfied. But adults, on the contrary, are busy running around and talking about it, electing this or that person. It is just a big mess, and even more difficult than our game of electing a “little king.” Overall, we dare not and will not interfere with their business; and our matters are simply not
worth any attention from them. So we can talk and laugh freely, and don’t need to worry about being laughed at by them. (21)

It is clear that Bing Xin contrasted the adult world characterized by cruelty, ruthlessness, and power-lust, with a children’s world defined by compassion. Bing Xin’s characterization of children in the passage should not be read as a realist portrayal of Chinese children, but as a construct. Read alone with Bing Xin’s proposal of sympathetic education, these compassionate children came into being while being differentiated from the adult. If sympathy is properly cultivated in Chinese children, Bing Xin indicated, they would fundamentally transform the violence-ridden Chinese society, whose evils were seen as rooted in a lack of sympathy. The seemingly trivial and inconsequential children’s world is thus precisely the opposite of what it looks—a model of democratic society bound by love.

Bing Xin’s conceptualization of nationalism thus takes on a cosmopolitan dimension. Bing Xin liked to use the word “world,” not the nation, and her idea of “love” also traverses national boundaries. Apparently, Bing Xin’s “universal” love evokes the universalist ideal of Enlightenment humanism, which claims to be independent of “the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives” (Robbins 1). But the May Fourth generation’s imagination of the nation “enlists the service of Enlightenment humanism to aid the battle against its rivals: families, clans, native places, and so on” (Lee 224). While the May Fourth movement was seen as Chinese enlightenment, it actually “reflects the exigencies of its own history” (Schwarcz 1). More importantly, cosmopolitanism and the idea of the local are not necessarily in
opposition to each other. As Shuang Shen argues, “Cosmopolitan worldviews are specific; they are not views from nowhere, but are contextualized by particular conditions and marked in terms of class and gender.” (23-24). Bing Xin’s “universal” love is nationalist in nature, aimed at curing the national disease of cruelty. Meanwhile, a transnational perspective—through the portrayal of the foreign girls—also enables the Chinese to really “see,” with their hearts, an alternative to human antagonisms. The loving mothers, caring motherly figures, and ailing innocent girls constitute Bing Xin’s cosmopolitanism. This feminine cosmopolitanism is reminiscent of Alice’s sympathetic identification with the Miao girls in Shen Congwen’s Alice’s Adventures in China. But Shen’s depiction of the subject seems a hasty ending, whereas the idea of cosmopolitanism is a consistent theme in Bing Xin’s Letters. This is further illustrated by Bing Xin’s conceptualization of the mother.

As discussed earlier, Letters features Bing Xin’s own mother. But the biological mother sometimes becomes indistinguishable from the motherland, and the national attachment was developed only after the writer left her country. Bing Xin used the image of the sea as a metaphor for maternal love and her mother: “I became close to the sea in my childhood. . . . the sea is deep, boundless, and calm, and her love is mysterious and mighty” (26). Bing Xin grew up by the sea and often played alone on the seashore, always struck by the “intimate greatness” of the sea (“My Childhood,” 38). The above quoted passage was written while Bing Xin was studying at Wellesley, a lonely daughter living in a foreign country. The sea became closely associated with the home—as both her family and her motherland. The writer’s nostalgia for home was felt only in the U.S. In a letter addressed to her young brother who had sent her an anthology of Chinese
poems, Bing Xin expressed that she did not come to keenly understand until now the meaning of the poems evoking pangs of homesickness (86). However, the Lake Waban at Wellesley College is a comfort for the homesick Bing Xin, for the lake is “the sea’s daughter” (26)—that connects her with her mother(land). The writer told her readers that she went to the lake every day (86). On a day before her mother’s birthday, she went there again, and her thinking of her own mother was mixed with nostalgia for her home country (86). By the lake the writer recited a Chinese poem, and particularly resonated with one sentence from the poem, “Nostalgia is forever restless.” Bing Xin then began to imitate what was described in the poem: she picked up a pebble, carved on it the line from the poem, and threw it afar into the lake, and walked away without turning her back. Like the branch from the peach tree thrown into the river described in the poem, the pebble carried Bing Xin’s love toward her mother(land).6

One central problem of nationalism for Anderson is the question of why it is able to generate such colossal sacrifices, such as the citizens’ deaths. In the words of Lieberman, “Part of his answer is that nations are imagined as objects of love to which we are inescapably and naturally bound, like the kin relations they imitate with terms such as ‘motherland’ or patria’” (101). In this light, Bing Xin’s nostalgia for her country embodied by the figure of the mother is not just “useless” feminine sentiments, but a means to arouse similar national attachments in her fellow-members of the “imagined community.”
Gendering the Innocent Child

If the affectionate mother is a construct, so is the child. Bing Xin’s construction of the child in *Letters* was both drawing on the dominant discourse of the innocent child and redefining it in its own terms. In the very first letter, for example, the writer described herself as “a lagger in the group of the innocent”—“I was once a child, and now am still a child sometimes” (3-4). “In order to keep this little trace of innocence before I enter into another world,” Bing Xin wrote to her child readers, “I sincerely hope that you help me and guide me, while I also need to work studiously, in order to become your most passionate and loyal friend” (4). While male writers of the period such as Ye Shengtao, Shen Congwen and Chen Bochui invariably “failed” to represent the “innocent” child in varying degrees, Bing Xin seemed more “successful” in rendering the innocent child.

Stories like *Alice’s Adventures in China* and *Scarecrow* are fantasy/fairy tales, they all strongly echo contemporary Chinese reality and its brutality. Bing Xin’s *Letters* is quasi-autobiographical but takes on a fairytale-like quality in that the children’s world constituted by innocent girls and loving mothers is insulated from the political turbulence of the 1920s China. But it is worth emphasizing that the children’s world in *Letters* is not a happy pastoral world, but filled with sorrow and melancholy, as evidenced by the writer’s depictions of illness and nostalgia. In fact Bing Xin revealed to her readers that her many friends blamed her for expressing sad sentiments in her correspondences with her child readers and that these friends advised her not to produce this kind of writings for the sake of her and children’s happiness and safety (82). But Bing Xin believed that life is filled not only with joy but also suffering. Since all children would come to know and experience these manifold facets of life, Bing Xin wrote, then it was unnecessary to
withhold truth from them (82). However, the kind of suffering depicted in *Letters* seem “trivial” in comparison with the kind of killing and violence in the children’s stories by the male writers. Farquhar sees such a difference as exactly what makes Bing Xin an outstanding children’s literature writer: “Much of her strength as a writer for and about children lies not so much in an evocation of their joys as in a sympathetic rendering of their fears and sorrows that seem so petty to an adult, but flood their entire being” (120). This feature also led Chen Xiu to argue that the first work “written genuinely for children and moreover, about their life” should not be Ye Shengtao’s *Scarecrow* but Bing Xin’s *Letters to Young Readers*” (qtd. in Farquhar, 115). According to Chen, this is because Ye exploited the fairytale as a vehicle to “reflect the real ugliness of contemporary society” (qtd. in Farquhar, 115), which disqualified Ye as a “real” children’s literature writer. Conversely, “Bing Xin’s art comes more from subjective experience than from social analysis” (Farquhar 121).

The difference between “subjective experience” and “social analysis” is only an artificial construct. In the words of Yan, “Feminist studies have of course long taught us that personal is political” (73). As I have been arguing, Bing Xin’s “philosophy of love,” rendered through the writer’s supposedly “subjective experience,” addressed the affective dimension of Chinese nationalism in the 1920s. However, Farquhar and Chen Xiu helpfully point out a formal difference between Bing Xin’s work and those by her male counterparts. And a more interesting question for me is how Bing Xin’s feminine “subjective experience” became a “proper” form of the emerging children’s literature. My answer is that the ideal innocent child underlying the emerging children’s literature was inherently feminine, and the attribute of “innocence” became closely associated with
girls. Speaking of the representations of Chinese women in the early twentieth century, Chow argues that “during a period of massive social transformations, the collapse of tradition would find its most moving representations in the figures of those who are traditionally the most oppressed, figures that become ‘stand-ins’ for China’s traumatized self-consciousness in every sense of the phrase” (170; emphasis original). While the “most oppressed” for Chow is women, I want to say that it is girls, for both their gender and age. It might not be merely a coincidence that one of the most important child characters in the period is Alice, an “innocent” girl. And, another widely celebrated epitome of the innocent child is Bing Xin herself, despite its inherent contradictions.

*Letters* was written during the time when Bing Xin was maintaining her “child-heart.” As Bing Xin told her readers, “I dare not write any letters with the troublesome adult-heart, if I am not taking up the pen at the moment when I assume my child-heart” (5). The best moments of the “child-heart” occurred when Bing Xin was in hospital. “Here [the hospital] is the most conformable, that is, [I] can quietly spend my life the way I want” (68). There Bing Xin did not have to deal with adult-matters, and simply “played and sang like a three-year-old” (69). All of her thoughts “followed the pattern of a very young child”: “Every day when I am still lying in bed, the nurse pushes my bed to the corridor; and I am looking up at her and imagine her as my wet nurse, and the bed is my cradle” (69).

Bing Xin also immersed herself in wild nature. The hospital is located in a mountain area, far from the bustles and hustles of the city. The natural surroundings enabled Bing Xin to “relive” her childhood. Bing Xin traveled the mountain area frequently. There were days when she and her female companions traveled around the
mountain on sledges and appreciated the beauty of the “pure and dustless” world coated in snow and dotted by wild cherries (89). There were also days when Bing Xin traveled alone in the mountain, re-playing her childhood games. In her childhood, Bing Xin liked to bury and excavate things, such as “fish bones carved into little boats,” “colorful paper made into figurines,” and tree leaves bearing her written characters (157). Now being a patient, Bing Xin was able to pick up her old favorite games. When walking in the mountain, Bing Xin “left many souvenirs along the way, postcards, landscape paintings of the West Lake, and used scarves, almost spread all over the mountain” (157). When in high spirits, Bing Xin would go to those places and dig the buried things out. The child and nature are closely associated with each other and represent what the adult society is not. When writing to her “innocent little friends,” Bing Xin is also becoming one of them: “When I write the correspondences, seemingly I see that innocent and pure addressee, just like moving clouds and running water, unpretentious, unreserved, and I say what I want” (142).

Bing Xin’s idolization of the innocent child was symptomatic of May Fourth intellectuals’ construction of a sharp contrast between the child and the adult. Since the child was perceived as naturally innocent and morally superior to the corrupt adult, it came to stand for the ideal citizen of modern China and the role model for the adult, rather than vice versa. This required progressive Chinese adults to acquire childhoodness as a means to reinvent themselves into modern citizens. While male Chinese writers had great difficulty in achieving this, it seemed natural for Bing Xin to be such an innocent child closely associated with femininity. In this historical context, Bing Xin’s femininity took on a paradoxical meaning, both traditional and untraditional, both empowering and
disempowering. As discussed earlier, Bing Xin’s version of the innocent child is modeled on the image of the weak and ailing girl who also easily evokes sympathy in others as a means to transform “unsympathetic” fellow countrymen. This weak and vulnerable version of femininity evokes the conventional image of Chinese genteel women as being sickly and sentimental in the imperial era, which Shen Congwen ridiculed in his second volume of *Alice’s Adventures in China*. Bing Xin’s employment of this image and her own embodiment of it explains why she was often labeled as a “traditional lady” by her male counterparts.

This “traditional” version of femininity seems jarring with a “modern” version of femininity represented by the Shanghai “modern girl.” In her last letter, Bing Xin felt exhilarated that she finally returned to Beijing from the cosmopolis Shanghai and described herself as a “wild girl from the northern countryside” (178). She felt that Shanghai was just not a place for her, populated by girls “wearing long dresses, short shirts with butterfly-style sleeves, and oiled hair” (178). These girls also invariably wear an “unnatural” hair band, and are “irritating and fearsome” (178). The Shanghai girl is the epitome of the “modern girl,” who came into existence in the early twentieth century as a result of China’s pursuit of modernity (Stevens). This “modern girl” has the following characteristics: she is not hysterical; she uses direct language; she has a direct and aggressive sexuality; and she scoffs at the idea of chastity (Stevens 90).

Bing Xin’s version of the innocent girl of nature is a sharp contrast to the Shanghai girl, and her disgust of the Shanghai girl could be read as her fear of and alienation from the modernizing China that brought Chinese girls a new form of agency. However, as Bing Xin’s “traditional” femininity is closely associated with the innocent
child as a product of China’s modernization, it paradoxically became “modern” in the sense that the innocent child signified a clean break with the past. And this enabling innocent child also made Bing Xin—herself being a girl while writing her most popular works including *Letters*—part of the first generation of modern Chinese women writers.

However, as Bing Xin was actively performing the innocent child in *Letters*, she was also acutely aware of a gap between the ideal innocent child and herself. The writer often lamented in *Letters* that she could not always maintain her “child-heart.” Especially in the last few letters, Bing Xin felt that she “could no longer waken the child-heart” (141), for her recovery from illness brought her back to the worldly affairs of the adult. The identification of herself as a healthy adult made the writer lose her desired child innocence. As the writer recovered from her illness, she also grew back into an adult seen as “contaminated.” Bing Xin’s sense of failing to embody the innocent child suggests the very limits of the model of the innocent child and the binary adult-child relationship constructed in the May Fourth period. The innocent child, in its “natural” innocence and sensitivity, was believed to “possess an *a priori* wisdom that decreases with age” (Farquhar 120; emphasis original). In this light, growing-up is an inevitable “failure,” which in turn reveals the innocent child to be just an ideal, a construct, or a “phantasmatic ideal” that simultaneously requires constant performance and necessitates deviation. More importantly, this model of the ideal child builds on an irreconcilable binary between the child and the adult. In this model, the child is frozen in its childlike status, whereas the adult is incapable of divesting “evils” of himself/herself and never able to acquire the desired childness. Despite being fundamental to the May Fourth nation-building project, this seemingly apolitical child could not directly participate in
transforming its country. As I have discussed in the preceding chapter and will also further illustrate in the following chapter, this was seen by the Chinese communists as a fatal fallacy of the May Fourth nationalist project.

