Introduction: Children in Chinese Art

Depictions of children have had a prominent place in Chinese art since the Song period (960–1279). The number of works commissioned at all levels of society indicates that child imagery was exceptionally meaningful to generations of people across China. Yet one would be hard-pressed to find in the carefully preserved historical documents of imperial China any significant discussion of children in art. Neither has contemporary scholarship given the subject much coverage, despite the rich materials available for research. Very little has been published in the way of serious study of the iconography or meaning of images of children. This volume begins to fill that gap by bringing to the forefront of scholarship themes and motifs that have crossed social boundaries for centuries but have been overlooked in scholarly treatises on Chinese art.

That attention is now given specifically to depictions of the child in Chinese art is as much a comment on our own times as the disregard of the subject is a comment on the past. Children in contemporary middle-class American society command respect nearly equal to adults. The changing power structure in many American families has shifted to give mothers a voice more equal to fathers. With fewer models of obedience to authority in the family (i.e., mother to father), children have also found a voice. Combined with Americans’ emphasis on democracy and the rights of special interest groups, shared family power has given rise to an especially strong focus on children. In this context, the study of children and their place in society is naturally appealing.

While not comprehensive in coverage of the subject, the essays in this book introduce and elucidate many of the issues surrounding child imagery in China.
These issues include the pervasive use of pictures of children for didactic reinforcement of social values as well as the amuletic function of these artworks to encourage the birth of sons. The objectives of this volume are to (1) establish the study of child imagery as a viable pursuit in the field of Chinese art history, (2) begin to document the historical development of the iconography of the child in Chinese art, (3) explore multiple aspects of style and meaning through the analysis of specific works of art, and (4) make available to interested readers recent historical research of the art. Together the essays provide a unique means to explore aspects of Chinese private life through visual representations of ideas about gender, family roles, and social goals.

Early Representations of Children

Possibly the earliest identifiable representation of a child in Chinese art is a small jade plaque dating from the fourth century b.c., excavated from the royal Zhongshan tombs in Hebei province (fig. 1.1). Found along with similar jade plaques of three female adults, the child is depicted frontally, wearing a skirt with an unusual checkered pattern that matches the clothing of the adults. The child’s facial features are not distinguished from those of the adults; the short stature and hairstyle are the only indications that the figure is indeed a child. The head appears to be shaved except for a small tuft of hair, or topknot, in a style that was common for young boys throughout most of China’s long history; thus the child is presumably male. The function of the four jade figures is unknown.

Representations of children are found in more significant numbers in the context of Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) tomb decoration and furnishings, yet still represent a trivial percentage within the corpus of Han figurative art. In general, these images are
related to the instruction of the descendants of the deceased in their familial duties. Made for didactic purposes, they rarely describe the playful gestures or endearing characteristics associated with children in later periods. The negligibility of childhood demonstrated by the infrequent portrayals of children is consistent with the attitude toward children that is reflected in Han burial practices, as revealed in studies by Anne Behnke Kinney and K. E. Brashier. Prescriptive texts suggest that mortuary rites were not performed until a child was at least eight sui (Chinese years), and even then in an abbreviated version. Anne Kinney observed that the qi (spirit/vitality) of a child was thought to be weak, even to the point that the ghost of a drowned child was not capable of seeking revenge as adult ghosts would.

One type of child motif found among Han tomb ceramics is the green-glazed pottery lamp in the form of an adult holding a childlike figure in its lap (fig. 1.2). These curious pieces may represent a shaman holding a child who impersonates an ancestor in sacrificial rites. As described by Michael J. Carr, ancient burial practices in which the deceased man’s grandson acted as his representative in receiving the funeral sacrifices are outlined in the Liji (Book of rites). If the grandson was too young, someone would be assigned to carry him.

In addition to the ceramic pieces, a few children are incidentally depicted in illustrations of historical and didactic tales painted or carved in relief on Han tomb tiles. In a study of the Wu Liang family shrines, Wu Hung has identified several boys among the figures who decorate the stone sarcophagi. For the most part, these boys are participants in well-known stories of virtue and social responsibility. Their portrayals clearly were used to instruct children and others in their filial duties to the patriline, appropriate reminders carved in stone at the ancestral burial grounds. There is one exception to the use of legendary children: an actual boy identified as Ah Qu, who died at the age of five. His portrayal is accompanied by a memorial inscription written by his parents, who express grief at his loss, as well as considerable anxiety over the child’s helplessness in the next life.

These Han images can be recognized as children mainly by their reduced size, which is also an indication of their relatively unimportant status. What distinguishes the children from servants or other adults of lesser importance is minimal. Indeed, none of the Han relief figures is easily distinguished by age using purely visual clues; the context and the inscriptions are more reliable factors. There is, however, the barely visible beginning of what one might call an iconography of the child, abbreviated pictorial conventions that indicate figures are children. Some of the children are pictured with topknots instead of hats. Others hold a simple toy. In terms of facial expression or body composition, however, the child figure is no different from that of a miniature adult. While this may be due simply to the stylized representation of
all figures at the Wu family shrines, it is also consistent with Han Confucian writings that extol the appearance of mature traits in gifted children in contrast to the ordinary child’s tendency to engage in aimless play. Children who acted with adult seriousness and wisdom were upheld as models; thus, there would perhaps be little incentive to portray a naturalistic child.

The attitude that adult behavior in children was praiseworthy persisted through the centuries in China, but after the Han period, it was applied mainly to exceptional individuals, with fewer references to children as a group. Julia Murray discusses in her essay the Chinese adaptation of illustrations of the life of one such individual, Shakyamuni Buddha, and traces the influence of those works on pictorial biographies of other cultural heroes, namely Houji, Lü Dongbin, and Confucius. Meanwhile, child imagery began to change as early as the third century to more naturalistic renditions of children. In her essay, Terese Bartholomew introduces possibly the earliest rendition of auspicious children: a group of children at play, unaccompanied by adults, painted on a lacquer dish from the Three Kingdoms period (220–265). In the center of the dish, two boys, naked except for short aprons, play at wufeng, a type of martial art. The boys are in the dynamic position of one leg bent and the opposite foot jutting forward that later became a popular pose for East Asian Buddhist guardian figures (and eventually heroes in Japanese Kabuki theater and prints). Facing each other and holding martial arts sticks, they are shown outdoors with a mountain in the background. The inner border features a design of fish and lotus vines; the outer rim of the dish has a pattern of clouds and dragons.

