

## BOOK REVIEW

Margaret Mih Tillman,

*Raising China's Revolutionaries:  
Modernizing Childhood for Cosmopolitan Nationalists and  
Liberated Comrades, 1920s-1950s*  
(New York: Columbia University Press, 2018)

Kyle David, *University of California, Irvine*

**R**aising *China's Revolutionaries* is a welcome addition to the historical study of twentieth-century Chinese childhood. In this work, Margaret Tillman explores adult discourse concerning early childhood and child welfare from the late Qing into the early 1950s. She focuses on the advocacy efforts of the National Child Welfare Association (NCWA), an “institution that established programs and brought together many actors, with sometimes conflicting and evolving assumptions about how best to protect and educate Chinese children” (3). As a philanthropic organization, the NCWA concerned itself with children’s physical, economic, and social well-being (21). By analyzing the rhetoric surrounding the NCWA and its patrons, Tillman argues that various actors instrumentalized childhood “for national advancement and economic modernization” (14). She concludes that Chinese advocacy work not only led to the material improvement for youngsters in need, but also contributed to the “formation of a developmental state” (24).

The introduction foregrounds the social and historical contexts that contributed to China’s engagement with the “global rise of child experts.” Tillman demonstrates, for example, how the “civilizing mission” of late nineteenth-century missionaries spurred indigenous reformers to open foundling homes and kindergartens of their own as a means to combat imperialism. In doing so, Tillman engages with scholars such as Angela Leung, Limin Bai, and Michelle King, who have traced the influence of western missionaries on indigenous Chinese conceptions of childhood.<sup>1</sup> In the late Qing period, these new institutions became sites of experimentation and knowledge production that helped give rise to professionalizing career opportunities, new academic credentials, and the study of childhood as a science.

In the years following the Qing’s collapse, reformers and revolutionaries experienced an unprecedented intellectual freedom to voice their concerns. During the New Culture-May Fourth movement, intellectuals such as Zhou Zuoren contributed to a “discovery of childhood.” Siding with Andrew Jones and Hsiung Ping-chen, Tillman rightfully identifies the ahistorical nature of Zhou’s “discovery,” while at the same time crediting his thought for connecting childhood to the emergence of Western modernity.<sup>2</sup> The “discovery of childhood,” Tillman

shows, “promised to usher in a new era for China: from empire to nation-state, from feudalism to capitalism, from status to class” (12).

The bulk of *Raising China's Revolutionaries* is divided into two sections. Part one, titled “The Science of Sentiment,” includes three chapters. The first contextualizes the career of Chen Heqin (1892-1982), a prominent Republican-era education authority. Tillman posits Chen’s thinking within the New Culture-May Fourth movement, which witnessed a pivot away from emulation of foreign education models toward ones rooted—at least ostensibly—in domestic traditions and needs. Chapter two introduces the NCWA, a philanthropic organization that engaged in a variety of advocacy and professionalization activities. These included overseeing Western mission orphanages, rescuing destitute children from famine, and developing model kindergartens, clinics, and a child study bureau. Beyond the bustling metropolis, the organization provided disaster relief, such as after the 1931 Manchurian Incident, when it traveled to North China to “supervise the distribution of 300,000 Chinese dollars’ worth of food, clothing, and medicine to 157,000 children” (72). The third chapter investigates the NCWA’s response and adjustment to the second Sino-Japanese war (1937-45). Here, Tillman shows how the NCWA experimented with alternative methods of soliciting donations and distributing relief. In the wake of the Great Depression, the NCWA, like other philanthropic organizations, relied increasingly on small, individual donations. New techniques such as showcasing donors’ status through consumer products such as a compensatory badge or emblem, and “advertising the political gains and consumer rewards” helped the NCWA to “democratize philanthropy,” and hence meet fundraising goals (80).

Four chapters constitute *Raising China's Revolutionaries*’ second section, titled “Child Experts and the Chinese State.” Chapter 4 juxtaposes Communist and Nationalist child-protection tactics in wartime Chongqing and Yan’an. As Tillman convincingly demonstrates, the two parties shared commitments to improving hygiene and freeing mothers from childcare responsibilities—in order to enlist them in the work force. Both parties also leveraged child assistance for statist purposes, outlawed abortion, and provided public vaccinations.