Though Bing Xin frankly expressed her difficulty and struggle in embodying the innocent child, she was idealized as its perfect incarnation by her male contemporaries. Shen Congwen, for example, praised that Bing Xin’s works reflect her “femininely beautiful soul” and that she observes the world with “an innocent attitude” and “her childish and tender heart” (“zhiruo de xin”) (176). Zhi Min in the same fashion compared Bing Xin to a lotus flower that is “pure, immaculate and upright” (278). The discourse of the child was so intertwined with that of the feminine. Shen Congwen’s comment made it especially clear that the feminine, demonstrated by the woman writer’s subjective experience and sentimentalism, is inherently “childish.” While being idolized as an “innocent” girl, Bing Xin was simultaneously dismissed for exactly the same reason. The feminine and the childish was a signifier for “immaturity.” Some critics explicitly expressed disdain toward Bing Xin. Jiang Guangchi called Bing Xin “a flower in the warm house” and “a representative of the lady” who “never walked outside her family” (173). Similarly, Chen Xiying defined her as a “cleaver girl who has never been outside the school gate” (174). C. T. Hsia, the pioneer of modern Chinese literature in the United States, argues that “It is only when Bing Xin is content to desist from philosophizing and to focus her attention on the simple joys and sorrows of children and adolescents that she emerges as a writer of remarkable sensitivity within her narrow range” (qtd. in Lieberman, 44).
Therefore, due to her “immaturity,” Bing Xin has been relegated to the rank of children’s literature writers, despite that Bing Xin herself accepted reluctantly such a label. In her article “How Was I Pushed into the Team of Children’s Literature Writers,” Bing Xin wrote that her earlier works about children were intended for adults and that even though Letters to Young Readers was for children, she eventually ceased writing the series because she became far away from children (147). Interestingly, Ye Shengtao and Shen Congwen also wrote stories for children, but they are not primarily associated with children’s literature. While Ye Shengtao is usually venerated as educator, social activist, and writer, Shen Congwen is remembered for his literary works for adults. Compared with the male writers who are allowed to “grow up” and leave the realm of mothers and children behind, Bing Xin is “imprisoned within that realm by men eager to establish their own maturity and independence” (Lieberman 48-49).

The ambivalent critical acceptance of Bing Xin as a writer points not only to the gendered politics of the May Fourth nation-building project but also to the contradiction inherent in the figure of the innocent child itself. One the one hand, accompanying the May Fourth generation’s “killing” of the patriarchal father and his relation to the son (subject) is the erection of a loving mother and her affectionate relation with her child (citizen). Writing during a time when the “natural” and “real” was celebrated, Bing Xin’s Letters, through its “subjective” rendition of the affectionate mother-child relationship and “feminine sensitivity,” came to ideally materialize the prerequisites of the stormy cultural revolution. Not only did Bing Xin become a well-known writer, but her Letters—a work for children—“gained an immense social-cultural influence at the time of their publication among educated adults” (Yan 85; emphasis mine). As both a product of and
producing the movement, the innocent child was enthusiastically celebrated by Chinese intellectuals, and so was “children’s literature” promoting the child. However, Bing Xin’s identity as a writer was acknowledged only in relation to children. As Bing Xin was childized by her male contemporaries, the child and children’s literature were also feminized and marginalized. While children’s literature was central to the May Fourth nation-building project, it functioned only as children’s literature, meaning being “irrelevant” to “important” (male-dominated) adult politics and more closely associated with feminine domesticity. Ironically, this was exactly the reason for Chinese communists’ dismissal of the model of the innocent child and its supporting literature. Therefore, as the Chinese Communist Party emerged as the national leader, the innocent child gave way to a proletarian child who fully immerses itself in adult politics and makes significant contributions to the communist revolution.
Notes

1. Haiyan Lee’s *Revolution of the Heart* is an insightful study on the epistemological shifts of the concept of “feeling,” and identifies its three structures in Chinese history, the Confucian structure, the Enlightenment structure, and the Revolutionary structure. But Lee’s study of “feeling,” or “love,” focuses on “romantic love,” feelings between men and women.

2. Bing Xin’s autobiographical essays about her childhood are collected in *Bing Xin Research Materials*, ed., Fan Boqu.


4. One good study on this topic is Eric Hayot’s *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain*. The author argues that the idea of China’s lack of sympathy played a central role in the construction of Western modernity represented by projects such as Enlightenment philosophy, globalization, and human rights.

5. Bing Xin is an ignored writer in this aspect. Critical discussions on this topic, such as Lydia Liu’s *Translingual Practice* and Lee’s *Revolution of the Heart*, tend to focus on canonical figures of modern Chinese literature like Lu Xun. Unlike these male writers concerned with translating the colonial discourse into a Chinese reality, Bing Xin was
more interested in inventing a hopeful reality modeled on an imagined children’s world as a solution to the national problem.

6. The poem is “To the Tune of Langtaoshan,” by Qing poet Zuo Fu. The poem describes the poet leaving his hometown for a new post in the West of the country. Bing Xin’s recitation and bodily interpretation of the poem endows the poem with a new meaning. It was used to express her nostalgia for the nation, not hometown. By reciting and performing the poem, Bing Xin was formulating a “modern” concept of the “nation” imagined as a geographical wholeness distinguished from this (foreign) nation in which Bing Xin was residing.

7. I am drawing on Judith Butler’s concept of performativity, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 4.

8. One example is a response essay by Yan Dunyi published in 1922. Though the response was on Bing Xin’s short story “Loneliness” published in the same year, not on Letters per se, it focused on the short story’s themes of the child and mother further explored in Letters. As the reader found that the story was about children, he was “ecstatic” and quickly delved into it. The story evoked all kinds of his childhood memories, and he believed that “none of the readers who read it closely would not remember his/her childhood” (309). Then the reader cited passages from Bing Xin’s story that “vividly and realistically” portray “the love between the innocent child and mother” (310). These passages, the reader wrote, “brought me back to the time when I was eight
to nine years old” (310). Interestingly, the reader’s response was a performative act of the mother-child theme, and the reader was inventing himself into the ideal child citizen. Besides adult readers, Bing Xin’s work also influenced actual child readers. Ba Jin, himself being a notable modern Chinese writer, recalled in his epilogue of *Works of Bing Xin* published in 1943 that both he and his brother were Bing Xin’s devoted readers more than a decade ago and her works provided them with considerable comfort and warmth (860). They “learned to love stars and seas,” and also “re-experienced from those kind and beautiful words their mother’s love that had been long lost” (860). Those works “once added some strength to my life,” as Ba Jin said (860). But Ba Jin’s essay implies a contrast between himself as a grown-up and Bing Xin as a *children’s* literature writer, just as Lieberman suggests. Ba Jin described his childhood as a past and Bing Xin’s influence on him as a past, which meant that himself had grown out of his childhood, whereas Bing Xin’s identity was frozen as a children’s literature writer. That is, as Ba Jin said, after more than a decade, he was already in his thirties, but there were still many lonely children in the world and Bing Xin’s work would “warm the hearts of those lonely children in the same way they did to Ba Jin and his brother” (861).
Chapter 4

“Chairman Mao’s Child”: Performing New China in Sparkling Red Star

In 1949 the Chinese Communist Party founded the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This marked the end of China’s war era and the beginning of its socialist construction and fashioning of a corresponding national identity under the leadership of Mao Zedong. For Chinese communists, the creation of “New China” (Xin zhongguo) requires a continuous battle against feudalism, imperialism, and capitalism—that is, of the ideologies that characterized Old China (Jiu zhongguo). Even after the establishment of the PRC, the communists considered the proletarian revolution to be incomplete. For them, the construction of the nation had only just begun. Having conducted a series of mass campaigns aimed at eradicating feudal, capitalist, and imperialist ideologies and practices in the 1950s and early 1960s, China’s socialist construction reached its apogee during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). In the almost three decades’ socialist construction, Mao became “the ultimate father-mother of the people (Landsberger 196), embodying the Chinese Communist Party and its power.

Meanwhile, children continued to figure prominently in the national imagination. On International Children’s Day 1966, Peking Kuang-ming Jih-pao (Beijing guangming ribao) published an editorial concerning children, which stated that “Teenagers and children are successors to the revolutionary cause of socialism and communism. The Party Central Committee and Chairman Mao have always shown deep concern for their sound growth” (“Actively Guide” 14). On International Children’s Day 1967, the Chieh-fang Rih-pao (Jiefang ribao) editorial noted that “educating our children is not a family trifle but a great affair of the nation and a great revolutionary affair” (“Use Mao Tse-
tung’s Thought” 24). According to the Maoists, at stake was the very future of the Chinese Revolution. Without doubt, raising children in a way that would support the proletarian revolution had come to be understood as crucial to its success. To ensure the continued growth of Chinese socialism and its eventual giving way to communism, the communists needed to ensure that the next generation would develop along the right proletarian line. Deeply implicated in the construction of New China, the fashioning of an ideal proletarian child—“Chairman Mao’s child” (“Mao zhuxi de haizi”)—thus became a national imperative.

Through a critique of the revolutionary children’s film, *Sparkling Red Star*, this chapter argues that performativity is deployed as a key fabricating mechanism through which Chinese socialist national identity and Chinese childhood are dialectically constructed. Geoffrey Bennington argues that “At the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation’s origin” (121). Joanne P. Sharp clearly explains Bennington’s suggestion that it is futile to try to find a national essence at the formative point of national history: “the nation is created not through an originary moment or culturally distinct essence but through the repetition of symbols that come to represent the nation’s origin and its uniqueness” (98; emphasis mine). Sharp points out that Bennington’s understanding of the nation as imitative and constructive “shares the same post-structural genealogy as Butler’s description of the social construction of gendered identity” (98). Sharp further explains that “Like national identity, gendered identity takes on its apparently ‘natural’ presence through the repeated performance of gender norms. In the performance of identity in everyday life, the two identifications converge” (98). Although Sharp is concerned primarily with the gendered effects of nation construction, the convergence of
national identity and gendered identity in their performative nature, as she has observed, is worth attention and elaboration.

Butler defines gender as a “kind of imitation for which there is no original. . . . a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself” (“Imitation” 127; emphasis original). What gender imitates is a “phantasmatic ideal,” a heterosexual ideal that has no ontological origin but functions only through the subject’s performing and repeating the heterosexual ideal itself. Butler’s performativity emphasizes the citation of the law: “Performativity is thus not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (Bodies that Matter 12). Like gender identity, performed into being through enacting imitations of the phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, national identity is also performative. It is an effect of and only operates through repetitive acts of citing the phantasmatic ideal that comes to represent the nation.

In this chapter, I employ Butler’s concept of performativity in both of its senses: first, as a repetition of acts that cites a norm or set of norms; and second, as a possibility for agency. In line with Butler, I argue that the iterability of performativity opens up possibilities for deviating from the law—the second sense of performativity. Yet the kind of agency opened up by such iterability does not free itself from power—the first sense of performativity (see Butler, Gender Trouble). On this basis, I contend that Chinese children in the Maoist period embody both senses of performativity. That is, though the children were subject to disciplinary training whereby they learned to undertake
revolutionary work and so imitate adult revolutionaries extolled as proletarian models, they also exhibited an agency and vitality defined by Mao Zedong as children’s “special characteristics” (“Youth” 290). But Chinese children’s agency never subverts the hegemonic political system; it is, instead, an effect of that system. An interesting paradox, I argue, inheres in the idea that children are educated to imitate adult revolutionaries functioning as the law, but that they also deviate from the law through their “special characteristics” not salient in adult revolutionaries. This paradox is an insidious mechanism by means of which the nation-state mobilized children in order to serve its nation-building project in the Maoist era.

**Class Struggle and the Politically Informed Child**

Mao’s speech at the Supreme State Conference in 1957, “On Correctly Handling Contradictions Among the People,” delineates the then political situation in a newly founded socialist China and also constitutes a major aspect of Mao’s theory of the post-1949 period:

In China, although the main socialist transformation has been completed with respect to the system of ownership, and although the large-scale and turbulent class struggles of the masses characteristic of the previous revolutionary periods have in the main come to an end, there are still remnants of the overthrown landlord and comprador classes, there is still a bourgeoisie, and the remoulding of the petty bourgeoisie has only just started. The class
struggle is by no means over. The class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the class struggle between the different political forces, and the class struggle in the ideological field between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie will continue to be long and tortuous and at times will even become very acute. (2: 331)

As Mao’s speech illustrates, the establishment of New China did not mean the complete demise of the old ideologies and practices; battling against “the old” is still the primary task for the nation-building project. According to Chinese communists, literature and art should serve the revolutionary cause. Mao Zedong made it clear in his important talks on art and literature given in 1942 in Yan’an, which laid the theoretical foundation for all revolutionary art in the following three to four decades in China. Mao stated that we need to “ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind” (p. 71). Children’s literature, as part of the revolutionary literature Mao discussed, became an important political apparatus of the nation-state, and was produced by state-owned publishing houses such as the Adolescents and Children’s Publishing House in Shanghai and Beijing. Worth noting is the particular significance of children’s films in the nation-building during the period. Film functioned as the main conveyor of a new, mass culture to all corners of China in the period (Clark 2008, p. 109). As a more conspicuous art, potentially available to a much wider and diverse audience, film was an ideal medium to establish and promulgate the new mass culture
revolutionary culture for the masses of the people.

One of the model films produced in the Maoist era is *Sparkling Red Star*, which not only gained widespread critical acclaim and popularity during the time, but has also become a household name in contemporary China. Based on the novel of the same title by Li Xintian, *Sparkling Red Star* features a peasant boy, Pan Dongzi, growing up in the 1930s. Dongzi’s father leaves to join the Red Army, and the boy’s mother dies in a fire set by the landlord Hu Hansan’s militia. With his mother’s death, Dongzi is effectively orphaned, and he is taken care of by the masses as represented by the Red Army soldier Wu Xiuzhu and the peasant Grandpa Song. Living with and learning from the masses, Dongzi becomes an active participant and later a capable leader in the class struggle against the enemy, represented by the landlord Hu. Eventually, Dongzi becomes a Red Army soldier, a national hero for every Chinese child to emulate.

The intelligent, courageous, and revolutionary character of Dongzi indeed greatly impressed Chinese viewers, especially children. In a response essay originally published in 1974, a self-identified “teenager” (*qing shaonian*) named Huang Shuai stated, “I very much admire Dongzi’s tactfulness and pluck” (151). A collective essay, “Learn from Pan Dongzi and Become Revolutionary Adventurers,” by the Red Guards of the Beijing Xisibei Elementary School appeared in the *Beijing Daily* of 23 October 1974. The young authors exclaimed, “How great the young Dongzi is!” and called for their peers to adopt his revolutionary spirit. Understanding that “Dongzi is not a flower in the greenhouse but a revolutionary bud, a brave eaglet” (150), the enthralled young viewers also saw themselves in the young revolutionary star: “Like Dongzi’s sparkling red star . . . we will grow and temper ourselves in the struggle” (150).
As the quoted Mao’s remarks suggest, the national mission of constructing a unifying socialist identity is negatively defined by a past that functions as the Other. In other words, rather than being a real threat to the socialist nation-state, the enemy—the old and the bourgeois—actually enables a proletarian national identity, because the nation-state’s identity “can only be articulated in relation to the differences (i.e. threats) that it inscribes in its own bureaucratic practices” (Feldman 214). Drawing on Butler’s concept of performativity, Gregory Feldman discusses how the European nation-state is constituted by such binary oppositions as citizen/alien, majority/minority, security/crisis, safety/threat, and domestic/foreign. Feldman foregrounds the relational dimension of performative construction of identity: “it is necessary but not sufficient to argue that the subject—nation, state, immigrant, minority, man, woman, etc.—is socially constructed through repetitious acts. More deeply, the subject is constituted by means of opposing or alternative positions, which also lack an a priori existence” (222). The “phantasmatic ideal,” whether it is a heterosexual ideal or a national ideal, functions only by means of opposing positions. In this light, the bourgeois enemy Mao refers to produces and is produced by the discourse of an ideal proletarian identity that positions itself in opposition to the bourgeois. As I will demonstrate, the performative differentiation is also fundamental to the construction of proletarian childhood.