Was the changing—and, later, proliferation of—imagery of the child influenced by the widening circle of philosophical ideas that expanded rapidly in the third century? While we should be cautious in linking general theories to specific visual expression, both Buddhism and Neo-Daoism contributed positive ideas about childhood and childlike attributes that were missing in the Han period. It is possible that this affirmation of childlikeness reinforced artistic tendencies toward more depictions of children, particularly infants and toddlers. Isabelle Robinet and Livia Kohn have written about the contemplation of the Taiyi, the sovereign of the interior gods according to Shangqing (Supreme Purity) Daoism, as an infant. This third-century school of mystical Daoism taught the visualization of the “world within the body,” a universe made up of the entire cosmos and inhabited by all the gods who represent the visible and accessible aspects of the omnipresent Dao. The Taiyi was called “the essence of the embryo, the master of transformations” and was centered in the brain. Through meditative identification with the Taiyi, the adept visualized his own rebirth, from the time of conception, through the nine months of gestation, and into
a new life. Various passages of the Huangting waijing jing (Outer radiance scripture of the yellow court), the oldest of the “Yellow Court Scriptures,” compiled in the third century, refer to the adept’s need to visualize the infant within. Excerpts from Livia Kohn’s translation:

The Yellow Court is in the head. It encompasses three palaces known as the Hall of Light, the Grotto Chamber, and the Cinnabar Field. Enter between the eyebrows toward the back of the head. . . .

. . . The Yellow Court is paired with the Grotto Chamber. Together they bring forth an infant god, who is their resident perfected. Always visualize him! Be careful not to lose the image.

The infant turns into a Perfected in the Hall of Light. Then he is called Master Cinnabar. Here, to know the perfected means to concentrate on the Hall of Light as its residence. . . .

. . . In the Hall of Light, the infant and the Master are like lord and minister. Further behind, in the Grotto Chamber, they are like father and mother. In the Cinnabar Field, they are like husband and wife. . . .

. . . The Yellow Court is the eyes. The father and mother of the Tao both nourish the immortal embryo. . . .

. . . Concentrate and visualize mother and child in the spleen. See how they enter the spleen from the stomach, wearing red. . . .

. . . Constantly visualize the infant in the heart. He is clad in red garments, finely ornamented and resides in the middle Cinnabar Field. All exhaustion and bad fortune, all sloth and agitation, through him are made to go. . . .

. . . With all your might, concentrate on the god in the heart and visualize him without interruption. When you can always see the infant within, you will be free from all sickness and disease. 9

By the eighth century, woodblock versions of Daoist scriptures had pictures to illustrate various exercises. The Neiguan jing (Scripture of inner observation), which explains that meditating on the infant within is a means to restore one’s original purity, includes a drawing of an infant at the center of an elaborate constellation titled Neijing tu (Chart of the world in the body). 10 The mythical founder of Daoism himself was called Laozi, or “Old Child.” This is a paradoxical reinforcement of both mystical Daoism’s emphasis on the cultivation of the infant within and the more Confucian recognition of genius in children who have adult characteristics.
The Development of Child Imagery in the Tang (618–906) and Song Periods

Actual pictures of the practices and beliefs of mystical Daoism are mainly in the form of diagrams and are not directly related to child imagery as it developed in China. But illustrations of Buddhist paradise played an important role in defining the depiction of the auspicious child. Pure Land Buddhism was introduced to China in 252 with the first translation of the Sukhāvatī-vyūha, a description of the paradise of Amitabha Buddha. To end the cycle of human suffering, the faithful were admonished to exercise faith in Amitabha, who would arrange for a final rebirth in his Pure Land. From that realm of peace and beauty, free from the distractions of the mortal world, nirvana could more easily be obtained. The vivid and detailed account of the Pure Land given in the scriptures does not seem to have inspired many Indian depictions of paradise. But it was a catalyst for elaborate portrayals of heaven in China, including the bliss of Amitabha’s land as well as the realms of other popular Buddhist deities such as Shakyamuni and Maitreya. Chinese pictures of paradise were modeled on the brilliance of the earthly imperial courts, with an emphasis on symmetry and the inclusion of palace architectural features. Perhaps it was the emphasis on “visualization” of the cosmos by the fourth-century Shangqing (Supreme Purity) Daoists, described by Craig Clunas in Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China as a Chinese concept predating both the arrival of Buddhism in China and the formative period of religious Daoism,¹¹ that influenced these pictures. At any rate, it is within the context of Buddhism, especially in renditions of the Pure Land (also called by the Chinese the Western Paradise, a reference to the location of the peach garden of Xiwangmu [Queen Mother of the West] and the magical Kunlun mountains, abode of Daoist immortals), that the child as something other than a miniature adult is first seen with frequency.

An early example of this can be seen in a Northern Qi (550–577) marble stele in the Cleveland Museum of Art (fig. 1.3). At the top of the stele, two infant boys hover in the air, supporting the stupa of Prabhuteratna and Shakyamuni, Buddhas of the Past and the Present. Beneath them stands Maitreya, Buddha of the Future, with four attendants. The child as attendant to deity increased in popularity from this point. The small male escorts here are a variation on the flying attendants to Buddha called apsaras. Usually female (and not children), these angel-like beings were ubiquitous in Northern Dynasties (386–581) paradise scenes. Eight traditional apsaras decorate the front of the marble stele along with the two boys.