Of the primary divergences, Tillman observes that the GMD and CCP differed in their rhetoric. The former “edified mothers” whereas the latter “trained staff” (107). The CCP also deviated in their underlying objectives for preschool, which they saw as, according to Tillman, “a step toward collectivization and intervention into family life” (125).

The fifth chapter surveys the conflicts concerning the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration’s (UNRRA) distribution of aid to Nationalist- and Communist-held territories. Here, Tillman makes one of many important contributions to PRC studies by expanding on the work of Nara Dillon, who has demonstrated how the early Communist state denounced and disbanded philanthropic and private organizations that spanned the 1949 divide.<sup>3</sup> Tillman locates the roots of these efforts in the Chinese Civil war, when the uneven distributions of United Nations relief funds favored Nationalist-held territories. Tillman conclusively argues that this episode “colored Communist perceptions of ROC social welfare as evangelical, self-interested, and exploitative.” Following the establishment of the PRC, the Communists would excise these and related institutions (158).

Chapter six examines how during the early 1950s educators associated with Western-influenced pedagogies and organizations came under fire as so-called “conduits of cultural imperialism” (162). Tillman takes as her main case study students of John Dewey, in particular Chen Heqin. Through these denunciations Tillman persuasively illustrates the discursive shift toward an understanding of childhood as a political construct. Through pedagogical journals, for example, the Communist state besmirched Republican-era approaches as obscuring “the role of class as the determining factor of social identity” (173). Tillman’s findings are congruent with those of Stig Thøgersen, whose work charts a parallel fall from grace of Chen Heqin’s student Zhang Zonglin (1899-1976). Both scholars argue that the critique of “life education” in the early 1950s represented the split between two conceptions of childhood that had coexisted until the founding of the PRC. Reformers such as Chen and Zhang had advocated that childhood in and of itself had intrinsic value. On the other hand, their opponents viewed youngsters primarily as future citizens of the socialist state. Education, therefore, aimed to produce economically productive workers that were loyal to the Communist Party.<sup>4</sup> Tillman builds on this in the book’s final chapter by showing how elementary school teachers systematically enumerated—“sometimes with pie charts and graphs—the socioeconomic backgrounds of students” (197).

<sup>1</sup> Angela Leung, “Relief Institutions for Children in Nineteenth Century China,” in *Chinese Views of Childhood*, ed. Anne Behnke Kinney (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995); Limin Bai, *Shaping the Ideal Child: Children and Their Primers in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2005); Michelle King, *Between Birth and Death: Female Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Jones, “The Child as History in Republican China: A Discourse on Development,” *Positions*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Winter

She concludes that “the legacy of the Nationalist period had actually helped further the statist goals of the PRC, [which] continued these modernization projects under the guise of communism and the goal of socialism” (207).

*Raising China's Revolutionaries* is an incredibly ambitious and compendious work, which spans nearly a century of adult discourse on many facets of childhood. And yet it is the enormous scope of this study that is perhaps its only shortcoming. Tillman’s work is impeccably researched and empirically robust, with an average of 164 endnotes for each of the seven chapters. Yet such broad-ranging engagement has the effect of dizzying the reader and obscuring the author’s main arguments. This has resulted in a number of missed opportunities. In one case, Tillman argues that through refugee camps, the NCWA “laid the groundwork for the wartime mobilization of children” (111). Tillman, however falls short of demonstrating how this organization actually mobilized youngsters. As a fellow historian of children and childhood, I would love to know how exactly adult discourse impacted the lived experience of flesh-and-blood children.

A final thought concerns Tillman’s use of “modern childhood,” which she uses “to demarcate notions that specifically gained traction in the early twentieth century” (2). Given the tremendous breadth of this monograph, I had hoped Tillman would put a definitive stamp on the field by developing this further. For example, in what ways would Tillman engage with scholars such as Peter Stearns and Heidi Morrison, who have outlined some of modern childhood’s key features?<sup>5</sup> These include the shift from work to schooling, drops in infant mortality and fertility rates, and the rise of family planning, compulsory education, child welfare, and pediatric care. Tillman authoritatively demonstrates how the NCWA was at the center of professionalization efforts that trained a new class of working women and child experts. She does equally well demonstrating the dissemination of hygienic modernity by way of clinics, vaccinations, and relief efforts. Yet in many regards, the Chinese experience was different from that of western Europe and North America. In what ways was China’s modern childhood dissimilar from that of other regions? Similarly, is it still appropriate to speak of *a* modern childhood? Would it not be more apt for historians—taking after scholars such as S. N. Eisenstadt and Sankar Muthu—to think in terms of *multiple* modern childhoods?<sup>6</sup>

2002): 695-727; Ping-chen Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Nara Dillon, “New Democracy and the Demise of Private Charity in Shanghai,” in *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People’s Republic of China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 80-102.