The national mission of class struggle between the past and the present, between the proletarian and the bourgeois, and between the line of Maoism and the line of revisionism fundamentally rests on the view that Chinese society is a class society in which “everyone lives as a member of a particular class, and every kind of thinking, without exception, is stamped with the band of a class” (Mao, “Classes and Class
Struggle” 8). For Chinese communists, class is the universal and timeless analytical category of Chinese society and the sine qua non of Chinese identity. Doubtless, Chinese children are no exception, also impressed with the mark of a particular class. *Sparkling Red Star* not only excelled in its construction of the heroic image of the child but also in foregrounding of the class issue as fundamental to the socialist nation-building in the Maoist era.²

The film’s opening scenes encapsulate the fundamental conflict between the Communist Party and the peasant class it represents, and the Nationalist Party and the landlord class it stands for. The film opens with a panorama of a lush mountain area and continues with a full shot of a boy in rags, who is strenuously hacking at a tree in the forest. A mature male narrator (voice-over) states that he had spent his childhood of almost forty years ago in the “bitter water of class oppression” (“jieji de kushui”) and in the “flaming fire of class struggle” (“jieji douzheng de liehuo”). The narrator then states that the Communist Party and the Red Army under Mao Zedong are leading a revolution and will be here soon. As this statement is made, the boy cracks a smile, climbs up a tree, and looks expectantly into the distance. The synchronization of the voice-over and the peasant-like boy on the screen leads viewers to associate the man behind the voice-over with the boy on the screen as his child self. Thus, viewers expect the film to be about this child’s experiences of class struggle. As the camera stays on the boy for a moment, a few gunshots emerge from the background and later a child calls out “Dongzi.” Dongzi, the boy in the tree, responds by asking the other child, Chunya, to join him. Dongzi tells Chunya that the Red Army is close and might come to their village today. Chunya asks why the Red Army is so named, and Dongzi replies that it is because the soldiers’ hats
bear a red star. He adds that the Red Army soldiers are revolutionaries fighting to eliminate landlords, such as Hu Hansan, the landlord in the children’s village, and so liberate and avenge the poor.

The opening scenes clearly show that Dongzi aligns himself with the Red Army—led by the Communist Party and Mao—against the landlord class represented by Hu. In fact, Dongzi tells viewers that his grandfather had been hounded to death by Hu, and the landlord is later shown whipping Dongzi relentlessly. The binary model of class conflict posited by the film’s opening reflects Mao’s theory on the antagonism between the people and the enemy. This is the contradiction that defines Old China yet still exists in New China, though it is less dominant than before. As Mao states, “The contradiction between the enemy and ourselves is antagonistic contradiction.” According to Mao, the concept of “the enemy” and “ourselves”—“the people”—varies according to country and historical period. For China’s socialist construction in the 1950s and ‘60s, Mao defines “the people” as those who “approve of, support, and participate in the endeavor to construct socialism” (“On Correctly Handling Contradictions” 2: 311). That Dongzi sides with the Red Army suggests that he belongs to “the people.” As the film later demonstrates, “the people” functions as a major revolutionary force. “The enemy,” on the contrary, refers to the opposite of “the people”—that it, those who resist, are hostile to, and undermine the socialist revolution. In the film, the landlord class and the Nationalists are the enemies of the people, because they exploit the poor and resist the revolution. It is in the interest of the landlord class to maintain the status quo.

To describe the nature of the confrontation between the enemy and the people, Mao uses the term “antagonistic.” To resolve this antagonism is to eliminate the enemy
through violence—or “dictatorship,” to use Mao’s word. Mao also states that a kind of “nonantagonistic” contradiction exists within the people based on “the fundamental unanimity of the interests of the people” (“On Correctly Handling Contradictions” 2: 312). Although for Mao the term “the people” signifies the fundamental unity among different groups of the proletarian class, such as the working class, the peasant class, and the intellectuals, he understands that it does not constitute a homogenous group. Contradictions can exist within a class or between classes that are part of “the people.” Such contradictions can be resolved through a democratic method—“discussion, criticism, persuasion and education” (“On Correctly Handling Contradictions” 2: 315). Sparkling Red Star, for example, represents a contradiction between the Red Army soldier Wu and the peasant Grandpa Song regarding how to educate Dongzi. Wu, who represents the Maoist line, insists that Dongzi should plunge into class struggle, whereas Grandpa Song is afraid that Dongzi is too young to participate in the revolution and should be protected by adults.

According to the Maoists at that time, Grandpa Song expresses an “incorrect” view on educating Chinese children. As the Peking Kuang-ming Jih-pao editorial of 1 June 1966 pointed out, “Some people are afraid that teenagers and children, being young, not well-educated and inexperienced, cannot take part in the cultural revolution, which is a class struggle in the ideological sphere. This viewpoint is incorrect. The great socialist cultural revolution is of vital significance to the tempering and growth of teenagers and children” (“Actively Guide” 15). The disagreement is solved through “a democratic method”; persuaded by Wu’s remarks about educating Dongzi through class struggle and Dongzi’s own activism in the revolution, Grandpa Song finally realizes that Dongzi is
Cohesion also is needed to resolve antagonistic contradictions between the enemy and the people, with the aim of safeguarding “the interests of the broad masses of the people” (“On Correctly Handling Contradictions” 2: 313). Not only does the opening sequence of Sparkling Red Star set up the fundamental conflict between the enemy and the people, it also foreshadows the method—“dictatorship”—through which the enemy will be eliminated. “Dictatorship” is symbolized by Dongzi’s cutting down the tree at the beginning of the film. As the narrator states that he spent his childhood in the “bitter water of class oppression,” Dongzi is shown strenuously hacking at the tree with an ax. While the narrator continues by saying that he spent his childhood in the “flaming fire of class struggle,” Dongzi keeps hacking at the tree with all his might, and it eventually falls. As a peasant boy, Dongzi’s hard labor, symbolized by his tree-cutting, signifies his exploitation at the hands of the landlord Hu. The oppression that Dongzi labors under, however, also becomes the source of his struggle and resistance. That Dongzi finally brings down the tree by using an ax predicts the victory of the revolution achieved through violence.

Dongzi’s articulation of class animosity, his acute awareness of his class position, and his determination to avenge the poor for his grandfather, as shown in the opening scenes, all suggest a highly politically child in contrast to the innocent child of the May Fourth period. The binarism that structures class in Chinese society resurfaces in the construction of Chinese childhood; specifically, the apparently apolitical innocent child functions as the constitutive opposite of the highly politicized proletarian child. The seemingly polarized but dialectical relationship between Chairman Mao’s child and the
innocent child is crystallized around the debate over the “tongxin lun” (“child-heart theory”) of the 1960s.

The debate starts with the publication of two articles by an acclaimed children’s literature writer and critic, Chen Bochui. Chen’s articles, “On Several Problems with Creating Children’s Literature” (“Tan ertong wenxue chuangzuo shang de jige wenti”) (1956) and “On Several Problems with Working with Children’s Literature” (“Tan ertong wenxue gongzuo zhong de jige wenti”) (1958), respectively suggest that writers of children’s books should write from a “child’s perspective,” and that editors working with children’s stories should “bear a ‘child’s heart’” and pay attention to children’s literature’s unique characteristics that literature written for adults does not possess in order to fully appreciate it. Chen laments that many editors treat children’s literature simply as literature, a practice that mitigates against selecting literature with which children can identify. Chen’s suggestion that writers and editors should “bear a ‘child’s heart’” was hardly new; it evokes what many May Fourth Chinese writers like Zhou Zuoren had already theorized about children and children’s literature. Yet Chen’s remarks drew scathing criticism from Maoists, who accused him of disseminating a poisonous capitalist worldview. Zuo Lin and Yang Runeng, for example, argue that Chen promulgates “Tongxin lun,” which essentializes the so-called “child’s perspective” and thereby essentializes children themselves. Thus, Chen’s view of children, the Maoists conclude, reflects the capitalist (humanist) view that human beings possess inherent attributes and ignores the formative role of class in constructing identity.

Chen’s opponents see the writer as mistaking age for class as the principal determinant of identity. Yang, for example, states that in a class society, a person’s
standpoint is determined by class position rather than by age. Further, there is no such thing as “an adult’s standpoint” or “a child’s standpoint.” Zuo also argues that in a class society children/young adults and adults share class and that neither group has a worldview that is not influenced by class—class cannot be transcended (69). Whether Chen meant to essentialize children, as the Maoists claimed, is debatable, but Chen and the “child’s heart” he evoked certainly play a constitutive role in China’s nation-building project. Associated with the innocent child, whose innocent nature resides in his young age, and built upon the humanist view of human beings as possessing inherent attributes, the “‘child’s heart’ theory” represents, for the Maoists, a capitalist (Western) ideology that must be eradicated. Rather than being a real threat to China’s nation-building project, the classless innocent child produces and is produced by the proletarian child, who depends on constructing and regulating the boundary between him/herself and this “Other” child. The debate accelerates China’s nation-building process by constructing the new national identity through naming and defeating the enemy. Sparkling Red Star in fact participates in the debate and sides with the Maoists by (re)producing the politicized child, as embodied in Dongzi.

Although Chen’s opponents accuse him of essentializing children by erroneously viewing them as “naturally” and “inherently” different from adults, they nevertheless acknowledge that children do differ from adults in terms of psychology, lifestyle, and language (Zuo 69). Yu Shanglu, et al. also argue that when creating children’s dramas, playwrights should take children’s characteristics into consideration and use language and ideas appropriate for them. The differences between children and adults observed by the Maoists are not, however, a reflection of different natures or attributes inherent in the two
groups, because children’s characteristics are always mediated through class and associated with their class positions. Mao himself, in fact, stresses the importance of paying attention to children’s special characteristics:

The young people are the most active and vital force in society. They are the most eager to learn and the least conservative in their thinking. This is especially so in the era of socialism. We hope that the local Party organizations in various places will help and work with the Youth League organizations and go into the question of bringing into full play the energy of our youth in particular. *The Party organizations should not treat them in the same way as everybody else and ignore their special characteristics.* Of course, the young people should learn from the old and other adults, and should strive as much as possible to engage in all sorts of useful activities with their agreement. (“Youth” 290–91; emphasis mine)

Mao’s remarks unambiguously demonstrate that he is cognizant not only of young people’s unique characteristics, but also of their service to the nation-building project. Therefore, Chinese children’s “special characteristics” can hardly be understood as essential traits independent of the historical context. They are necessarily constituted by historical and sociopolitical forces. As “a triumph of Chairman Mao’s ‘proletarian line on literature and art’” (Farquhar 286), *Sparkling Red Star* (re)constructs and magnifies this crucial paradox of children by replicating the nation’s founding father, Mao, in Dongzi
while simultaneously distinguishing him as a model of the child revolutionary.

**Fashioning the Ideal Child**

As discussed, the opening scenes of *Sparkling Red Star* clearly depict Dongzi as a peasant boy directing his class animosity against the exploitative landlord class. That Dongzi is positioned in the exploited class does not mean, however, that he has a kind of “class instinct” or a proletarian consciousness that naturally grows out of his class position—a view considered bourgeois. In an article published in 1967 in *Peking Kuang-ming Jih-pao*, Ren Lixin harshly criticizes the bourgeois fallacy of “one being naturally Red,” claiming that to preach “the reactionary theory of blood heritage” is a vain attempt to “push the innocent youngsters into the mire of revisionism” (22). Ren’s attack on the theory of “one being naturally Red” corresponds to the Maoists’ assault on the “‘child’s heart’ theory,” because at a fundamental level both Ren and the Maoists who criticized Chen level their criticisms against the Western humanist assumption that human beings possess essential attributes. Following Mao’s instruction, Ren urges, “We the broad masses of revolutionary cadres must, in accordance with Chairman Mao’s teachings, let our children plunge into the class struggle in society” (22). What Ren suggests here is that rather than being a given, proletarian identity is a construct—one fashioned through class struggle, through proletarian education.

While Ren, along with other Maoists, understands the constructive nature of childhood, what is not said is that it is exactly through this constructive nature of childhood that the state makes convenient use of children in the service of its own nation-building project. Dongzi’s growth into a proletarian child, a qualified Red Army soldier,
is the result of the proletarian education he has received from the masses. The proletarian education, or class struggle, functions as disciplinary training, which does not merely regulate but actually produces its child subject. As Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (170). According to Foucault, one of the techniques of disciplinary power is to train its subjects by capitalizing on their time:

> It is this disciplinary time that was gradually imposed on pedagogical practice—specializing the time of training and detaching it from the adult time, from the time of mastery; arranging different stages, separated from one another by graded examinations; drawing up programmes, each of which must take place during a particular stage and which involves exercises of increasing difficulty; qualifying individuals according to the way in which they progress through these series. (159)

*Sparkling Red Star* manifests this disciplinary technique by dividing Dongzi’s training into three distinct stages, organized progressively according to degree of complexity and separated from each other by examinations. The first stage spans the beginning of the film, when Dongzi is seven years old, to the time of his mother’s death, when he is adopted by the Red Army soldier Wu. Although in this first stage, as the opening scenes demonstrate, Dongzi is depicted as identifying with Mao and the Red Army, who are focused on destroying the landlord class, he has not yet become a revolutionary agent devoted to the revolutionary cause of socialism and communism. Dongzi’s initial wish to
exact revenge on Hu in the opening scenes is merely a personal concern. It has only to do with himself and his father; it does not express any devotion to the revolutionary cause of eliminating exploitative classes for the sake of the people. This point is illustrated in a dialogue between Dongzi and his father, who has just had surgery for a gunshot wound to the leg inflicted by the enemy. Having seen his father suffer, Dongzi tells him that he also will shoot the enemy, make them bleed, and so avenge him. The father responds by asking if Dongzi will take revenge only for him, whereupon Dongzi falls silent. However, Wu steps in, stating that this is not a personal matter. He observes that the Nationalists want to destroy the Red base, that the poor and oppressed can only become liberated when all the Nationalists have been eliminated. What the dialogue implies is that Dongzi lacks both theoretical learning and the “tempering” of class struggle—both of which are necessary if he is to become a real proletarian distinguished from the enemy. This is what the proletarian training, in both its theoretical and practical aspects, offers to Dongzi in its subsequent stages.