One cannot help but compare these infant attendants to the putti, the chubby naked boys seen in early Christian mosaics such as those at Santa Costanza in Rome,
the mausoleum built for Constantine’s daughter, 320–330. These putti, which eventually came to be associated with paradise in Christian art (and thus the tendency to think of them in reference to *apsaras*), had their origin in the decorative arts of the Roman empire, works that were easily transported to China and northwestern India via the overland trade routes through Central Asia known collectively as the Silk Road. Plump boys with grapes (a reference to Dionysius, the corpulent and carefree Roman god of wine) and other types of plants were a popular motif on cups and pitchers for several centuries (fig. 1.4). The months and seasons in Roman decorative arts were represented by female dancers and musicians interspersed with small boys among scrolling vines. Numerous works modeled on Roman prototypes, including fifth- and sixth-century works of Central Asian origin, have been found in excavations at Datong and other Chinese sites. By the time the Northern Qi stele was made, plump-boys-with-vines was already a well-known motif in China.

In Chinese Buddhist art, the soul newly born into paradise also looks very much like the putto of Western art. The concept of the recently arrived soul as an infant is a purely Chinese invention. Nowhere in the *Sukhāvatī-vyūha* is the person saved in paradise described as a baby. On the contrary, the assumption is that those in Amitabha’s world continue their adult consciousness in a seamless progression from Earth life, through the Pure Land, to nirvana. But the idea of a baby fits well with the Shangqing Daoist visualization of the self in embryo. This mystical form of Daoism was well-known in elite culture, the same circle of people who would have been responsible for the commissioning of Buddhist works of art and the most likely to dictate trends in art. The Chinese monk Zhi Dun (314–366) was the first to describe the reborn soul’s entry into Suhkāvati as occurring through the calyx of a lotus flower, a method of rebirth whereby the impurities of the womb would be avoided. An infant seated on a lotus pedestal thus became the standard way to depict the newborn soul. These new inhabitants of heaven, tiny infants on lotus flowers intertwined with scrolling vines, form the border of the halo around Maitreya on the Cleveland stele (fig. 1.3). In this case, they are in the paradise of Maitreya.

Some really spectacular scenes of paradise survive in the murals and scrolls found at the Mogao caves near Dunhuang. Many of these include depictions of children as attendants, gift bearers, and newborn souls (fig. 1.5 and plate 1). In this context,
Figure 1.5 Paradise of Shakyamuni. Tang, eighth century. Wall painting from cave 17 at Mogao, near Dunhuang. © The British Museum, Sir Aurel Stein Collection.
the child took on the appealing characteristics that became the typology for the depiction of auspicious children. Referred to in painting as Tangzi (Tang boy), the child was outlined with a thin, even brush. His head was slightly enlarged to emphasize chubby cheeks, a manifestation of good health, and his hair was shaved except for a few tufts, which was the style for young boys. The typology of the child as a chubby, bare boy is consistent among the various paintings. Indian and Central Asian prototypes were available for all the major figures in Chinese paradise scenes. But there was no model in either Buddhist art or previous Chinese art for the depiction of children. Early Chinese pictures of children as diminutive adults did not adequately convey the spiritual changes represented by an infant. The model can be traced to Rome, and the spread of the Roman putti to Christian, Sassanian, and Central Asian art.

By the eighth century, the same cherubic image of boys began to appear outside the religious context in decorative arts made for elite consumption. At court and among the wealthy the child became an auspicious motif related to wishes for the birth of sons. A fragment of a greeting card preserved in the Shōsō-in shows that pictures of boys symbolized good wishes from one friend to another as early as the seventh century (fig. 1.6). A cherubic boy and a dog, cut from silk and attached to a plain silk ground, accompany the verse “On this propitious occasion, may happiness be renewed. May you find the peace of ten thousand years, and may life last a thousand springs.”¹⁴ The boy represents male progeny, the only certain way to prolong life, that is, in the sense of the patrilineal continuation. He plays next to silk cutouts of two auspicious plants, a wutong (paulownia) tree and an orchid growing from a rock. An intricate pattern of plum blossoms and scrolling vines, cut from paper and covered with gold leaf, is attached to the silk square and forms a border around the verse and figures. This type of colorful ornament was known as rensheng, and was given to friends on the seventh day of the new year in celebration of Renri (People’s Day), a popular Tang festival.
Customs meant to encourage the birth of sons are tied in some way to all major festivals held in China, whether religious or secular. (In fact, most Chinese celebrations have long been a mixture of both religious and secular practices just as most celebrations in contemporary American culture are.) During the Tang dynasty it was customary to float small wax figurines in a basin of water, a reenactment of birth in the Pure Land, on the seventh night of the seventh month, the Festival of the Star-crossed Lovers. During the Song period, clay figures of infants holding lotus plants called *mohele* or *mohouluo* were produced for this festival, for sale to women hoping to become pregnant. Dramatizing this rebus for the birth of sons, real children ran through the streets carrying lotus as part of the Double Seven festivities. Ellen Laing identified a ninth-century Changsha-ware ewer with the design of a boy holding a lotus blossom as illustrating this custom (fig. 1.7).\(^{15}\) The lively young boy is running vigorously, expressing robust physical health and the joy of movement. The combination of plants and boys, originally borrowed from the West, worked very well in China as fertility symbols, a subject that is explored in several of the essays in this volume. In this example, *lian* (lotus) is pronounced the same as *lian* (continuous). So a boy and lotus, a motif derived from both the Buddhist visualization of rebirth and the Roman celebration of the grape harvest, could symbolize “an endless succession of sons.” Another example of this holiday motif is found on a small Song dynasty Qingbai-ware box, of a type used for cosmetics, that depicts a festively dressed little boy running and carrying lotus (fig. 1.8).

The appearance of children in Chinese Buddhist art only partially explains why auspicious images of children became increasingly prevalent after the Tang period. Chinese theories of child development also played a role. While genetics and fate were acknowledged, the thoughts and actions of mothers during both gestation and early childrearing

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\(^{15}\) Figure 1.7  Ewer with design of a running boy holding a lotus. Tang, late-eighth- or early-ninth-century Changsha ware; stoneware with underglaze iron; h. 19.5 cm. Excavated at Changsha, Hunan province. Collections of the People’s Republic of China. After William Watson, *Tang and Liao Ceramics* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1984), fig. 95.