<sup>4</sup> Stig Thøgersen, “The Tragedy of Zhang Zonglin: Competing Conceptions of Childhood in China from the May Fourth Movement to the Anti-rightist Campaign,” paper presented at

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European Association for Chinese Studies, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, August 30-31, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Stearns, *Childhood in World History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011); Heidi Morrison, *The Global History of Childhood Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> S. N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, No. 1 (Winter 2000): 1-29; Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

## Response

Margaret Mih Tillman, *Purdue University*

I thank Kyle David for his careful reading and summary of many important points of my book, including his deft contextualization of my contributions to a larger scholarly conversation about the history of modern childhood around the world. I am also very grateful to Yidi Wu for arranging for this review, and for her and Zachary A. Scarlett's guidance and suggestions.

*Raising China's Revolutionaries* explores contested notions of modern Chinese childhood, intertwined in the political struggles to forge a new China. By examining childhood as a site for modern knowledge production, the ultimate purpose of my study is to look toward larger questions of cultural and political identity formation across tumultuous transformations of "China" in the twentieth century. In separate but similar ways, childhood and youth came to symbolize future progress in the crucible of socioeconomic and geopolitical vulnerability. In the early twentieth century, Chinese child experts found inexact equivalencies for Western ideas in the Chinese tradition. For example, in place of John Locke's "blank slate," they asserted Mozi's "dyed silk," but the Chinese historical example emphasized cultural environment and social engineering, while nodding indirectly to concepts of childhood innocence. In reference to Ann Hulbert's study of the United States,<sup>1</sup> I argue that sentimentalism and science provide a twin set of values for the construction of child expertise in China, but within an historical framework of *essence* and *function* in moral knowledge and utilitarian education, as well as the ultimate goal of social Darwinian responses to China's search for wealth and power.

What distinguishes *Raising China's Revolutionaries* from intellectual history is its embeddedness in the context of charity and state development, both of which demanded that childhood be treated as a distinct category. Eventually, the two contributed to certain types of child welfare that helped to legitimize the state. Thus, my work ultimately traces the connection between childhood and the Chinese nation through a period of incredible experimentation and vicissitudes of intellectual thought – a tumultuous period in which many expected China to dissolve like a sheet of shifting sand. Yet unlike the Ottomans, Mughals, or Austro-Hungarians, China transitioned from empire to nation-state without disintegrating. A necessary component of this transformation was surely the making of Chinese citizens out of Chinese imperial subjects. And clearly integral to this process was the inculcation of new ideas of childhood in the fields of education and hygiene, and the inauguration of childhood as a pathway to political inclusion, whether as Republican citizens or Communist comrades.

Regarding the latter of David's questions, concerning the multiplicity of modern childhoods, the child expert and educational psychologist Chen Heqin desperately wanted to put

forward a notion of a specifically Chinese child psychology. Doing so would not only satisfy a patriotic desire to distinguish the quality of being Chinese, but would also allow Chen to develop an independent branch of child psychology. Chen circumvented addressing the constructed nature of childhood (and ethnicity) by documenting the life of his infant son with the assumption that biology would constitute a natural form of difference. It is perhaps in the realm of the political that we can most easily see Chen's successful promotion of Chinese difference, by championing Sun Yat-sen and Chinese historical heroes like Zhuge Liang in his textbooks. What interests me is that after 1949, his efforts to assert the distinctiveness of Chinese childhood were completely dismissed; the editors at *People's Education* accused Chen of plagiarizing Western theorists and advocating a form of childhood that would result in bourgeois liberalism. Embedded in this critique was a sense of modern childhood's freedom from work – which the book discusses under the conception of "sentimentalized childhood" – as the training ground for participation in market speculation. Furthermore, these debates reveal changes in underlying assumptions about ontology, from a more ethnic-based notion of nationhood in the 1920s and 1930s to a more class-based notion of polity in the 1950s.