The second stage begins with the intensive proletarian training overseen by Wu. While the major force of the Red Army withdraws from Dongzi’s village, Liuxi, a small force led by Wu continues the battle in Dongzi’s area, but retreats from the town to the nearby mountains. As Dongzi’s father has left to fight with the major force and his mother has sacrificed herself in order to protect the peasants, Dongzi is to all intents and purposes orphaned. This quasi-orphaning provides the mechanism through which the nation-state can intervene in Dongzi’s identity formation and interpolate him into its hegemonic system. The substitution of the nation-father—that is, the Party, Mao, and Mao’s proxies—for Dongzi’s biological parents enables the state to directly replicate
Embodying the Party and Mao, Wu takes his place as Dongzi’s surrogate father, responsible for the boy’s education and his overall upbringing. Wu is portrayed as both a valiant and spirited revolutionary soldier and a tender father; he stays up late to sew a winter coat for Dongzi, tucks him in bed at night, and adds extra salt to his soup when salt is scarce. As the staple of Dongzi’s theoretical learning, Mao’s positions on education and the importance of the revolutionary qualities of endurance and altruism are also passed on to him by Wu. Mao emphasizes a dialectical relationship between theory and practice: “Reading is learning, but applying is also learning and the more important kind of learning at that” (Quotations 310). Mao advocates learning Marxism-Leninism as “the science of revolution” (306) through “doing” and “applying.” Therefore, Dongzi must learn through theory and practice (doing), and making connections between the two aspects. The implications of Mao’s theory are addressed in a scene in which as Dongzi reads *Liening xiaoxue keben* (*Leninism for Elementary Schools*), Wu comes to converse with him. While Dongzi reads a rhyme about overcoming hardship from the book, Wu points out that they are currently facing similar difficulties. Not only is food scarce in the mountain area where they are living, but their stock of salt is very low. Wu tells Dongzi that soldiers cannot march and fight without taking in salt. Wu’s teaching connects Mao’s Marxist-Leninist theory to practice, the reality of their current situation. What Wu, Dongzi, and the other soldiers are experiencing illuminates what is presented in the book, and the book itself offers a way to understand and survive the harsh situation, through braving hardship and continuing the revolutionary battle.

To illustrate the importance of the qualities of endurance and altruism to the
success of the revolution, Wu cites Dongzi’s father as a revolutionary model because he refused anesthetic in order to save it for other wounded soldiers. In addition, Dongzi’s mother is cited as a good revolutionary who embodied the revolutionary spirit of sacrifice, because she gave her life to and for the Party. As she tells her son, “I have already given myself to the Party. I will do whatever the Party needs me to do.” The influence of his mother’s remarks and actions on Dongzi is illustrated by the boy’s response to her: “You belong to the Party, and then I am the Party’s child. From now on I will also do whatever the Party needs me to do.” Dongzi’s remarks reveal the performative nature of his identity—that of becoming a revolutionary model by performing repetitive acts of imitating the revolutionary—and also the tactic of citation as the central mechanism through which the desired subject (Mao’s replication) is produced. The successful transformation of Dongzi into a revolutionary subject rests on his replication in himself of the nation/the Party/the nation-father Mao. As Dongzi himself states, “I am the Party’s child.”

The proletarian education of the second stage produces Dongzi as a good student/subject, who repeats a set of acts in imitation of revolutionary models. Dongzi learns to give of himself by imitating others who have done this for him. For instance, when Dongzi realizes that he is draped in the guard’s coat, he immediately returns the coat to the guard, who is performing his duty in the bitter cold. Later in this stage, as he eats a meal after talking with Wu about braving hardship, Dongzi finds out that Wu has put additional salt in his soup, and he decisively mixes his soup with the soup designated for the other soldiers. By depriving himself of the privilege of consuming additional salt, Dongzi imitates Wu, who has also given up the chance to consume more salt. In doing
this, Dongzi shows that he has acquired the revolutionary qualities of self-sacrifice and endurance from Wu, as well as from other revolutionaries like his father and mother. The process of the student’s internalization of the hegemonic ideology through adopting examples is summarized by Lisa Lowe: “the student internalizes the pedagogical mandate, in which learning consists in reproducing, and thereby conforming to, the morphology of the example, a process by which all students are iterated and abstracted as uniform, generically equivalent sites of those reproductions” (131).

It is worth noting a detail in the scene in which Dongzi discovers that his soup tastes different from the others’. Wu prepares a bowl of soup with additional salt exclusively for Dongzi and asks him to drink it. But by mixing the soup from his own bowl with the rest of the soup in the wok, Dongzi defies Wu’s command to “drink it,” and thus shows that he is not an exact replica of Wu. In other words, instead of doing whatever he is told, Dongzi does not dutifully comply; thus, he is not a submissive subject faithfully following the authority’s instruction. In fact, in giving Dongzi additional salt, Wu contradicts his own teaching about overcoming hardship. By granting Dongzi the privilege of consuming more salt, Wu shields him from suffering the same hardship as he and the other soldiers are experiencing. Yet the contradictions in both Dongzi’s seemingly disobedient behavior and Wu’s apparently inconsistent actions mirror the paradox inherent in the construction of proletarian childhood, in that the child is educated to imitate adult revolutionaries, though also distinguished from them. Wu teaches Dongzi to withstand hardship like a real (adult) revolutionary. But Wu’s wish to protect Dongzi by giving him more salt also reflects an assumption opposite to the one whereby a child is expected to imitate adult revolutionaries; the child is seen as different
from the adult, at least in terms of physiology, as Wu’s treatment of the boy demonstrates. Because Dongzi is so young, he is likely to have less stamina than the adults and also to need more salt; thus Wu treats him differently from the other adult soldiers. The paradox suggested here that the child is different and yet not different from the adult corresponds to the Maoist view on childhood reflected in the debate over the “child’s heart” theory.” Dongzi’s seemingly disobedient behavior echoes Mao’s theory on children’s “unique characteristics,” namely that “young people are the most active and vital force in society.” Dongzi’s disobedience, which in fact demonstrates his agency and vitality, is thus an index of his subjection to the Maoist ideology rather than a subversion of it.

The training of the child subject in service to the nation-building project does not aim to produce children who are exact copies of adult revolutionaries, but rather child revolutionaries with their own “special characteristics.” This is explored in more detail in a scene at the end of the second stage, in which Dongzi and Grandpa Song go through a salt checkpoint. Located at the foot of the mountain on which Wu’s force is camping out, the salt checkpoint aims to prevent attempts to deliver salt to Wu’s army. Wu assigns to Dongzi the task of secretly collecting salt in town with Grandpa Song. When collecting salt from the villagers, Dongzi dissolves it by adding hot water to the bamboo canister containing it, as he thinks that this stratagem will prevent the salt from being discovered. As Grandpa Song and Dongzi wait in line at the checkpoint, a man ahead of them is found to have salt hidden in his bamboo pole. Having observed this incident, Dongzi snatches the bamboo canister from Grandpa Song and disappears into the bush behind the checkpoint. After Grandpa Song has safely passed the check, Dongzi, carrying the bamboo canister, is stopped by the guard, who breaks the canister with his gun and tastes
the liquid inside, only to find nothing but water. Later, Grandpa Song tries to console Dongzi by telling him that they will think of a way to bring salt to the soldiers in the mountain. However, Dongzi smiles and unbuttons his cotton coat to show that its lining is wet. Initially bewildered, Song finally realizes that Dongzi has poured the salted water onto the coat’s lining and then filled the bamboo canister with fresh water in order to deceive the guard.

As this scene demonstrates, Dongzi is portrayed as a smart, courageous, and creative child rather than a passive receptacle of indoctrination. Rather than following the original doomed plan, he creates and successfully executes a new one. Dongzi’s actions in this instance once again simultaneously show both his agency and his fidelity to the revolutionary cause (the successful delivery of the salt guarantees that the people’s battle against the enemy will continue until the final victory). The salt checkpoint metaphorically functions as a test of Dongzi’s revolutionary learning. On meeting Wu for the first time after passing the salt check, Dongzi asks to be tested on his proletarian learning, handing over the book, *Liening xiaoxue keben*, that he has been studying. But Wu believes that Dongzi has already passed the test by delivering the salt: “You have already graduated. The Party will send you to a new school where new lessons and new struggles are waiting for you.” Foucault defines the examination as an important instrument that the disciplinary power deploys to train its subjects. It is “a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish” (184). Dongzi’s successful completion of the second-stage proletarian training signifies that he is becoming incorporated into the hegemonic system and moving toward taking up the subject position of the idealized child revolutionary prescribed by that system. The third
stage, in which the difficulty increases and the proletarian training intensifies, completes the idealization of Dongzi as Chairman Mao’s child.

Although Dongzi can act independently and accomplishes the assigned task in the second stage, he will not become a real revolutionary until he goes to the front line to be tempered in the “mighty storm of class struggle.” This is in accord with Mao’s instruction to millions of Chinese children that they “go out to face the world and brave the storm” (“Use Mao Tse-tung’s Thought” 24). The third stage, which begins when Dongzi is sent to the Maoyuan Rice Shop alone and lasts until the end of the film, prepares him to be transformed into a real child revolutionary.

In the third stage, Dongzi is charged with obtaining military information. In order to accomplish this, he disguises himself as an apprentice at the Maoyuan Rice Shop, whose owner has connections with Hu and supplies rice for the Nationalist army. Here Dongzi draws on his intelligence and courage to play a central role in defeating the enemy. As the rice shop owner plots to profiteer by selling his rice to the Nationalist army, rice will not be available to the public, who will undoubtedly go hungry. Having seen through the owner’s scheme, Dongzi secretly alters the message on the wooden sign shown to the public that says “Jinri wu mi” (“No rice today”) to read instead “Jinri shou mi” (“Selling rice today”). However, since no rice is available, a public riot ensues in which the masses intercept the rice that has been set aside for the enemy. Rather than passively receive and carry out orders from Wu and Song, Dongzi assumes a leadership role. By devising and implementing a plan that thwarts the enemy’s military action by cutting off its food supply, saves the starving masses, and wins the latter’s support, Dongzi “tempers” himself in the fierce class struggle and proves himself to be an
important force in the revolution.

As Wu and Grandpa Song are relegated to the background in this third stage, Dongzi’s pivotal role in the revolution is foregrounded, a fact that speaks to the symbolic and practical importance attached to Chinese children during China’s earliest socialist construction. Mao enthusiastically speaks to young people, the successors to the proletarian cause:

> The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigour and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you.

> . . .

> The world belongs to you. China’s future belongs to you.

*(Quotations 288)*

Dongzi has validated himself as an ideal incarnation of China’s future. Having undergone tempering in the course of class struggle, he has become a revolutionary hero “willing to integrate himself with the broad masses of . . . peasants” (*Quotations* 291), the standard by which one’s revolutionary commitment is judged. This child revolutionary, who saves the starving masses and frustrates the enemy’s scheme, can be contrasted with the Dongzi of the first stage who is ready to avenge only his father. This new Dongzi has become a revolutionary through intellectual and political growth. He is concerned with the condition of the people and the progress of the revolution, not merely with his own
family.

Dongzi’s growth in political awareness is further illustrated by a spirited exchange between him and his childhood playmate Chunya, who also works as an apprentice at the rice shop. Looking into the starry night, Dongzi imagines having a pair of wings and flying to Yan’an to see Chairman Mao. But in order to meet Chairman Mao:

Dongzi: We should help Wu to wipe out the white dogs, entirely!
Chunya: To get back our revolutionary base!
Dongzi: Then we will go to Yan’an, bringing our red star, to see Chairman Mao!

Unlike the boy of the first stage who fails to articulate the ramifications of entirely eliminating the enemy, Dongzi here understands that to eradicate the enemy is to recapture the revolutionary base and, therefore, to win the revolution. While Dongzi has grown into a qualified revolutionary who wholeheartedly serves the people, he retains the “special characteristics” of a child. Instead of physically confronting his enemies, he uses trickery to combat them, as evidenced by his actions in delivering the salt and inciting the riot over the rice. These strategies show Dongzi’s all-around creativity and ability. He has, then, “the revolutionary spirit of daring to think, speak, and break through” (“Use Mao Tse-tung’s Thought” 24). He is surely Chairman Mao’s Child.

The Maoist discourse of the child simultaneously appropriates that of the child as a national symbol for regeneration, which first emerged in the late nineteenth century, while it implicitly differentiates the political child from the innocent child of the
Republican period. Unlike May Fourth intellectuals celebrating children’s “natural” characteristics, Chinese communists dismissed such characterization of children as “bourgeois” and established class as the sine qua non of identity. Importantly, class consciousness was not instinctual for Chinese communists, but rather trained through class struggle. Revolutionary literature produced during the Maoist era thus emphasized proletarian education, which is disciplinary in nature. But worth noting is that though the proletarian child is fashioned through disciplinary training, it is neither a passive receptacle of adult indoctrination nor an exact copy of the adult. Both the idealized child and its emulators, like Sparkling Red Star’s viewers/readers, actively construct their own identity according to the cultural and political script. Such suggestions made by Sparkling Red Star offer a way to understand childhood that neither essentializes children nor deprives them of agency. However, the valorization of class is equally troublesome, subsuming all other potential constituents. Unlike the preceding era in which the nation was imagined as a loving mother, Mao became the omnipresent nation-father in New China. If Dongzi, a male child, is the ideal citizen who replicates Mao in him while simultaneously distinguishing himself from Mao, then how was the girl child figured in relation to her nation-father? This is the question I explore in the next chapter.
Notes

1. The great success of *Sparkling Red Star* created new interest in “Learning from Pan Dongzi and Become the Party’s Child.” A flurry of response essays about the film by children across the nation were published in 1974 and 1975. Like the two essays quoted in the text, the responses from the Red Guards of different schools in Shanghai, collected in Learn to be Dongzi and Become the Party’s Good Child (*Xue Dongzi zuo danging hao haizi*), discuss how the young authors were inspired by Dongzi and were determined to be like him. A common feature among the essays is their manifestation of the agency and exuberance of the young authors themselves. Another interesting response is from the actor who played Dongzi—Zhu Xinyun himself. His essay describes how he learned to perform the role during the filming process. For instance, Zhu, a spoiled boy living in Beijing, the capital city of New China, learned about every aspect of Dongzi as a laboring child of a peasant family living in Old China. Zhu told his audience how he had learned to endure hardship through chopping wood, climbing trees, poling a bamboo raft, and following a strict diet. Not only did Zhu learn about Dongzi’s behavior and comportment, but he also learned to emulate Dongzi’s emotional responses. For example, Zhu wrote that he was not able to cry on camera during the scene in which the mother dies in the fire set by the landlord Hu’s militia. Eventually, however, Zhu learned to empathize with Dongzi, who loves his revolutionary mother and hates the landlord Hu. The boy actor Zhu’s depiction of the process whereby he learned how to play the role of Dongzi literalizes the process of the performative construction of identity analyzed in the film. As Zhu, like Dongzi, repeatedly enacts a set of normalized behaviors and emotions on the screen, he simultaneously performs into being an idealized proletarian identity as his own
identity. As Zhu stated, “to play the role of Dongzi is to learn to be Dongzi, and this continues even after performing on the screen” (Xue Dongzi 39). In this light, Dongzi is Zhu Xinyun and Zhu Xinyun is Dongzi.