Figure 1.8  Covered box with design of a running child holding a lotus. Southern Song, twelfth- or thirteenth-century Qingbai ware; h. 5.7 cm; d. 10 cm. Private collection.
were also held accountable. Charlotte Furth’s extensive work in the area of ancient Chinese obstetrical practices has yielded various examples of the belief that the fetus could be programmed by an attentive mother. For example, she quotes Sun Simiao (581–682), who in his treatise *Beiji qianjin yaofang* (*Prescriptions worth a thousand, for every emergency*) described the third month of gestation as the time when gender was determined and the mother could influence the child’s nature by “fetal education.” During this crucial stage, the development of the fetus could be governed by what a pregnant woman saw and ate, as well as by her thoughts and emotions.

The abundance in the Song period of ceramic pillows with designs of baby boys and other motifs symbolizing the birth of sons seems related to these ideas of controlling pregnancy, as if sleeping with such a pillow could perform some kind of sympathetic magic. The pillows served dual functions: first, to aid the onset of pregnancy, and second, to direct the dreams of pregnant women to positively influence fetal development. In the decoration of the Northern Song (960–1126) Cizhou-ware pillow illustrated here, the symbolism of fertility is reinforced by numerous tiny seeds that form a background for the boy and flowering plants (fig. 1.9). The child wears a scarf, a cloud-collar necklace, and a triangular apron that covers his navel. The apron, usually red, was a traditional piece of clothing worn by infants well into

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Figure 1.9 Pillow with design of an infant. Northern Song, eleventh-century Cizhou ware; glazed stoneware; h. 12.6 cm; length, 26.7 cm. © Royal Ontario Museum, George Crofts Collection, 918.21.392.
the twentieth century that served a symbolic protective function. The flower grasped in his hand is a lotus blossom. The scrolling peony and silver ingots that surround the infant, and the giant hibiscus (*furong*) that decorates the side of the pillow, are symbols of wealth and abundance.

During the Song dynasty, a time of reappraisal and renewed focus on classical Chinese culture, not just pillows but many of the ceramic articles used by upper-class women were decorated with boys and plants. An elegant example is a twelfth-century Ding-ware bowl in the British Museum, with a design of three infants, naked except for their scarves or necklaces and anklets, who cling to lotus and melon vines as if to prevent themselves from floating away (fig. 1.10). Lotus, beyond its Buddhist associations with rebirth and the “succession of sons” rebus, was also an

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Figure 1.10 Bowl with design of infants among lotus and melons. Jin, twelfth- or thirteenth-century Ding ware; porcelain with molded decoration; h. 6 cm; d. 21.3 cm. © The British Museum, Oppenheim Bequest, OA 1947.7-12.62.
important symbol of marriage because one of its names, he, sounds like the word for “harmony.” Melons, shown on the vines on this bowl, symbolize fertility because of their many seeds. The melons, blossoms, and vine together form the rebus guadie mianmian, meaning “May you have ceaseless generations of descendants.” At the center of the bowl is a peony, used in literature to symbolize both feminine beauty and female genitalia. In combination with other flowers, the peony is also a symbol of wealth.

It was in the Song period that the subject of children became a recognized category of Chinese figure painting. As discussed in the essay by Dick and Catherine Barnhart, certain court painters were deemed specialists in the painting of children, the most famous of whom was Su Hanchen (twelfth century). The style of the Tangzi (Tang boy) described in the preceding text was the prototype for the develop-

Figure 1.11 Attributed to Li Song (1166–1243), Skeleton Puppeteer. Album leaf; ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing.
ment of a standard iconography for the child in the Song period. Su Hanchen’s prolific output so successfully idealized the model child, that pictures of children by later artists were mostly variations on his style. In their essay, the Barnharts examine several works attributed to Su Hanchen. In addition, they discuss two prominent sub-categories for Song pictures of children, the buffalo herder and the knickknack peddler. They boldly explore reasons for the artistic focus on children in the Song period, using literary sources to reinforce their argument that the unprecedented naturalism in the sympathetic rendering of children at this time reveals the Song to be a humanistic and enlightened age.

An album leaf attributed to the Southern Song (1127–1279) figure painter Li Song (1166–1243) in the Palace Museum, Beijing, is a startling aberration in the category of knickknack peddler paintings as discussed by the Barnharts (fig. 1.11). The pessimism revealed in the album leaf is out of place in the context of all other known Song paintings of children. The placement and expression of the women in the painting is particularly cynical. One woman sits nonchalantly nursing her son next to a skeleton posing as a puppeteer, while a girl gestures toward the skeleton’s puppet as though to encourage a crawling boy to move closer to it, indicating that a woman gives birth and nurtures a man only to set him on the path toward death, and that other women along the way will hasten his progress to that end. This illustration of women as obstacles in an illusory life is given an ironic twist by placing it in the traditionally delightful context of a child at play.

Ming and Qing Variations

The bulk of essays in this book considers depictions of children in Ming and Qing art. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the return to Chinese rule after a period of foreign domination encouraged a reinterpretation of traditional Confucian values and an endorsement of those ideals by the state. In order to preserve political dominance, the Manchu rulers of the Qing period (1644–1911) adopted many of the Chinese cultural norms that had been strengthened during the Ming. Portrayals of children in Ming and Qing art provided pictorial reinforcements of these values, which are discussed in detail by Terese Bartholomew, Ann Waltner, Julia Murray, and Ann Wicks.