Yang Changwen 楊昌文, "Mofan pi'anni'er" 模範皮安尼兒 [Model Young Pioneer], *Shike zhunbei zhe* 8 (1933?), p. 6

Regarding the former of David's questions, what is truly interesting about China's twentieth century is the political mobilization of children *as* children, rather than as future adults. To elaborate with a source mentioned but not analyzed in my book, the Jiangxi Soviet of the 1930s prompted young boys not only to become Red Soldiers someday, but also to shame their families in the current moment; for instance, one little boy pressured his brother, "If you do not go join the Red Army, you are not my elder brother."<sup>2</sup> Tall and short, the two stand in identical poses with rifles readied at their shoulders; the image reinforces conformity to a military ideal, but, according to the text, it is the round-headed, tuft-haired *youngster* who is in fact *encouraging* (rather than mimicking) his elder. In a similar manner, to symbolically pure May Fourth university students (relatively more akin to the age of the elder brother in the primer) demonstrating to denounce elder militarist officials, so too could young children exert social pressure within the family or in intimate settings for larger patriotic ends. As I note in the book regarding the context of the notes of kindergarten teachers in the 1950s, parents perhaps more readily cave to the demands of their children than they might to mass movements for political suasion. One subtheme of the book is the way that institutional expertise might be brought home and may even contribute to Du Yue's thesis about the supremacy of the Chinese state in its apotheosis displacing (rather than completely eliminating) Confucian patriarchy in its relationship to China's youth.<sup>3</sup>

Another form of social pressure, detailed in the book, was through fundraising. The democratization of fundraising allowed a much greater degree of participation among children, who solicited donations and contributed artwork for sale. Children saved their pennies not only in China, but also in the United States and elsewhere. Notwithstanding important distinctions, one important feature of childhood in the twentieth century (and even reaching back into the nineteenth century)

was an imagined solidarity of children across the world. It was that global solidarity that allowed children to participate in diplomatic exchanges, such as greeting foreign dignitaries when they visited China; kindergartens represented China's vitality and a strong communal spirit to the rest of the world. Perhaps this early history helped to reinforce the notion that youth in the 1950s could, as Sofia Graziani and Amanda Shuman have shown, participate in international cultural exchanges long before ping-pong diplomacy helped to usher in détente.<sup>4</sup>

These examples stem from wartime and Cold War conditions. I agree with David about the influence of violence in shaping children's actual experiences and the importance of historicizing children as part of our historical narratives. I must also, however, acknowledge that his questions point toward directions that differ from the ways in which I explored them in *Raising China's Revolutionaries*. His comments highlight children's experiences with wartime mobilization, as well as a characterization of those experiences within a period we might recognize as modern, and modern in a specifically Chinese sense. In the preface to my book, I explain my subject positionality and reasons for bracketing children's subjectivity from the scope of this project on the history of early childhood. I hope my book will contribute to a platform for further studies that more directly answer questions of children's experiences and voices. The pioneering work of Aaron William Moore provides exemplary models of how to access Chinese youth experiences in World War II.<sup>5</sup> My second book project, *Tested*, is also showcasing those voices – as preserved in letters and essays – of an older cohort of adolescents and may thereby better address some aspects of social history.

<sup>1</sup> Ann, Hulbert, *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice about Children* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Yang Changwen 楊昌文, "Mofan pi'anni'er" 模範皮安尼兒 [Model Young Pioneer], *Shike zhunbei zhe* 8 (1933?), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Mara Yue Du, "Parenthood and the State in China, 1644-1949: Law, Ritual, and State-Building," (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Sofia Graziani, "The Case of Youth Exchanges and Interactions Between the PRC and Italy in the 1950s,"

*Modern Asian Studies* 51, no. 1 (2017): 194-226; Amanda Shuman, "A Champion for Socialist China," *Afro-Asian Visions* (June 7, 2016): <https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions/a-champion-for-china-d22b771111ab#hqe046e4>.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Aaron William Moore, "Kunming Dreaming: Hope, Change, and War in the Autobiographies of Youth in China's Southwest," in *The Habitable City in China: Urban History in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Toby Lincoln and Xu Tao, 43–70. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2017).