2. The core principle that guided all artistic production during the Cultural Revolution is that of the “three prominences” (san tuchu): “Among all the characters, give prominence to the positive characters; among the positive characters, give prominence to the main heroic characters; and among the heroes give prominence to the central character” (Clark 46). This principle evolved from the experience of creating the five model Peking operas selected in 1967 by the authorities headed by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing. The principle was subsequently applied to other forms of art such as television, novels, and films. The aim of the “three prominences” was to foreground proletarian heroes and make them “typical” (dianxing). The importance of the typicality of proletarian heroes can be traced back to Mao’s “Yenan Talks” in 1942, in which he stated that “life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life” (2: 82). Although Mao’s “six mores” initially referred to life in general, they were promoted and applied to the characterization of proletarian heroes during the Cultural Revolution. According to a commentary originally published in 1974 by Fang Zesheng, the novel Sparkling Red Star was more “autobiographical”—full of personal details and lacking a structural focus—than artistically abstract and typical. To address the novel’s shortcomings, the filmic adaptation only focuses on and dramatizes the intense class struggle and the line struggle within the CCP during the late stage of the Second Chinese
Revolutionary Civil War. By situating the child hero Dongzi in the “typical environment of class struggle,” the film succeeded in constructing him as a “typical” proletarian hero, whose fate was closely connected with those of the Party and the revolution.

3. As the previous chapters illustrate, the meaning of the innocent child in the Republican era was instable. The consistent image of the innocent child was only a construct in the Maoist era.

4. That Dongzi has not become a revolutionary agent does not, however, mean that he is a “free” agent outside of the regulatory system. Dongzi’s identity formation is always in progress, shaped by discourses about class, gender, childhood, and nationhood. In this sense, the subject is always being trained. However, the film condenses into Wu’s teaching—an intensive proletarian training—the otherwise invisible and slow regulatory training process occurring in Chinese people’s lives, thus magnifying this process so that its internal workings are revealed.

5. The rhyme Dongzi recites reads: “Tian shi fang [The sky is the house], di shi chuang [the earth is the bed]; yecai yeguo dang ganliang [wild herbs and fruits are food]. Bupa ku [Do not fear hardships], bupa nan [do not fear difficulties]; hongjun zhangtou zai gaoshan shang [the Red Army is fighting in the mountain].”
Chapter 5

“The Party’s Good Daughter”: Tales of Liu Hulan

In early 1947, during the Civil War fought between the Kuomintang and CCP, a fourteen-year-old female Party candidate, Liu Hulan, was arrested by the enemy who tried to force her to sell out her communist comrades. But Liu Hulan, preferring death over surrender, was decapitated. When Mao Zedong heard the story on March 26, 1947, he was “deeply moved” and wrote down the words “A great life; a glorious death” (Liang Fengwu 5). Mao urged the Party to seize this “typical” material and strongly promote Liu Hulan’s accomplishment nation-wide. Biographies of Liu Hulan were produced, and a black-and-white film Liu Hulan was released in 1950. On the 10th anniversary of Liu Hulan’s death in 1957, Mao Zedong rewrote the motto “A great life; a glorious death,” which was then sent to Liu Hulan Memorial in her hometown in Shanxi Province.

In the following two decades, more stories about Liu Hulan appeared, written in a variety of genres ranging from comics, to picturebooks, and to full-length biographies. Quite like her male counterpart Pan Dongzi from Sparkling Red Star, Liu Hulan not only achieved the status of a national hero in Maoist China but has also become a household name in contemporary China. In fact Liu Hulan was one of many heroine characters promoted during the Maoist era. The image of an iron-strong woman with short hair, plain clothes, and serious look frequented the films, posters, and plays produced in the Maoist era, especially during the Cultural Revolution. The state’s promotion of strong female characters during the Maoist era led Mayfair Mei-hui Yang to argue that in the Maoist era “gender became an unmarked and neutralized category” (14). By exploring the representations of the heroine Liu Hulan produced in the Maoist era, I suggest that the
official discourse of gender equality and erasure of gender differences contradicts a politics of gender inequality and erotics underlying the socialist nation-building.

Furthermore, critical discussions on issues of gender during the Maoist era invariably focus on adult women. Supporting Rosi Braidotti’s argument that “the signifier woman is no longer sufficient as the foundation stone of the feminist project,” Catherine Driscoll adds that “Age can be understood as one of these differences between and within women” (127). While feminism has long studied gender’s intersections with other identity categories such as race and class, it has not devoted adequate attention to age, which, I argue, is an important analytical category and sometimes replaces gender. Through the case study on Liu Hulan, I show where gender and age converge and diverge. The stories about the heroine are heterogeneous in nature, conveying different and sometimes contradictory messages regarding her gender and child identity. The ambivalent and different representations of the heroine were fundamentally connected with the shifting inner-workings of multiple discourses about childhood, women, and communist revolution integral to the socialist construction. This chapter focuses on a few representative works on Liu Hulan produced in the Maoist era, including the 1950 film Liu Hulan, the 1966 picturebook Stories from Liu Hu-lan’s Childhood, the 1972 comic book Liu Hulan, and the 1975 full-length biography The Heroine Liu Hulan. By comparing and contrasting these different versions, I aim to show the heterogeneity of the mechanisms of the socialist nation-building.
The Emancipation of the “Village Woman”

The film *Liu Hulan* was made in the second year after the founding of PRC in 1949, a time when the political control was somewhat relaxed. The film covers two consecutive pre-1949 War periods, the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Civil War (1945-1949). The story is set in Liu Hulan’s hometown, Wenshui County of Shanxi Province, Northwest of China. The film begins with Liu Hulan’s childhood during the Sino-Japanese War period and ends with her death in 1947. Unlike the later variants highlighting class antagonism, most of the film is structured around a conflict between the patriarchal system in which the protagonist lives and her resistance to it. The film could be understood as the protagonist’s actualization of her self-worth, which is closely intertwined with the acquisition of a communist revolutionary identity. Rather than a product of New China, such a representation of the heroine is a mix of discourses about Chinese women and communist revolution dominant in the Republican period.

Additionally, the eighty-five-minute film uses the first ten minutes to depict Liu Hulan’s childhood, which also differs greatly from the later versions’ portrayals of the heroine’s childhood. Rather than emphasizing the child’s rudimentary class consciousness and agency, the film foregrounds the child’s playfulness. This shows that the conception of the child in the beginning years of New China was influenced by the Republican discourse of the playful child, and that the Maoist child, whose gradual maturation embodies the tortuous but triumphant history of Chinese communist revolution, had not become the only legitimate version of childhood.

The film begins with the voice-over narrating that in the dark years of old society replete with hunger and poverty, the child Liu Hulan begins laboring prematurely. Then
viewers see a girl leading a donkey plowing the field. Suddenly the girl sees something in the field, and then jumps around trying to catch it. An old man scolds the child: “You do the work! Always play! You just can’t play for enough! What a girl! Won’t give you any meal!” The camera then switches to a close-up shot of the child’s resentful face. At this moment a middle-aged woman approaches the child: “Hulan, you made your grandfather angry again. Now go help your father” (emphasis mine). Although the child Hulan is from a poor peasant family, as the first scene shows, she has a “natural” inclination for play, which is illustrated by her mischievousness often making her grandfather angry, as the mother’s remark indicates.

The film’s representation of the child Hulan draws on the Republican discourse of the “natural” playful child, and the beginning voice-over frames the major conflict in Liu’s childhood as that between her “right” to play and her destitution depriving her from growing “naturally,” not class antagonism. But the film’s beginning part indeed portrays an evil and sly landlord exploiting the farmers, including Hulan’s family, and an amiable Red Army officer concerned about the life of the farmers. However, the landlord’s animosity toward the peasants and the Red Army officer’s devotion to the poor does not inspire the child Hulan to embark on the revolutionary road. This is shown by Hulan’s interactions with the adult characters. After being scolded by her grandfather for playing, Hulan goes to pick wheat ears with a few other peasant children. When the children fill their baskets with wheat ears, the landlord and her wife show up, not allowing them to pick wheat ears in the field. As the landlord’s wife snatches the basket away from Hulan and slaps her face, the girl shows indignation but keeps silent. At this moment, someone runs toward the landlord and tells him that the Red Army is approaching the village. As
the landlord couple hurries back home to collect their belongings and run away, the children also run back. Then the film shows an energetic army entering the village while the local villagers are running away. Then a young Red Army officer speaks, assuring the crowd not to be afraid and introducing themselves to the villagers as the Red Army fighting against landlords and any other oppressors. Hulan, who is among the crowd, tells the officer that she just had a flight with the landlords. The Red Army officer happily walks toward Hulan, gently strokes her head, asks for her name, and holds her up.

The contrast between the landlord’s exploitation and violence and the Red Army officer’s friendliness and reliance is clear. But the contrast does not develop into a revolutionary consciousness in the child Hulan. Having witnessed the Red army distributing grains among the villagers after Hulan’s above initial encounter with the Red Army officer, Hulan happily runs home with a bundle of straw. What follows is that Hulan first mischievously teases the family donkey with a handful of straws before feeding it, and then starts tenderly stroking the donkey. This scene echoes the film’s beginning scene that highlights the child’s playfulness. The preceding scenes of the landlord’s hostility and the Red Army officer’s heroic image seem unimpressive to the child, who is more concerned with play. As the child is playing with the donkey, the film gives a close-up shot of Hulan’s mother, smiling and approving her daughter’s behavior. Then Hulan merrily runs toward her mother, who tells Hulan to continue her play. But Hulan insists on helping her mother push the millstone. As the mother and child are pushing the millstone, the film transitions to the next section, which is signaled by the reappearance of the voice-over narrating that Liu Hulan gradually grows up, along the
thousand-year-old tragic road of China’s village women. Then the film shows an adult-looking Hulan pushing the same millstone with her aged mother.

It is interesting to note that the first section represents Hulan as a “playful” peasant child, whereas the following part suddenly turns her into an oppressed village woman (funǚ). While the film’s beginning part never identifies Hulan as a gendered child and suggests age as a prominent identity category, Hulan’s gendered identity becomes a major theme in the rest of the story. Hulan’s oppression as a village woman is highlighted in the first scene after the reappearance of the voice-over. As Hulan and her mother are pushing the millstone, the grandfather and an old peasant woman enter the scene and begin to converse. The old peasant woman has a son, Xiaoqing, who is going to get some coal for his family that day. The grandfather sighs, because his son—Hulan’s father—is sick and unable to do the same thing for the family and his only grandchild is a girl. The grandfather envies the old woman for having a son, and laments that girls are just a “distress commodity,” raised for their future husbands’ families. The grandfather’s remark provokes Hulan, who decides to go with the young man to get coal for her family.

The grandfather represents the feudal patriarchal system in which women are subordinate to men. As the grandfather sees her granddaughter through such patriarchal lens, Hulan is accordingly placed on the “the thousand-year-old tragic road of China’s village women.” This representation of Hulan evokes the discourse of enslaved Chinese women dominant in the early twentieth century, especially during the May Fourth period. Prominent May Fourth intellectuals, such as Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, and Ye Shengtao, just to name a few, all wrote about the “question of women.” They called for emancipating Chinese women from Confucian patriarchy prescribing that a woman obeys
her father, husband, and son. The fate of Chinese women thus signified the fate of her country and was closely intertwined with the nation-building in the May Fourth era as well as New China, as I will discuss later. As Geraldine Heng argues, “Female emancipation—a powerful political symbol describing at once a separation from the past . . . .—supplies a mechanism of self-description and self-projection of incalculably more than pragmatic value in the self-fashioning of nations and nationalisms” (31). In the May Fourth period, the most potent symbol of national salvation was the village woman, the most oppressed among all Chinese women, whose tragic life is vividly illustrated by Ye Shengtao’s “Is This Also a Human Being,” published in New Tide in 1919:

She was born into a peasant family and had neither the privilege of being a lady who could dress in silk and satin and order servants around nor any education about ideas such as the “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” or “Fraternity and Equality.” To put it bluntly, she was simply treated as an animal. Not long after her birth, when she started to speak and could walk around, she was already helping her parents to pick up grains of rice left behind in the paddy fields and to find and collect wild vegetables. When she was fifteen, she was married off by her parents. It is supposedly the fate of a woman, and it is better sooner than later—otherwise her parents will not get a good deal on her because they will have paid more expenses for her food and clothing. On the other hand, it was not so bad for her husband’s family to have some extra help in the fields, especially during the busy seasons on the farm. She was not a full farmhand, but she was no
less useful than half a cow. In less than a year, she gave birth to a son while knowing next to nothing about the facts of life. She felt as if it was only yesterday that she was sleeping in her mother’s arms; but now, most strangely, she herself was holding her own baby in her arms. (18)

This is just the beginning of the peasant girl’s poor life described in the essay. Within six months, her child dies, and the girl is subject to her parents-in-law’s vituperation and husband’s abuse. Finally the girl can no longer bear any abuse and escapes from her husband’s family. She then works as a maid of a wealthy lady. But her life is not as peaceful as she hopes, for her father-in-law and her own father finally find her and force her to go back home. As she finally returns home some time later, her husband is already dead. And she is sold to another family by her parents-in-law without hesitation. Worth noting here is the girl’s ambiguous identity as a girl/woman. Even though she is only a child, which itself was a construct in the May Fourth era, she really does not have a childhood as May Fourth intellectuals understood. However, while the modern child was being invented in this period and the oppressed peasant girl often appeared in May Fourth nationalists’ discussions of social evils in China, there was not a separate discourse about Chinese peasant girls that is different from both the discourse of the modern child and that of the oppressed woman. In other words, the Chinese peasant girl existed in the early twentieth century either as a child or a woman (funǚ), not a female child. The lack of alternative discourses about Chinese peasant girls not only indicate the limits of the conceptualization of both “Chinese women” and “children” as two homogenous categories, but also explains why the film makes an abrupt shift in the representation of
Hulan’s identity. On the one hand, the film, which was made three decades after the May Fourth movement, attempted to claim a childhood for the peasant Hulan. But this representation of childhood is confined within the May Fourth discourse of the playful natural child. And, as the child passes its supposedly playful stage, she suddenly turns into an oppressed mature village woman. The film not only draws on the May Fourth discourses of the modern child and oppressed peasant woman, but also interlocks the village woman’s emancipation from patriarchy and the Chinese communist revolution.