Children at Play

Terese Tse Bartholomew documents the symbolism of specific games, toys, and seasons in Ming and Qing depictions of boys playing in a garden, elaborating on the topic of play, introduced in the essay by Dick and Catherine Barnhart. This tradi-
tional theme of the Song dynasty was given new life in the Ming period through large court-commissioned paintings and the prolific decoration of imperial ceramics, lacquerware, snuff bottles, furniture, and textiles. Bartholomew discusses the *baizi*, or hundred-boys theme, as a popular symbol for male progeny that was used to decorate any object bearing a wish for numerous offspring, but was especially the paraphernalia of the wedding chamber. Throughout Chinese history, the strong desire for sons was directly related to the need for male progeny to perform the ancestral sacrifices and to ensure the continuation of the family line. But by the Ming period, the birth of sons in itself was not enough. Families hoped for *guizi*, or noble sons, who would excel in their studies and take top honors in the civil service examinations, bringing wealth and the highest possible honors to their kin. Thus the boys depicted in Ming court paintings and the decorative arts are not just ordinary boys at play. Usually well dressed, they frolic in the gardens of the upper class. The garden plants indicate the season, and the toys and activities reflect the important festivals of China. As Bartholomew unravels the hidden meanings in pictures of boys at play, she illuminates the multitude of clever and playful methods used to reinforce one basic obsession among Chinese adults: the longing for talented sons.

*Mothers and Sons*

Ann Waltner’s essay considers woodblock illustrations of late Ming editions of *Lienü zhuan* (Biographies of exemplary women), where children appear with their mothers in closed gardens or interior spaces. The interactions of the women and children, mostly in the absence of men, illustrate Ming views of the Confucian roles for different members of the family. Waltner interprets these pictures as paradigms of model behavior that dictate society’s stern expectations for all adults, but especially women. The pictorial inclusion of children in illustrations to the text reinforces the importance placed on women’s roles during the Ming period not only as child bearers but as significant educators during their sons’ early formative years.

A Ming painting of palace women and children in the National Palace Museum supports the thesis of Waltner’s paper (fig. 1.12). In late imperial China boys lived
with their mothers in the women’s quarters until the age of seven sui. At this point they were released from the inner quarters into the outside world of men. In this painting, the boys have been carefully arranged by age to show a gradual progression to the outside world. The tiniest infants are held by their mothers in the innermost part of the women’s abode. They are visually the most confined, seen through a window in a separate room. Children at the crawling stage are slightly farther out, though still confined to a carpet surrounded by pillars, watched over protectively by their mother and two eunuchs. The next step outward is a boy learning to walk, holding on to the hand of an unmarried palace girl, most likely an older sister. Boys who can walk independently are shown farther out, and the interior space becomes even less confining. These boys are watched from a distance by the emperor’s principal consort, but they still rely on their mothers, who bathe and comfort them. While not confined by walls, they are surrounded on all sides by palace women and servants. Two far more independent boys play on the edge of the veranda. One shakes an oversized lotus flower growing in a huge basin, causing petals to drop on a much younger child perched on the steps. This of course symbolizes a continuous succession of imperial sons. Finally, three older boys play in the garden, free of the palace building and having no association with the women. These are the sons who will soon leave the women’s quarters. Since the handscroll would be viewed from right to left, it is fitting that the older boys are placed at the opening of the scroll, while the view progresses deeper into the inner quarters as the scroll is opened.

A notable aspect of child imagery in the Ming period is the frequency with which a child is depicted alone with his own mother, in addition to the more traditional pictures of young boys in the company of a large group of palace women or playing without adult supervision in a garden. As discussed in Ann Waltner’s essay, the role of women as child bearers and early-childhood educators took on increasing significance in the Ming period. The Ming emphasis on the confinement of women is dramatized by works consistently showing the mother in an enclosed garden or indoors with no male company other than her little son. The isolation of the mother in these works may evoke sympathy among modern viewers, but we believe the intent
in the Ming social context was most often to focus on the importance of the mother’s duty to her son. There are a few exceptional paintings, however, in which the artist does seem to identify with the woman’s plight. A painting by Chen Hongshou (1598–1652) of an upper-class woman leisurely fumigating her clothing while her young son plays in the foreground is pleasant enough on the surface, but the dark undertones so often characteristic of Chen are also there (plate 2). The woman is framed by two beautiful but trapped creatures, a parrot tied to a perch and a butterfly caught under the boy’s fan. These creatures elegantly symbolize her own entrapment. The boy’s childish activity foreshadows the future subjugation of his own wife, who will also be kept in the inner quarters of his home while he is free to roam the outskirts. The bunch of loquats hanging from the parrot’s perch could hint at the boy’s future career as a literatus and visitor of high-class brothels, as the phrase “running under the loquat blossoms” was used to describe young examination candidates who visited famous courtesans. That this pattern of raising sons is the classic path to high social status and wealth is symbolized by the vase of mountain peonies \((\text{fugui})\) on a table next to the woman’s raised wooden bed \((\text{kang})\). The woman’s dress is ironically decorated with cranes, a symbol of long life. It is not her personal longevity that matters, but the longevity of the patriarchal family that she is bound to preserve.

Noting that children are not usually portrayed in the context of a two-parent family, Ann Waltner asks the important question, “If the Chinese family is as central as we believe it is, why is it so seldom represented in art?” As she explores this seeming contradiction, she raises questions about the public-private dichotomy that has been a central issue in many recent interpretations of the dynamics of elite families. If women in the inner quarters are meant to be shielded from the public gaze, a reasonable explanation for the absence of men from pictures of their wives and children, how is it that we as viewers are given an undiscriminating view? Ann Wicks’ essay on family pictures highlights the handful of depictions of nuclear families that do exist in Chinese painting. As in the Ming woodblock prints, these works most often serve as instructive guides to the correct ordering of family life.

Julia K. Murray focuses on depictions of child prodigies, celebrated individuals who are well-known in literary representations but whose pictorial biographies are only beginning to be known through Murray’s pioneering work. Her essay points out conventions for the portrayals of three distinct types of prodigy: gods, sages, and scholar-officials. The dividing of prodigy pictures into recognizable types is another example of how art reinforced rigid expectations for all groups in traditional Chinese society, even among those who were exceptions to the norm.


Children in the Material Culture of the Literati

As the link between a classical education and a prosperous family grew in the Ming period, luxury goods made for the literati increasingly portrayed boys and fertility symbols. Writing tools and desk ornaments—such as the ceramic brush handle, the ink cake, and the jade water dropper illustrated respectively in figures 1.13, 1.14, and 1.15—were decorated with stylized boys. As discussed in Terese Bartholomew’s essay, many ceramics featured imagery specifically related to passing the civil service.
exams, such as five boys fighting for a helmet, a boy riding a carp, and numerous variations on the theme of children imitating the activities of scholars. These pictures of children reinforced the image of the scholar-bureaucrat as powerful, and encouraged adults to view children as avenues of wealth.