Though Hulan is an oppressed village woman, she is not obedient and submissive. She tries to challenge her grandfather. Not listening to her family members’ dissuasion, Hulan treks to the coal place with the young man Xiaoqing and brings home two full baskets of coal, proving herself as capable as the young man. Hulan thus distinguishes herself from the oppressed traditional Chinese woman and makes herself a New Woman. But Hulan’s new identity would not be possible without the CCP-led communist revolution. Before I discuss Hulan’s newly acquired revolutionary agency, I would like to point out that the figure of the New Woman is not a product of socialist ideology, and the Maoist discourse of the “emancipated” Chinese women is a reworking of the New Woman that first came into being in the early twentieth century and had a direct relation with the figure of the oppressed woman discussed earlier. The New Woman, who is “educated, political, and intensely nationalistic” (Stevens 84), is the reverse image of the oppressed woman as obedient, domestic, and usually illiterate.¹ As May Fourth intellectuals were painting a tragic life of Chinese women, the New Woman became a desired model for Chinese women to emulate.
In an essay published in *Young China* in 1919, “The Woman Question in China: Emancipation from a Trap,” the author called Chinese women to wake up from the thousand-year-old poisonous notion that being a submissive daughter and wife means being virtuous. The author thus urged her female compatriots who had been denied the right to participate in state affairs to develop an independent character and struggle against the evil society that entrapped them. A dominant version of the New Woman in the May Fourth period is the New Woman martyr, “a young woman who seeks emancipation but encounters pressures (usually related to marriage) that lead to her death” (Lan 75). Biographies of women martyrs were actually a widespread genre in late imperial China. They generally extolled the virtues of women who committed suicide to preserve their chastity when threatened with rape or widow remarriage (Lan 75). These women were held as exemplars who sacrificed their lives to uphold Confucian patriarchal values.\(^2\) The New Woman martyr of the early twentieth century was adapted from the traditional woman martyr. One example of the New Woman martyr during the May Fourth period is Miss Zhao, who committed suicide as a means to resist arranged marriage. There was a heated discussion on Miss Zhao among male intellectuals of the period. Mao Zedong, for example, voiced his opinion in “The Question of Miss Zhao’s Personality” published in 1919. Mao made a paradoxical argument: Miss Zhao did not have her own independent personality, because she did not have the freedom to choose her own lover and she died; but Miss Zhao did have a personality of her own in the last moment of her brief life, because she chose to commit suicide. In the end, Mao made a passionate call: “Long Live Miss Zhao!” (80). In this light, Miss Zhao’s martyrdom made her an ultimate representation of the New Woman.
The revolutionary martyr Liu Hulan strongly resembles the New Woman martyr represented by Miss Zhao. Like Miss Zhao, Liu Hulan’s death as well as her participation in the revolution is represented as her own choice and shows her “free will” and “independent personality.” But Hulan sacrificed her life for a different cause. Hulan chose not to surrender to the enemy for the sake of the communist revolution, whereas Miss Zhao ended her life for “free love.” However, as I will illustrate later, this difference was erased in the later variants produced in the Cultural Revolution. That is, the discourse of “love” was merged into the heroine’s devotion to the revolutionary cause. In comparison, the film foregrounds Hulan’s revolutionary path as a means to free herself from the patriarchal system and exert her own agency. Hulan’s rebellious act of getting the coal against her family’s opposition may just have been an inconsequential incident within the domestic sphere and would not necessarily lead to her “freedom,” if the CCP did not establish its presence in Hulan’s village. As the village is organized into an anti-Japanese government under the leadership of the CCP, Hulan actively participates in the revolution. She is shown making military uniforms with other village women, learning to write, teaching other women to read, and transferring wounded soldiers.

As Hulan is acquiring her new identity as a “free” agent, she is simultaneously redefined as a normative communist “funǚ” (woman). As early as 1932, the CCP described “funǚ” as “a political subject who was over fourteen years of age; had been emancipated from the tongyangxi (infant brides by purchase), prostitution, and female slave system; had recourse from family violence. . . . and took part in liberating political praxis” (qtd. in Barlow, 270). Funǚ’s proper field was the “organizational sphere of the party,” where she sustained herself in the political space of the CCP through selection,
mobilization, and various organization practices (Barlow 271). Hulan’s political activities clearly identify her as a “funǚ” who supports the communist revolution and makes contributions to it. As Mao Zedong stated in 1939 in his inaugural speech at the Women’s University of China founded by the CCP during the Sino-Japanese War period, “[We] should fight against the views that belittle women, because they don’t see the use of women, and look down on women’s great power in revolution” (8). Hulan’s political activities in the film are practical in nature, directly related to the proper function of the revolution. But involving herself in the political activities—becoming a “funǚ”—does not mean that Hulan automatically becomes a CCP member, as the Party secretary tells Hulan in the film.

To achieve this goal, Hulan has to work harder and make herself stand out from other “funǚ.” The following of the film then highlights Hulan’s exemplariness: she organizes her fellow villagers to evacuate during a military attack from the enemy, saves a child from the Japanese army, assists the local Party branch in assuming its work after the attack, educates her female friend to be persistent in doing revolutionary work, and passes out due to intense field labor. Because Hulan excels in the revolutionary work, she is finally approved to become a Party member candidate, despite that she has not reached eighteen as the youngest age for the CCP membership. When Hulan attends the Party committee meeting, she makes an emotional speech. As she says, “I am from a poor family and had been bullied since my birth. Since the Party arrived at the village, we poor people have been expecting a good future. Today I joined the Party. From now on, I will further align myself with the Party.” The scene not only represents the CCP as the savior of the exploited people, but also signifies Hulan’s complete break with her past oppressed
identity and the acquisition of an enlightened proletarian consciousness. Toward the end of the film, the party secretary of Hulan’s village is captured by the enemy. With a few male comrades, Hulan successfully rescues him. But while Hulan is covering her escaping comrades, she is captured by the enemy. Hulan refuses to surrender, and is escorted to the execution site. Before she is killed, Hulan encourages her fellow villagers to stand up to the enemy and never surrender. Hulan’s final remark reinforces her image as a strong-willed woman tempered by the strenuous revolutionary work. Hulan’s final remark accentuates her “independent” and brave character, and her revolutionary identity is represented only as a means to achieve her self-actualization culminating in death.

**Not a Girl, But a Proletarian Child**

In 1966, Shanghai Juvenile Publishing House published an English picturebook, *Stories from Liu Hu-lan’s Childhood*. 1966 was the beginning year of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution aimed at consolidating a homogenous socialist national identity by removing “anti-Maoist” elements. And it was also this year that *Peking Kuang-ming Jih-pao* published an editorial concerning children, which stated that “Teenagers and children are successors to the revolutionary cause of socialism and communism. The Party Central Committee and Chairman Mao have always shown deep concern for their sound growth” (“Actively Guide” 14). The publication of the picturebook is significant in two aspects. First, it suggests that as the socialist nation-building was intensified, the importance of children in this process was even more prominent. Not only was this picturebook intended for children, but the heroine was also represented only as a child, not a “woman.” Though the 1950 film included Hulan’s
childhood, most of the story represents her as an adult “village woman” (nongcun funǚ).

However, it was precisely through the special importance attached to children as illustrated by the editorial that representations of childhood were politicized. This is the case with Sparkling Red Star discussed in the preceding chapter. Thus, a second difference between the picturebook Stories from Liu Hu-lan’s Childhood and the film Liu Hulan is that the “playful” child of the film was remade into a representative of the politically informed proletarian child embodied by Dongzi of Sparkling Red Star. It is interesting to note that gender does not function as a meaningful identity category in the heroine’s childhood in the stories produced in the Cultural Revolution and Liu Hulan is represented only as a proletarian child—the successor to the revolutionary cause.³

The picturebook features four stories from Hulan’s childhood. The first story is about Hulan taking her younger sister out into the fields to pick wheat ears. But as noon is approaching, her sister is too tired and hot to continue the labor, whereas Hulan perseveres. The second story is about Hulan protecting the poor children in her village. This story is reminiscent of Hulan’s encounter with the landlord couple in the film. But in the picturebook, Hulan confronts the landlords’ sons who forbid Hulan and other children from digging wild herbs in their territory. Unlike the Hulan in the film who silently swallows the landlord’s slap, the Hulan in the picturebook beats the landlords’ sons for bullying other poor children. In the next two stories, Hulan helps the Communist-led anti-Japanese fighters in the village catch a spy, and takes care of a wounded Communist soldier. The last story highlights that Hulan takes initiative and leadership in the revolution. When the soldier is sent to Hulan’s village, he is badly injured and unconscious. Hulan gathers her friends, both boys and girls, and sends them to search for
as many eggs as they can. Hulan herself finds a few eggs at home, but they are not enough. And she uses the money she has saved from selling wheat ears to buy more eggs for the wounded soldier. In the good care of the children, the wounded soldier quickly recovers and returns to the battle front. These stories show an energetic, perseverant, agential, intelligent, and altruistic girl actively participating in the Communist revolution against exploiting classes. These revolutionary qualities, seen as especially prominent in children by Mao, can be also found in the child hero Dongzi from Sparkling Red Star. The proletarian girl thus shared the same pivotal position with the proletarian boy.

The girl’s central position in the revolution is further illustrated visually by a few illustrations in a comic book, Liu Hulan, published in 1972. On the third page of the comic book, a child Hulan is shown standing next to a group of male adult peasants (see fig. 1). Looking into the distance with their arms akimbo and torsos slightly leaning forward, these physically strong men look indignant, tough, and determined. Hulan is positioned slightly ahead of the male group. The accompanying text states: “Where there is oppression, there is resistance! Poor peasants’ fight against landlords is like a flaming fire that can never be extinguished. The young poor peasant Chen Zhaofang says indignantly, ‘the poor will revenge someday!’” The illustration supplies additional information, suggesting not only that Hulan belongs to the oppressed proletariat symbolized by the male adult group, but also that the girl will replace the adults in the future and become the successor to the proletarian cause.
The girl’s central status in the revolution is reinforced by the following illustrations, which also position her in the center of male adult groups (see fig. 2 and fig. 3). While the contrast between the physically strong adults and a small girl is stark, the apparent differences are overshadowed by their concerted efforts to promote the revolutionary cause.
Fig. 2. Poor peasants expecting urgently the Red Army; Liu Hulan Comics Creation Group, *Liu Hulan* (Shanxi: Renmin chubanshe, 1972) 4. Print.

Fig. 3. Learning the heroic deeds of Gu Yongtian; Liu Hulan Comics Creation Group, *Liu Hulan* (Shanxi: Renmin chubanshe, 1972) 5. Print.
A particular interesting illustration in the comic book is on page seven (see fig. 4). This illustration includes several different groups of people, including male Communist soldiers, male peasants, adult peasant women, and the child Hulan. In the center of the page is a Communist soldier, Comrade Gu, and next to him is an adult male peasant holding Comrade Gu’s hands on the right. Hulan is holding Comrade Gu’s right arm on the left. Behind Comrade Gu is a line of male peasants along the invisible diagonal line of the page. Comrade Gu and Hulan are both two dots on the diagonal line, but Hulan is again placed at the front. The accompanying text says that Comrade Gu called on the poor peasants to organize themselves into a militia and implement the Reduce Taxes Policy in order to fight for claiming the anti-Japanese democratic right and improving their lives, and that every sentence Comrade Gu said touched the hearts of the people. And the last sentence on the page reads: “From then on, a revolutionary seed was sowed in the Yuzhou village.” The revolutionary seed is the child Hulan, and the people placed on the diagonal line form a fighting line under the leadership of the CCP represented by Comrade Gu. Besides this line of central characters comprised of Hulan, Comrade Gu and the male peasants, three peasant women also appear on the page. But none of them are placed on the central diagonal line: the older-looking woman holding a child in her arms is positioned at the upper left margin, and the other two younger-looking women having long braids are placed at the right lower margin. Although these women appear on the page, meaning that they are part of the proletariat, they look more distanced from the center of the page/attention focusing on the child Hulan, Comrade Gu and the male peasant holding Gu’s hands.
The different placements of the adult women characters and the child Hulan indicate their different roles in the revolution. While the child Hulan takes a central role in the revolution, the adult women occupy a marginal place. As I have been arguing, the child Hulan’s identity was shaped by the discourse of the proletarian child discussed in Chapter 4. It seems that gender was not a barrier to the communist revolution, conventionally a male domain. The child Hulan looks more like her male counterpart Dongzi than her older sisters from her village shown by the above illustration. But the stories of the proletarian child are essentially stories of growth and development. As some critics observe, the narrative tradition of the Bildungsroman is often employed in Chinese revolutionary literature to narrate the revolutionary history of China. The genre of Bildungsroman describes “the process of development and education of a single protagonist from childhood through adolescence, leaving him at the threshold of maturity”
Traditionally the protagonist of the genre is a male child, as is the case in *Sparking Red Star*. The story of Dongzi’s maturation through a series of tests is also a story of the CCP guiding the broad masses of the proletariat onto a tortuous but bright revolutionary road. *Sparking Red Star* ends with Dongzi’s successful growth into a Red Army soldier. If Liu Hulan is a proletarian child for the beginning years of her life as depicted in the stories produced during the Cultural Revolution, then what would her later life trajectory look like? I will suggest in what follows that as the heroine grows into adolescence, she is refashioned into a Maoist female subject. This girl’s revolutionary road diverged from that of her male counterpart.

**Re-education for “Women’s Work”**

*The Heroine Liu Hulan* is a detailed biography published in 1975 by the People’s Press. The first three chapters focus on Hulan’s childhood from birth to fourteen year of age. During this period, Liu Hulan grows from a peasant child into a proletarian child. The portrayal of Hulan’s childhood is similar to that of Dongzi in that Hulan’s acquisition of her proletarian consciousness is a gradual process of education. The beginning of the story portrays the destitution of Hulan’s family, aimed at illustrating Hulan’s “good” family background. At a young age of five, Hulan witnesses the landlord’s exploitation of her grandfather, father, and mother. For example, the landlord presses Hulan’s family for paying large debts, which directly causes the death of Hulan’s sick mother. Hulan develops deep hatred for the landlord and expects the Red Army to come to her village. This is because she has heard that the Red Army punishes landlords. Like Dongzi, Hulan’s identification with the Red Army originates from a personal reason—to revenge
the exploitation of her family. Besides, Hulan does not really know who the Red Army is and whom they represent. This starts to change as the Red Army (which is called the Eighth Route Army during the Anti-Japanese Resistance War) really comes to Hulan’s village.

An Anti-Japanese Democratic Government is established in Hulan’s county. A young CCP member Gu Yongtian becomes the governor. The new government not only drives away the landlord and reduces the financial burdens of the poor peasants, but also builds an elementary school in Hulan’s village. Hulan finally has a chance to go to school. She learns about the history of the CCP and its significance, stories of many revolutionary heroes, and most importantly, Chairman Mao. Hulan develops her immense love for Chairman Mao and the Party (54). Also like Dongzi, Hulan not only learns theory but also praxis. Her first revolutionary assignment is to keep an important document for the local CCP branch. As she successfully accomplishes the task, she is given more difficult and dangerous assignments. Hulan once directly confronts a few Japanese soldiers and outwits them to prevent a classified document from being discovered. Later, the Eighth Route Army gets into a military confrontation with the Japanese army. The revolutionary militia of Hulan’s village is responsible for delivering grenades. Hulan’s original task is to deliver food to the soldiers. But as she sees the militia sending grenades to the front line, she also grabs a few grenades, rushes to the battlefield, and hands them to the fighting soldiers. Hulan is not only tempering herself in the revolution but also preparing herself to become an Eighth Route Army soldier. She imitates her role models of the Eighth Route Army soldiers and is determined to become an exemplary revolutionary. Especially after the enemy occupies the capital city of the
county, Hulan “set her mind on becoming an Eighth Route Army soldier and taking up guns to eliminate the enemy” (77). At this time, Hulan hears that the Party sends someone to recruit female students for a Women Cadres Training Program. Hulan is excited, because she thinks that once she attends the training she will become an Eighth Route Army soldier. But against her “will,” Hulan never fulfills her dream.