Scholars’ exchanges of poetry and paintings sometimes referred to the satisfaction of having numerous offspring, especially among retired government officials. For example, the well-known bureaucrat Wang Ao’s (1384–1467) *Ode to the Pomegranate and Silk Gourd Vine*, inscribed on a painting by Shen Zhou (1427–1509) in the Detroit Institute of Art, was given as a birthday gift with a wish, written next to the poem, that the recipient’s descendants be as numerous as the seeds of the pomegranate and as tall as the gourd.¹⁸

Beyond the wish for successful sons, the idea of childhood itself was taken up by the literati, who sometimes reflected on their own boyhood in poetry and painting. For example, in a painting by Cheng Sui (active ca. 1650–1680), a scholar seated in a garden pavilion instructs a young boy in the classics (fig. 1.16). The inscription on the painting reveals that the idyllic setting frames the artist’s memory of his own childhood tutor, his great-uncle Cheng Yuanji:

Mr. Yuanji was a member of my family—my father’s uncle. Once he retired from the Hanlin Academy and returned home, he cherished righteousness and kept to himself. Brushing aside the confusions of the outer world, he would not set foot in the marketplace. His only intimates were the classics. He would, however, give instruction to the young boys in our family, and this is how I, too, came to study with him. His hope was that the hearts of those who would make an honorable career would remain true and generous. But, as I thought back, I realized that what Mr. Yuanji accomplished in opening our minds was very hard to come by, so I painted this to hang in my grass hut. When I wipe my eyes and sit in front of it for a long time, it is as though I were a boy again, and he were teaching me. . . .¹⁹
Watching the Children Catch Willow Catkins, by Zhou Chen (ca. 1450–ca. 1535), a professional artist who painted literati themes, is a pictorial description of the reflections of a senior member of the literati class (plate 3). In a rustic garden set against an exquisite mountain landscape, a scholar watches three children play. Each child is in a different stage of male matura-
tion, from an infant dressed only in a navel cover, to the preschool child with double-tufted shaved head and long gown, to the adolescent boy with trousers. The scholar himself, with beard and an official’s cap and robes, represents the fourth stage, adulthood. By the Ming period, distinct stages of life were clearly recognized, and this is evident in Zhou’s painting. Even the interaction with the catkins and the involvement in the game differ for each of the individuals. The posture of the infant is the most exaggerated, as he stumbles awkwardly in his attempt to catch the little seeds. The preschool child is standing, but with bent knees and both arms raised high; he too will surely miss catching a seed from the air. The oldest boy stands poised and upright, his hands in a position that will successfully capture the seed. The scholar stands aloof and dignified, his arms at his sides and his hands hidden by the long sleeves of his gown. His seeds were caught and planted years ago. Each of the children must journey through life to where the scholar now stands. Farthest from him is the infant, who has the longest way to go. The seedpods of the tree are a conventional reference to posterity. The subject itself was taken from a poem by Du Fu (712–770), but willow catkin imagery was used by other poets as well. Su Shi (1037–1101) com-
pared the catkins to human travelers searching for their lovers. Zhou Chen’s painting also incorporates the theme of travel, by illustrating the male journey of life. The contemplative mood of the scholar reinforces this interpretation. He stands removed from the children, wistfully acknowledging the long (and perhaps
lonely, a common literary complaint of scholars that is illustrated with willow imagery) journey he has traveled.

Paintings, calligraphy, prints, and decorative arts owned by the literati reveal an intense ambition among the educated elite for their sons to achieve high intellectual status and preserve the literary prestige of the family. But at the same time, humorous paintings of schoolroom scenes, such as the one painted by Zhang Hong (1577–after 1660), poked fun at the intense competition among the families, who pushed their boys sometimes beyond the boys’ limits (fig. 1.17). Intellectuals also broke free of the stylized court formula for painting boys at play. The spontaneous brushwork of Xu Wei’s (1521–1593) Boy Flying a Kite, for example, expresses the concept of freedom that childhood represented to many of the literati (fig. 1.18). The relaxed brush of the “amateur” scholar-painter was eminently suitable for the depiction of childhood as an idyllic state that may well have been envied by the painter himself.

Admiration of childlikeness enjoyed a renaissance in the context of Neo-Confucianism in the late sixteenth century. Philosophers revived the ideas of the early-sixteenth-century thinker Wang Yangming (1472–1529), which reasserted the innocence of children in the centuries-old debate about the nature of man at birth. As pointed out by Pei-yi Wu, preserving the “child’s heart” (tongxin) nearly reached cult status among the literati of the time. Li Zhi (1527–1602), an outspoken literary critic and champion of spontaneity, wrote an essay called Tongxin shuo (On the infant’s heart), in which he claimed, “The heart of the child is never false, but pure and true. . . . If you lose your child’s heart, you will lose your true heart.”

A renewed interest in depicting herd boys in various media for elite consumption during that time represents the spontaneous and carefree life idealized by scholars and is perhaps related to the preoccupation with tongxin then in vogue. Boys herding water buffalo had been a popular theme in Song painting. The rustic depiction of commoners was consistent with the growing humanism and realism of Song figure painting as described in Dick and Catherine Barnhart’s essay. “Returning home” on the back of a buffalo was also a metaphor used to explain the stages of Chan cultivation and enlightenment, which made the pictures meaningful to Song intellectuals. But buffalo herders in Song art are not usually young boys. At best, they are adolescents. Ming idealism and playfulness, as well as the growing interest in depictions of boys and a recognition of childhood as a distinct stage in life, led to increasingly younger depictions of traditional herd boys. Guo Xu’s (1456–after 1526) Boy on Buffalo (fig. 1.19) is a good example of this lighthearted treatment of the theme. As an urchin, the boy’s figure is less chubby than imperial children playing in a garden. But his round head and small facial features retain the unmistakable stylized formula for depicting a child.
The romanticized view of carefree childhood may have been a symbol of the enlightened mind of the Neo-Confucianist, but it contradicts the message of the decorative art owned by the literati that depicted academically successful sons as the ideal. It appears that for the men of the educated class, real childhood was sacrificed to the study of the classics, and they expected the same sacrifice from their sons. But childhood as an ideal was freely dwelt upon by grown men. Just as busy bureaucrats sometimes substituted landscape paintings or gardens for outings to mountains and lakes, imagining childlike spontaneity in playful ink paintings was perhaps vicariously enjoyed in place of an actual childhood experience.