As the class begins, Hulan realizes that it does not prepare her for real battles. What Hulan learns is primarily politics, culture, and Maoist revolutionary theory. Hulan is initially unsatisfied with the class content and becomes agitated. But it turns out that Hulan’s unsatisfaction is an indication of her lack of understanding of the revolution. The theory not only teaches the students that the ultimate goal of the Chinese communist revolution is socialism and communism and that only the CCP can lead the Chinese people to achieve the victory of the revolution, but also that the fate of Chinese women is closely linked with the Chinese communist revolution. As Mao Zedong stated, “When Chinese women rise, the Chinese revolution achieves its victory” (The Heroine Liu Hulan 102). For Mao, women’s liberation was integral to national liberation, which was fundamentally a class issue. Worth emphasizing here is that the word “women” did not designate all women, but referred to “exploited women,” laboring women. Women from landlord or bourgeois classes were exploiters, not oppressed women. Chinese women’s oppression was seen as part of class exploitation characteristic of Old China. As long as the “old” factors of class exploitation, feudalism, and imperialism are eliminated, the official rhetoric went, Chinese women are automatically liberated.

But Chinese women did not naturally understand their own position in the revolution. As one old village woman in The Heroine Liu Hulan responds to the call for
participating in class struggle, “To get rid of this poisonous ulcer [despotic landlord], we completely support. But what can we old women do? You send someone to arrest him, and turn him over to the government. Isn’t that all?” (99-100). The Maoist idea of women postulated that since participating in class struggle and fighting against class exploitation is the means to liberate women themselves from oppression, women are expected to act out of self-interest. But as the above remark illustrates, the old woman does not see how her life is related to the revolution. This thus requires educated women workers to explain to these women their stakes in the revolution. The training program precisely prepares Hulan for this kind of work that educates the masses of laboring women about their importance in and contribution to the communist revolution—“women’s work” (fünǚ gongzuo). Rather than addressing women’s real needs, “women’s work” aimed at mobilizing women to support the revolution.

The program is also a mechanism of fashioning the genderless child Hulan into a normative female subject of the Maoist nation-state. Through applying her learned theory to practice, Hulan gradually acquires her “proper” (gendered) revolutionary identity. The Party sends Hulan and a few other women comrades to the village Guanjiabao to take part in the Anti-Traitor and Anti-landlord Struggle and to “temper themselves in the stormy mass movement” (99). Hulan carries out her “women’s work” by visiting poor peasant families every day and persuading the village women to participate in the struggle. Hulan tells these women that the masses of laboring women have been relentlessly oppressed by landlords, imperialists, and feudalism, and thus they should unite, organize, and liberate themselves and fight for their own emancipation (100). As a result of the successful women’s work, the village women voluntarily attend the struggle
sessions in which the “tyrannical landlords” are forced to admit their crimes before a crowd of exploited peasants. The mobilized village women, for the first time, can voice their oppression and tell stories of landlords’ exploitation. As these women wail their complaints, which also signify their acquisition of a “feminist” consciousness, the peasants, for the first time in their lives, become masters and the despotic and arrogant landlords are punished. Immersed in the class struggle and hearing the voices of these “awakened” women, Hulan comes to understand one thing: “How important the mass work is! How great women’s revolutionary power is!” (102). Hulan finally realizes: “fighting with guns and doing women’s work are both what the revolution needs, and both are part of the proletarian cause. At this moment, how honorable is that I can contribute to the ordinary but also great mass work!” (102).

Maoist feminism promoted equal rights between men and women and women’s participation in state politics. The irony of such state feminism is that while it subsumed women’s emancipation under class emancipation—seemingly replacing gender with class, it simultaneously rested on gender binarism and sexual division of labor. As soon as the training program is finished, Hulan returns to her village and devotes herself to women’s work. Hulan also organizes a similar training program at her village, teaching the local village women politics and culture to raise their political consciousness and mobilize them to support the front line. Under Hulan’s leadership, the village women take care of wounded Eighth Route Army soldiers, make military shoes, and spin cotton into yarn. Hulan often leads the village women to work overnight and complete the assignments in advance. As Hulan sends the yarn to the front line, a comrade in charge says to her: “Under the circumstance that the enemy is attacking and blocking us, the women in your
village have made great contributions to the front line, and the entire district should learn from you!” (118). In the Maoist discourse, women were an important labor force that had not been fully utilized. As Mao stated in 1957, “Chinese women are a great human resource. Must excavate this resource in order to build a great socialist country” (“Mobilize Women to Take Part in Production” 16). In the book, the comrade’s remark emphasizes the women’s production value and indicates their labor as important as men’s fighting in the battlefields. But the women’s “elevated” status does not break the traditional idea that “men till the land and women weave cloth” (nangeng nǚzhī). While men go out to fight on the front line, women stay home and support the fighting by producing life necessities.

It is important to note that the Maoist word “women” was not a homogenous category. Conflicts exist among different generations of women. Old women easily come to stand for traditionalism. One example is Hulan’s grandmother. Because of her grandmother’s opposition, Hulan is initially not chosen for the Women Cadres Training Program. The grandmother does not want her granddaughter to venture outside the domestic sphere. Due to Hulan’s insistence, the grandmother has to give in at last. Furthermore, Hulan, a fourteen-year-old girl, also theoretically falls outside of the ideological ideal—“a healthy, semiliterate woman of eighteen to thirty-five who ‘could destroy her familist outlook and serve [the state even when called upon to make] government transfers’” (Fulian, 1933; qtd. in Barlow, 271). At several moments in the book, Hulan’s young age becomes a barrier for her to becoming the ideal woman. For example, the other reason for why Hulan is not chosen for the training program at first is that she is too young. And also, when she returns from the training program to carry out
women’s work in her village, many villagers see Hulan only as an immature “girl” and doubt her capability to lead other women to do women’s work. However, Hulan’s devotion to the revolutionary work, outstanding service, and inextinguishable passion prove these ideas “backward” and win the support of the broad masses. The local Party committee, which treasures “new blood” and young people’s high revolutionary spirit, unanimously approves Hulan’s candidacy for membership. Unlike the film which unambiguously represents Hulan as a mature “woman” immediately after she passes her “playful” childhood, Hulan’s young womanhood is represented in this 1975 biography as a source of both anxiety and energy that can be directed toward the revolution. Such an ambivalent representation of the heroine straddling childhood and womanhood may suggest the Maoist state’s increasing awareness of the complexity and heterogeneity of the categories of “childhood” and “womanhood” and of their intersections.

**Falling in Love with the Nation-Father**

By using the example of a popular liberation story, “The White-Haired Girl,” produced in the Maoist era, Meng Yue argues that the political code of class struggle “entirely displaces the sexual code as a functioning part of the story” (120). In the same fashion, Haiyan Lee also argues that “love in socialist realism is by definition class love, even if it manifests itself phenomenologically as romantic or sexual love” (*Revolution of the Heart* 282). That is, in socialist realism “the only legitimate expression of love assumes the form of class passion” (Lee 287). Yang Lan also reasons: “During the CR [Cultural Revolution] love was a ‘forbidden zone’ in literary writing. . . One reason may have been the CR ideology that people should be altruistic and devote themselves entirely
to the revolutionary cause: unmarried heroes were probably believed to be in a better position to do so than married ones” (190). For these critics, sexuality either completely disappears from revolutionary literature, especially those works produced in the Cultural Revolution, or exists simply as a signifier for class struggle. This seems true for the representations of the heroine Liu Hulan, if we compare the 1950 film and the 1975 biography. In the 1975 biography, Hulan attempts to erase her sexual differences. For example, she cuts off her long braid during her training as a women’s work cadre. When her classmates feel pity for it, Hulan responds: “For the revolution, what’s the use of being beautiful? It is simply a trouble hindering the study and has to be cut off!” (90).

Furthermore, in this version, Hulan is not involved in any romantic relations, which is not the case in the film. In the film, the young man Xiaoqing, with whom Hulan goes to get the coal for her family, is her lover.

However, I suggest that the apparent erasure of sexuality does not mean that sexuality became defunct in the revolutionary politics in the Maoist era, especially during the Cultural Revolution usually seen as a period of extreme political control. I suggest that sexual love cannot be conflated with class struggle when analyzing romantic relations portrayed in revolutionary literature of the Maoist era. Sexuality should not be seen as replaced by class struggle, but intertwined with it. By arguing that the analytical category of sexuality was meaningless in the Maoist era, the critics fail to see the libidinal dimension of Maoist nationalism. I suggest that a more insidious mechanism of producing the desired female subject for the Maoist nation-building, as epitomized by Liu Hulan, was exactly to utilize sexual desire by rechanneling it to the masculinized nation-state.
The nation is thus not only a political community, but also a field for the play of erotic desire and a regime for regulating pleasure (Ramaswamy 9). In Maoist China, however, it was a gradual process for the nation-state to become the object of erotic desire. In the 1950 film, as mentioned earlier, Hulan develops a romantic relationship with Xiaoqing, who also comes from a poor peasant family. Their affection for each other is represented in a subdued way. Their private conversations do not carry any sexual connotations, and focus merely on politics and revolution. One exception is that before Xiaoging leaves for joining the Eighth Route Army, Hulan tells him that she will wait for him. Then these two lovers go on different life trajectories, and their romantic relation never comes to interfere/intertwine with their respective revolutionary work. In the last scene in which Hulan is about to be executed, her mind is never set on her lover. As discussed earlier, the film is concerned with representing Hulan as an “independent” and strong woman.

The 1975 version, The Heroine Liu Hulan, removed Hulan’s romance. But the text heavily used sexually charged language to describe Hulan’s love for the CCP. As the text states, for example, “Liu Hulan is completely immersed in her love for the Party” (130). Wang Ban defines the directing of libidinal energy toward the Communist revolutionary politics as “a psychic process of sublimation, in which the erotic is redirected and converted into a political frame of reference and private passions become intertwined with revolutionary sentiments” (146). As this Cultural Revolution version of the heroine’s story removes the heroine from the private field of heterosexual love between two individuals, she sublimates her libidinal energy into her devotion to the revolutionary politics. Wang Ban also argues that “Classical heterosexual love is only
one variety of the forms that desire can take” (136) and thus suggests that the sublimated libidinal energy is non-heterosexual. Although Wang’s point on the political sublimation is insightful, he ignores how the nation-state itself can become a heterosexual object, upon which the female subject directs her desire. This is best illustrated by the closing scene in the 1975 biography in which Hulan is about to sacrifice her life for the revolution.

Liu Hulan’s final contemplation before her death sounds like an emotional farewell from a passionate woman to her male lover:

Lûliang Mountain ah Lûliang Mountain! What great inspirations your soaring mountain top had given to Liu Hulan! This morning, Liu Hulan was going to run into your arms, climb onto your highest peak, and look towards Yan’an. At this moment, facing the Lûliang Moutain and thinking about Yan’an, Liu Hulan felt that she had made too little contribution to the revolution. . . . Liu Hulan deeply understood the meaning of life and death in relation to the revolution. She had made her mind: she was willing to die rather than surrender! (223)

The Lûliang Mountain is where the CCP organization at the district level is located, and Yan’an is the base of the Central Committee of the CCP/Mao. A synecdoche of the Party/nation-state, the Lûliang Mountain is clearly masculinized and erotized. Not only is the mountain associated with male strength, toughness, and protection, but its erecting “peak” or “mountaintop” also symbolizes phallic power. The cited passage carries strong
erotic connotations, signified by phrases such as “the mountaintop’s great inspirations” for Liu Hulan, and her desire to “run into its arms and climb onto its peak.” Liu Hulan’s feeling that she has made little contribution to the revolution and her failure to go to Lû-liang Mountain or Yan’an can be interpreted as her failure to unite with her nation-lover and consummate their relationship. Joan Ladnes argues in *Visualizing the Nation* that “Eros is the glue that binds private passion and public duty” and that “we need to remember that eros is a longing, always postponed, never wholly achieved” (153). What made Liu Hulan a memorable heroine is perhaps not so much her heroic deeds as the eternally deferred consummation of her romantic relationship with the Party/nation-state, which is made possible by her immortal death.

In *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature*, Kathryn James argues that “a culture’s representations of death may be read collectively as a text to give insights into a wide array of its functions, values, social order, and systems of meaning” (11-12). Representations of death are historically and culturally specific. But James believes that representations of heroic death are inextricably connected with masculinity, not only because heroes are predominately male but also because those representations celebrate the male warrior’s physical prowess, physicality, endurance and courage (52-53). Although James’ discussion focuses on male heroes, she points out that the meaning of death is not gender-neutral. More importantly, death can be a site of forever deferred erotic desire as well as its culmination. The representation of Hulan’s death in the 1975 biography differs greatly from that in the 1950 film. While Hulan’s final remark in the film encourages her fellow villagers to be fearless of the enemy, the heroine’s farewell in the 1975 book transforms her into a feminized and sexualized loyal
lover. The heroine’s feminized and sexualized death is also visually illustrated in the 1972 comic book. In contrast with the illustrations portraying the male soldiers’ deaths that give prominence to their motion, movement, activity, and physical prowess, the illustration of Liu Hulan’s death in the comic book highlights her sexual difference (see fig. 5). She is shown softly touching her hair, with eyes filled with tenderness. The accompanying text reads: “Liu Hulan arranged her hair, and then her eyes fell on the beautiful rivers and mountains of her nation with deep emotion. Looking toward Lôliang and thinking about Yan’an, she missed her great Chairman Mao and dear Party” (133).

Fig. 5. Liu Hulan’s farewell to Chairman Mao and the Party; Liu Hulan Comics Creation Group, *Liu Hulan* (Shanxi: Renmin chubanshe, 1972) 133. Print.

The heroine’s death does not really end her life. On the contrary, her death is rather the beginning of her immortal life and eternal longing for her nation-state. As the story tells us: “Martyr Liu Hulan lives forever! Liu Hulan’s spirit is everlasting!” (*The Heroine Liu*
That the heroine chooses to die rather than surrender can be read as her self-defense against sexual impurity and as her loyalty to her lover—the masculinized nation-state. However, this image is not that unfamiliar. The traditional woman martyr of imperial China died for chastity, and the New Woman martyr of the May Fourth period died for “free love.” And this Maoist heroine died for both reasons: her death proves her sexual fidelity and “free will.”