The Impact of Social Consciousness and Western Ideas

During the Qing period, children were still seen as vital to the preservation of the patriline, but society’s view of the child became increasingly sympathetic. As demonstrated in the writing of Angela Leung, by the latter part of the nineteenth century the child was considered a social being with rights of his own apart from his significance to the family. Evidence of the growing importance of the child is seen in the rising concern among the gentry for child welfare. Definite actions included the provision of vaccinations and health care specific to children, the establishment of children’s cemeteries for all classes, and sustained efforts to integrate orphaned children into society. This changing view of the child, initiated in the more affluent Jiangnan region, found expression in the paintings of Ren Bonian (1840–1895) and other members of his circle who lived as professional painters in Shanghai. The Rens specialized in figures, flower-bird paintings, and portraits in a whimsical, quasi-literati style inherited from the eighteenth-century Yangzhou professionals. Ren Bonian’s subjects are not completely free of the confines of symbolism, but for the most part, he painted ordinary children engaged in activities of no special significance other than snippets of the fabric of daily life. Most revealing of his progressive
attitude toward children is the way he depicts their interaction with and importance in relation to the adults in the paintings. In *Figures*, two boys wrestle, with little notice given to the scholar walking next to them (fig. 1.20). A small child on the scholar’s back glances scornfully down at the boys. The scholar, in a reverie of his own, pays no attention to any of the children. They are neither his servants nor his progeny, and he strides briskly by. But the scholar is in no way given a place of prominence in the composition. Each

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**Figure 1.19** Guo Xu (1456–after 1526), *Boy on Buffalo*, from the album *Miscellaneous Paintings.* Album leaf; ink on paper. Shanghai Museum.
figure assumes equal importance in the painting, each with his own right to existence.

The beautiful portrait of Jiang Shinong’s granddaughter by Ren Bonian is another example of the recognition of the child as a social being (fig. 1.21). It also reveals the progressive attitude of the grandfather, who fostered the prodigious talent of his granddaughter and brought her out of the obscurity of the women’s quarters to bravely meet the eye of the onlooker. This painting shows Ren’s facility with Western-style realism in the depiction of facial features. In fact, many southern painters of the nineteenth century adopted this method as portraiture gained prominence as a category for painting.

James Cahill has suggested that the realistic facial features of figures by these Shanghai painters could only have been painted by artists exposed to the way human expressions were captured by photography.27 I believe the visual impact of photography was important, and probably even necessary to effect the dramatic change in nineteenth-century figure painting in Shanghai. But photography alone was not enough to convince Chinese artists to change the centuries-old method for illustrating children. The view of childhood itself had to change along with the visual representation. Eighteenth-century court artists also had dramatic possibilities presented to them for the individualization of children’s features by Western painters. But because of their less expansive view of children, it was much harder for them to act on those possibilities. Photography did provide visual ideas for change. But it was the social consciousness that developed in south China in the nineteenth century, and the awareness of adults of the special needs of children, that provided the motivation for artistic change. This climate is also partly responsible for the emergence of family portraits in the late Qing period, discussed in Ann Wicks’ essay, “Family Pictures,” chapter 7 in this text.
Help from the Gods

Ann Wicks’ essay on folk deities departs from a discussion of art depicting an ideal world with children as role models, to document art that illustrates the earthly concerns adults had about the safe birth and preservation of sons. The high mortality rate of infants and the vulnerability of young children to disease contributed to the supplication of specific gods on behalf of the young. Wicks discusses paintings and woodblock prints of some of the popular deities believed by the Chinese to deliver and protect children. While not comprehensive—the number of child protectors in folk religion is as numerous as the imaginings of parents in every time period and locale—it is a colorful documentation of the concern for healthy sons among prospective ancestors in every class of society.

Conclusion

In China, child imagery became a constant part of material culture, from the Song dynasty on. But until the nineteenth century, the focus was almost never on the child himself. It was the future role of the child as provider for aged parents and preserver of the patriline that mattered. Thus, once an acceptable image of the child was developed, there was no reason to change its elemental style. In fact, the use of child imagery was meant specifically to encourage obedience to tradition. A fluctuating style or an emphasis on individual characteristics would be counterproductive to that purpose. It was not until society recognized the child as a social being, that painters were able to individualize children in art.

So far, very little mention has been made of depictions of girls. Portrayals of girls in Chinese art do exist, but their numbers are few in comparison to those of boys. This should not be surprising to anyone familiar
with traditional social norms in China, nor indeed even to one who has simply read
the preceding introduction. There are, however, a few truly remarkable pictures of
young girls to which we would like to draw attention. A smattering of girls is shown
in the context of pictures of palace women. One of our favorites is a tiny child who
playfully runs underneath a length of silk in *Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*, a
handscroll after Zhang Xuan (active 714–742) attributed to Emperor Huizong that
is now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.\(^{28}\) The painting shows women and girls
of all ages—corpulent middle-aged women; slender women of childbearing age;
unmarried girls with pigtails, who fan coals and hold the silk; and the small girl who
is too young for a job. Imperial daughters are usually shown engaged in the same
activities as the older women, performing at whatever level they are capable. Older
girls share the women’s work of embroidery, ironing silk, or the care of little boys.
Unlike small boys, who must be entertained and watched over by the women, little
girls in court paintings are left to their own resources, watching female activities until
they have learned their role and can join in. There are no toys or symbolic plants pic-
tured with the girls, and their number is always diminished in comparison to boys
or even palace women. When boys and girls are shown together, the girl is almost
invariably older than the boy and able to care for his needs.