The story of the ideal girl in the Maoist era seems a more complex one than that of the boy, i.e., the normative child. Sometimes she is a genderless child; and at other times she is a devoted woman. While the film represented her as a playful child influenced by the Republican discourse of the playful child, she was transformed into a more agential, smart, and perseverant proletarian child as the socialist construction was intensified. Therefore, as the massive socialist construction moved forward, the nation-state called on both its daughters and sons to take initiative and exert their agency to make contributions to the nation-building. Gender is shown to have its limits. That is, it does not work as an analytical category when we study the central role the girl child plays in the revolution. As Rey Chow insightfully argues, “Any analytical discourse on the Chinese situation in terms of a single category…is presumptuous” (82). Chow suggests that to use gender as a universal and timeless analytical category is to forget the “historicity that accompanies all categorical explanatory power” (82). The girl’s agency needs to be understood in relation to the Maoist discourse of the child that eulogized its agency, exuberance, and brightness. However, as the girl grows, she no longer looks like her male counterpart in terms of her relation to the revolution. As the boy continues to replicate the nation-state/Party/Mao in him and advances to become a combat soldier, the
girl is re-educated into a proper “funő” devoted to women’s work. But the girl’s new revolutionary identity endows her with a new form of agency—her emancipation from traditional patriarchy and right to participate in state politics. Meanwhile, as the Maoist state was increasingly concerned about its homogeneous identity during the Cultural Revolution, the girl no longer loved anyone else but her masculine nation-father. The heroine’s death only eternalizes her erotic desire for her nation-lover.
Notes

1. Like the modern child, the New Woman was also a hybrid, fashioned out of local appropriation of foreign female figures by the Chinese intelligentsia from the last decade of the Qing to the May Fourth era in China. On this topic, see Hu Ying’s *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918*. This book studies Chinese adaptations of three notable foreign women, either real or fictional, the Lady of the Camellias, Sophia Perovskaia, and Madame Roland de la Platière.

2. These traditional martyred women came under serious attack during the May Fourth period. For example, Lu Xun strongly criticized the virtue of chastity in “My Views on Chastity” published in 1918.

3. That the Maoist discourse of the child blurred gender differences is exactly the criticism of contemporary feminists on representations of Chinese women in the Maoist era. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang argues that Chinese feminism today “may be caught up in a historical juncture that requires reconstructing binary gender, rather than a deconstruction of gender” (36, emphasis original). In accordance with this view is the production of children’s books intended exclusively for girls, or “girls’ books,” in contemporary China. Two popular and critically acclaimed examples are Qin Wenjun’s *The Full Biography of the Girl Jia Mei* (2009) and Yang Hongying’s *Girl’s Diary* (2000). Written from a girl’s perspective, these novels foreground and celebrate female experiences such as the initial menstrual experience.
4. See Meng Yue and Wang Ban.
Conclusion: Nationalism and Childhood in Contemporary China

As the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 with Mao’s death, China shifted its national attention from defining itself in terms of class struggle to developing a market-oriented economy. The economic reform initiated by Deng Xiaoping “resulted in the widespread demise of communist ideology” (Zhao 210). As the Chinese public lost the “spiritual pillars” that “had been incarnated as Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought” (213), reformist leaders, in order to secure the CCP’s leadership and stabilize the society, dismissed dogmatic communist ideology and reconceptualized nationalism as patriotism in order to fill the spiritual void of the Chinese people. As Suisheng Zhao suggests, “Rediscovering the utility of nationalism, pragmatic communist leaders began to stress the party’s role as the paramount patriotic force for and the guardian of China’s national pride” (214).

The CCP Central Committee defines patriotism in “Outline for Conducting Patriotic Education” issued in 1994. The outline states that “The patriotic spirit of our people was forged and developed in the long history of the making of the Chinese nation. It is through Chinese history, particularly the teaching of modern and contemporary history, that the people get to know the development of an industrious and persevering Chinese nation, to know the contributions we Chinese people have made to human civilization, to know the important events and figures in our history, and to know the struggles of the Chinese people against foreign invasion and oppression, and against domestic bureaucracy for national independence and freedom” (3). This official discourse of patriotism emphasizes a distinctive Chinese history and its importance in patriotic education. What is conjured up is “a narrative of historical events, heroes, traditional
values, ethnic myths and historical memories to form a distinctive repository of Chinese culture, or a spiritual source for the Chinese to tap‖ (Guo 2004, p. 2). In this light, patriotism operates culturally and does not necessarily mean political loyalty to the CCP. Identifying with officially defined Chinese culture and history is patriotism in contemporary China.

At the new historical juncture, children again emerge as the central concern of the nation-state. The outline clearly states that “The important target of patriotic education is children.” The outline also advises that “since school is the prime site for education, patriotic education should be incorporated into school curricula from kindergartens all the way through to universities.” In 2004, the central government issued “One Hundred Patriotic Films, One Hundred Patriotic Songs, and One Hundred Patriotic Books’ (or “Three Hundreds”). Since the publication of the outline, central governmental organizations such as the CCP Central Propaganda Department, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Culture, along with local governments and schools, have actively disseminated and implemented its messages. In September 2004, for example, seven central governmental organizations jointly issued a recommendation list for children, “One Hundred Patriotic Films, One Hundred Patriotic Songs, and One Hundred Patriotic Books” (or “Three Hundreds”).\(^1\) Revolutionary works of the Maoist era such as Sparkling Red Star appear in the list. Rather than being dated propaganda, these revolutionary works are redefined in contemporary China as “red classics,” which become part of a glorious national history led by the CCP which contemporary Chinese children should feel proud of.
These “red classics” are in fact popular readings among contemporary Chinese parents and children. Take *Sparkling Red Star* for example. Those who grew up watching *Sparkling Red Star* have become parents who now want their own children to watch it. For example, one commentator on dangdang.com, the largest online Chinese-language shopping center in the world, stated that “The life in the film is unimaginable for the current young generation. Should let them watch it. It is very good.” Among the numerous parents who commented on the same Web site that their children loved the film or the book version, one pointed out the significance of *Sparkling Red Star* (the book edition sold in a series with other Red classics) for her child in contemporary Chinese society as follows:

I have a ten-year-old boy. I bought this book because I want the young hero to exert an imperceptible influence on and educate my child. My child likes this kind of work very much. He was so happy when I told him that I would buy this series. He quickly finished the book and asked for other “red” books. I think nowadays children lack virility, ideals, and endurance. Reading red classics will not only broaden their knowledge and enrich their experience but more importantly shape their characters. Recommend this book for broad range of parents.

This parent sees the value of *Sparkling Red Star* in its cultivation of the hero’s endurance, virility, and striving for lofty ideals. Ironically, these qualities, which were the important indices of the child’s revolutionary identity during the Maoist era, have been transformed
into characteristics capable of helping contemporary youth to succeed in a rapidly
developing market economy in today’s China. This generation does not live in hard times
as their parents did decades ago. Watching the film or reading the book therefore offers
contemporary children an opportunity not only to connect with their parents’ childhoods
and learn about the struggles and successes in modern Chinese history, but also to
emulate the child hero by developing their own endurance and industriousness.

The “Outline for Conducting Patriotic Education” defines patriotism as “a driving
force for Chinese society and history,” because under the new historical condition of
developing a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics, patriotism energizes
the national spirit, unites all social forces, and encourages the Chinese people to rely on
themselves and pioneer businesses with arduous efforts in order to revitalize the Chinese
nation. Tinged with an entrepreneurial spirit, the qualities that define Dongzi’s
revolutionary identity are rematched with the socioeconomic conditions of contemporary
China. Today, children are educated not only to be proud of Chinese history by
watching/reading about child heroes, but also to see parallels between the past and the
present and learn from the past in order to serve the present. Indeed, Dongzi’s endurance,
agency, creativity, and adventurousness are also indispensable to contemporary
children’s success in today’s competitive market. Relying on one’s own ability,
embarking on business adventures, and enduring hardship all have become important
indications of Chinese patriotism and contemporary Chinese nationalism. The proletarian
child of the Maoist era has been transfigured into a patriotic child, without losing the
significance of his defining characteristics or his exemplary status for Chinese children.
Despite the official status of the patriotic child and the renewed popularity of “red classics,” the patriotic child is not the only idealized child in contemporary China. In fact, recent Chinese scholarship on children’s literature has started to reassess the significance of the “child-heart’ theory” that first emerged in the May Fourth period but was dismissed during the Maoist era. For example, Zheng Yuanjie, a critically acclaimed and popular children’s fantasy writer, suggests in “Fantasy Is for Children to Read” that fantasy as an imaginative art connects with children who are considered most imaginative. Fang Weiping, a recent leading voice in children’s literature studies in China, wrote an article discussing the contribution Chen Bochui made to the development of children’s literature. Fang strongly affirms Chen’s promotion of the “child-heart’ theory” so fiercely attacked during the Maoist era. In his preface to the Chinese translation of Peter Pan, Fang defines Barrie’s work as a classic that “belongs to children but also belongs to those adults who have a childhood complex deep in their heart.” Fang claims that “Peter Pan which desires and eulogizes eternal childhood expresses the universal mentality and sentiment of treasuring childhood and keeping guard of innocence” (“Zhenshi tongnian” [“Treasuring Childhood”] 410).

Contemporary Chinese children’s literature critics are reactivating the May Fourth discourse of the child and children’s literature, while dismissing children’s literature produced in the Maoist era as ostensibly “ideological” and “political.” These critics align themselves with the May Fourth intellectuals interested in the issues of children, seeing a “true” childhood as “natural” and “apolitical.” The innocent child thus resurfaces as an ideal child for contemporary Chinese children’s literature critics and writers. In particularly, Cao Wenxuan, both critically acclaimed and widely popular, makes the
innocent child a constant theme in his children’s novels, often called “novels of innocence and beauty” (chunmei xiaoshuo). But Cao’s interpretation of the innocent child takes on a new meaning, which is closely connected with alternative imagination of contemporary China. One representative work of this genre is Cao’s *Straw Hut*.

*Straw Hut* is set in the late 1950s and early 1960s in a rural area Youmadi in China. Although the story appears to portray a past, it embodies the writer’s imagination of an ideal childhood and national community in contemporary China. The novel tells the stories of the boy protagonist Sangsang and his classmates at the Youmadi Elementary School. The writer depicts a closely-knit rural community constituted by genuinely kind and mutually caring members. The children in the story are exuberant, mischievous but kind. Sangsang is known for his “unexpected-eccentricities” (Cao 8) but is “forever a kind child” (311). The boy saves his classmate Zhiyue from out-of-town bullies; and he gives the money, which he earns from selling his own pigeons, to Du Xiaokang. Du is the richest child in Sangsang’s class, but has to support his disaster-stricken family toward the end of the book. The adults depicted in the story are also kind-hearted. Grandma Qin, for example, is an old lady living by herself at the Northwest corner of the school. While the teachers and students of the school take good care of Grandma Qin whenever necessary, she also sacrifices her own life saving a girl from drowning in the river.

The Youmadi community in *Straw Hut* epitomizes the ideal national community for Cao Wenxuan. It is materially impoverished, signified by the title *Straw Hut*—the kind of dwelling the Youmadi people reside in, but morally noble and innocent. Accordingly, the children of the community possess the same admirable qualities. This fictional community presents a sharp contrast to the reality in contemporary China. The
increasingly prosperous Chinese society becomes increasingly ambivalent about moral values. Cao laments in “Beautiful Pain” that we are now trapped in “frivolous hedonism” (244). Cao believes that the pursuit of vulgar material pleasures make the Chinese people unable to cope with difficulties and challenges in a changing society. As Cao suggests, the deep-rooted reason is that contemporary Chinese children are spoiled and growing up emotionally and mentally vulnerable. Having tasted considerable bitterness in their childhood, contemporary parents try their best to shield their children from hardships and create a “happy” world for them. The children in Straw Hut, by contrast, experience various hardships, disasters, and tragedies, which are made the essential lessons for their growth. For instance, when Du Xiaokang’s family loses their fortune, he drops out of school and takes up the responsibility to support his family. The boy faces the new life with courage and dignity. The hardships educate Du Xiaokang: “Sky, reed, flood, wind, thunderstorm, duck, loneliness, melancholy, sickness, cold, hunger. . . . all of these, trouble and torture Du Xiaokang, but also educate and illuminate Du Xiaokang” (335).

For Cao Wenxuan, the mentally strong and morally innocent children in Straw Hut serve as the exemplars for contemporary Chinese children. If contemporary Chinese children acquire the same moral qualities embraced by the novel, they will become responsible citizens and capable of building a strong nation in the future. Cao argues in “What Should Literature Bring to Children” that “children’s literature writers shape the future national character” and that “the mission of children’s literature is to provide the human race with a sound moral base” (1). Cao’s idea is not new; he shares the same belief with his predecessors of almost a century ago. But in a new era the rapidly developing economy poses new challenges for building a modern Chinese nation. The
hope to build a desirable Chinese nation remains, however, Cao suggests, as long as we understand the importance of children in building the national character and effectively utilize children’s literature to educate them.

The ideal child—whether the innocent, the proletarian, or the patriotic version—has played an indispensible role in China’s nation-building since the end of the nineteenth century. The significance of the ideal child resides in his/her own transformative power. Every time the Chinese nation perceives itself as being in danger, the child comes to represent a new force capable of transforming the degenerate society into a new order. At the end of the twentieth century, a time when the Great Qing Empire was on the verge of extinction, Liang Qichao envisioned a comprehensive reform proposing that China should reinvent itself into a modern nation. Such a modern nation came to closely associate with the Chinese youth. For Liang, the young embodied all the desirable national characteristics: future-oriented, progressive, optimistic, and heroic.

Although Liang’s ideas did not save the Qing Empire, they nevertheless influenced the next generation of the Chinese. As the Qing Empire was overthrown in 1911, the Republic of China was founded in the following year. But the new government did not bring a democratic nation to the Chinese people. Chinese intellectuals of the time argued that Confucianism was the source of China’s backwardness. Therefore, from the mid-1910s to 1920s, Chinese intellectuals led a May Fourth movement aimed at fundamentally transforming China through creating a new culture.

Integral to this fashioning of a new culture was the formation of a theory of childhood, which postulated that children possessed inherent characteristics such as innocence, curiosity, and imagination, qualities that were presumably repressed by
Confucianism. For May Fourth nationalists, a democratic modern nation would promote children’s “natural” development, and such “natural” children would in turn constitute the desired modern nation. It was also during the period that Chinese children’s literature came into existence. While the emerging children’s literature celebrated the “natural” child, it also surfaced various tensions between the nationalist imagination of modern China as embodied by the innocent child and the turbulent sociopolitical reality. The child continued to feature prominently in Chinese communists’ imagination of socialist China. Dismissing the innocent child as bourgeois, Chinese communists valorized a politically informed proletarian child. However, rather than disappearing from the Maoist discourse of the proletarian child, the innocent child became the constitutive Other of the Maoist child in New China. For Maoists, children were successors to the proletarian cause, and guaranteeing children’s growth along the right proletarian road was seen as a national matter. However, the ideal proletarian child was not a passive replica of the adult revolutionary, but exerted his/her own agency to make contributions to the revolution.

More than three decades have passed since China ended its Maoist era. But children continue to occupy a central position in contemporary Chinese nationalism. As this dissertation attempts to illustrate, the issues of children as well as children’s literature are never apolitical and insignificant, despite that they are often believed to be so. If children play such central roles in social transformations, then the question of how to help children become critical citizens of the world is a question worth considering for anyone involved in the education of children.
Notes

1. The seven governmental entities include the CCP Central Propaganda Department; the Civilization Office of the Central Communist Party Committee; the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Culture; the Ministry of Broadcast, Film, and Television; the General Administration of Press and Publication; and the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League. See “Qi bumen xiang shehui tuijian aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu ‗sange yibai’ (mingdian).”


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