There is at least one example of a pampered girl depicted in traditional Chinese
painting. A section of *Gongzhong tu* (Women of the court) in the Sackler Museum
at Harvard University shows a precious daughter cuddled in her mother’s lap, play-
ing with a dog (plate 4). This exquisite line drawing (*baimiao*) is a fragment of a Song
copy after a scroll by Zhou Wenju (active 961–975). A similar handscroll in the
Cleveland Museum of Art, once thought to be a section of the painting in Cambridge,
has another small daughter, who holds a bird while riding in a carved chair carried
by two adolescent girls.\(^{29}\) This girl looks unusually solemn for her size. Her ride in
the sedan chair may be an imitation of a wedding procession, playacting
an adult role in anticipation of her future as a wife or concubine. Two more young
girls romp playfully with a small dog at the far left of the Cleveland piece. Their
demeanor is appropriately childish.\(^{30}\) Like other paintings of court women made in
the Tang manner, the *Gongzhong* scrolls still show only a few girls, growing up and
learning their roles in the company of the many palace women. Little boys, typically
smaller than even the youngest girl, are also included. The rare example of girls in
favored positions, however, makes the *Gongzhong tu* especially noteworthy.

Tang ceramics show palace women and girls as we have seen them in the paint-
ings, delightful creatures beautifully dressed and ready to serve the emperor. These
eighth-century tomb figures help to authenticate the activities and style of women
depicted in copies of Tang paintings. As in Emperor Huizong’s painting after Zhang
Xuan, age is defined by weight and hairstyle. The slenderness and the rounded pigtails of the figure with a duck on its shoulder illustrated in plate 5 tell us that it is a young girl. This girl is lively and playful; the richly embroidered fabric of her clothing is depicted in clay with relief flower patterns.

As in painting, girl figures appear among tomb ceramics far less frequently than grown women. But unlike painting, boys are not represented among tomb objects in the Tang period. One can only guess at the reason. Depictions of boys represent wishes for good things to come. Since the man in the tomb is already an ancestor, he is beyond the stage of producing heirs and is better served by living sons. Officials, court musicians, grooms, and palace women are enough to attend one in the afterlife. There might even be the lingering traces of distant human sacrifice represented by the choice of tomb figures. Certainly no powerful figure would take live sons with him to the afterlife. They were needed on Earth to perform the ancestral sacrifices.

There is one unusual tomb figurine that shows a palace woman holding a naked male infant upright by his feet (fig. 1.22).³¹ The infant is not depicted as a chubby boy being raised among palace women. Perhaps he represents the spirit of a child already dead who accompanies his parent to the afterlife. The dog at the palace woman’s feet could be interpreted as a playmate and guardian for the boy. Dogs are also associated with exorcism, and may be meant to repel the possible harmful effects of a dead child. On the woman’s shoulder is a parrot, which was frequently used in Tang poetry as a symbol of the captivity of palace women. This woman appears doubly captive, accompanying the adult body in the tomb and watching over the spirit of a deceased infant.

Differences between boys and girls are not always clear in Chinese art, especially to twentieth-century viewers who are accustomed to clothing for young children that is remarkably gender specific in style, color, and decoration. But as pointed out by Karen Calvert in her study of American childhood, this is only recently the case. In the two centuries preceding our own, early American boys and girls under age seven dressed alike. Eighteenth-century portraits of boys in white dresses with long, curly hair look very much to us today like girls. Because the portraits are of specific, named individuals, their gender can be identified. But depictions of Chinese children are mostly anonymous. Our contemporary eyes, accustomed to gender-specific clothing,
can deceive us as we try to distinguish gender. While Chinese adult costumes were specific to men or women, much of children’s clothing in Chinese history is androgynous. Even when there was a difference, such as in the wearing of jewelry, boys sometimes dressed like girls to confuse malevolent spirits. Individually identified portraits would not necessarily help in this case, as boys were even given feminine names to hide their identity from ghosts who might covet them if they knew they were boys. Most children in Chinese art are in fact boys, whether they appear so to modern eyes or not.

One context within which girls are represented nearly as often as boys is that of acolyte, or attendant to deity, especially during the Ming and Qing periods. Child attendants, while certainly not unknown in earlier art, seem to become standard in Ming religious art. Guanyin, or Bodhisattva of Mercy and Compassion, is often attended by a little boy, most likely a reinterpretation of the youthful pilgrim Shancai. Nanhai (South Seas) Guanyin has a girl attendant as well, Longnü, the Dragon King’s daughter. As was typical for portrayals of girls in court art or in the Confucian family scenes that are discussed in Ann Wicks’ essay on family pictures, Guanyin’s girl attendant is usually depicted as somewhat older than the boy. The same is true in depictions of the Golden Boy and Jade Maiden, who appear as attendants to Daoist deity. The cultural stereotype that boys are coddled and given the freedom to play while girls mature quickly and assume domestic duties is so pervasive that even an unrelated pair of children outside the human realm cannot escape it. The individualized portrait of Jiang Shinong’s granddaughter by Ren Bonian finally broke the stereotype for depictions of girls (fig. 1.21). But this was not until the late nineteenth century.

Though the figural style used to depict children changed very little between the Song and the Qing dynasties, motifs and subject matter did vary in response to cultural aspects of the larger society. Thus it is possible to document trends specific to each time period by looking at the way children were depicted in art. The subtle differences are revealing. But even more telling is the remarkable consistency of one continuing concern, the production of male heirs. The overwhelming preference for little boys, reinforced by the decoration of clothing, utensils, wall hangings, New Year greetings, and even furniture, was solidly a part of Chinese public mores for centuries. The hundred sons of the legendary King Wen, prototype for the virtuous ruler discussed in Terese Bartholomew’s essay, set the ideal precedent. No matter what the private feelings of individual Chinese might have been, art conveyed the accepted propaganda for a hundred generations: Multiple sons are the most precious treasure of all.