

# The Reversal of the View of Children in Ancient China—Based on the Dimension of Children's Image in Ancient Pictures of Infant Games

You Hongmiao

Faculty of Education, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China  
hongmiaoyou@163.com

**Abstract:** The core of the reform of early childhood education lies in the change of concepts, and the view of children held has embedded the view of education and curriculum on how to cultivate such children. Using the method of image evidence for history and historical documents to support the evidence, this study re-examine the ancient Chinese view of children with a perspective different from that in the educational history textbooks by analysing the image of children in the ancient Chinese infant play pictures, with a view to enriching and deepening the understanding of the ancient Chinese view of children. The images of children who are different from adults and rebel against the school, as well as the images of brave and confident girls in the pictures of ancient Chinese children's games reveal that in the background of children's education, which emphasises intervention and preaching and has a serious tendency towards adultisation in the traditional Chinese society, children still have a certain amount of free space to live in, and there exist the demand and call for respecting the development of children's individuality. This inspires contemporary education to take a comprehensive view of the ancient view of the child, and to explore and carry forward the essence of it.

**Keywords:** Views of children; ancient views of children; children's image; infant play pictures

## 1. Introduction

The 'view of the child' reflects the adult world's view of the child and the idea of how to treat children[1], the core of which is the historical inquiry and reflection on "who the child is" [2]. It is inevitable to include factual descriptions and value judgements in the process of trying to describe "who the child is". Therefore, the view of the child in a certain period of time is also the result of a specific socio-cultural and institutional construction[3]. In traditional cognitive and educational history textbooks, it seems that ancient Chinese society often held a conservative or even negative attitude towards children's play, and the dominant ideology emphasised the "elders' position", with children always appearing in an image of being suppressed and restricted. For example, Wang Shouren used the analogy of "whipping and tying up, like a prisoner in custody" to profoundly attack the social repression of children's nature in education at that time. Lu Xun also pointed out in his book *How to be a Father Now* that in the father-child relationship, the father has unquestionable authority and dignity[4]. However, Chinese games have a long history, dating back to the pre-qin period as recorded in historical materials. Ancient game forms such as cockfighting, running dog, Liubo and ta-ju have been developing for more than 3,000 years[5]. Pictures of infant games, also known as 'baby play pictures' or 'baby play patterns', are ancient paintings depicting children playing scenes in China. Ancient Chinese pictures of infant games matured in the Tang and Five Dynasties, reached its peak in the Song dynasty. Although it gradually declined during the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, there were still many excellent works that were loved by the general public. In these pictures of infant games in ancient China, are there any images of children that are different from those in the educational materials? What kind of view of children did the ancients have?

## 2. Methods

Peter Burke, a British new cultural historian, put forward the idea of "Proving history with images", arguing that images are the most powerful medium for insight into the power of visual representations of religious and political life in past cultures, and that they provide new perspectives for interpreting history[6]. As a matter of fact, there has been a scholarly tradition of giving equal importance to images

and texts in China since ancient times. Ancient Chinese thought the image was not only a superficial visual presentation, but also a carrier of deep concepts. Ancient Chinese pictures of infant games are not only displays of ancient children's games, but also contain people's views and attitudes towards children at that time, mapping out the specific cultural connotations and characteristics of the times. Using the method of image evidence and historical documents, this paper intends to enter the world of children's games in traditional society through the medium of ancient pictures of infant games. By presenting a different image of children from that in educational history textbooks, this paper will explore what small but rich tributaries there are in the traditional Chinese view of the child, in addition to the mainstream of the "Elderly Orientation" [7], so as to provide references and inspirations for the renewal of the current view of children in China.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Images of children that are different from adults

Before the Tang Dynasty, children were often regarded as 'small adults', and it was not until the Tang Dynasty that people began to gradually realise the essential difference between children and adults, and the uniqueness of children began to show its initial outline. In many Han Dynasty tombs in brick portraits, archaeologists have found the image of children. These images can be broadly divided into two subjects, one is the subject of farming and labour, the other is the subject of historical tales. In farming subjects, children were depicted as labourers involved in agricultural production, and there was a serious phenomenon of adultification of children. In historical allusion subjects, children often appeared as a companion to adult figures. For example, in the Han portrait of Laozi meeting Confucius, although the image of children exists, it was mainly to set off the main characters, and the clothes worn by children were no different from those of adults (*Figure 1*). In Gu Kai's Picture of Women with Benevolence and Wisdom of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, although the image of children was different from that of adults in terms of body size, they still followed the attire of adults with no obvious differences in clothing and hairstyles (*Figure 2*). During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the number of infant games drawings gradually increased, and children's images also showed significant changes in artistic expression, with costumes becoming bobs and the portrayal of children's moods becoming more and more vivid. For example, Zhou Fang's The Feet of Unicorn from the Tang Dynasty depicted the entertainment of the royal children in the backyard of the palace, pouncing on butterflies, picking lotus flowers, playing with water in the bath. The innocence and vivacity of the children were depicted in a vivid manner (*Figure 3*). In the Song Dynasty's pictures of infant games, children became the main characters of the picture. In addition, most of the scenes were playful and playful, showing the image of innocent and childish children. For example, in Su Zhuo's Playing with Infants at the Dragon Boat Festival of the Song Dynasty, three children were the core part of the picture (*Figure 4*). The child in a red bib was carrying a toad and was about to scare the younger child, with a mischievous look on his face. The child who was overly frightened was squatting on the ground with his hands protecting his head, and his face was trembling in fear. The other one was walking as fast as he can, and rushed to stop it with a determined look. It could be seen that from the Tang Dynasty onwards, the image of children began to be different from that of adults, and society had a renewed awareness of children's unique identity and characteristics, and attached importance to children's growth and individuality.



Figure 1: Han Dynasty, Portrait Stone, Laozi Meeting Confucius.



Figure 2: Eastern Jin Dynasty, Gu Kai, *Picture of Women with Benevolence and Wisdom*.



Figure 3: Tang Dynasty, Zhou Fang, *The Feet of Unicorn*.



Figure 4: Song Dynasty, Su Zhuo, *Playing with Infants at the Dragon Boat Festival*.

### 3.2. Images of Children's Rebellion School

In ancient China, the most difficult thing about education was the strictness of the teacher, who was strict and authoritative in his reasoning, so that teaching could be carried out. In the literature, the ancient Chinese school was often known for its seriousness and rules. However, there were still many depictions of out of the ordinary behaviours such as village children messing with the school and truant in the ancient pictures of infant game. They made us see the other side of the children, which was their occasional mischievousness and resistance to the constraints. For example, in Qiu Ying's *Village Children Messing with School* from the Ming Dynasty, the figures were a teacher and eight students. On the left side of the painting, the teacher was asleep (Figure 5). So tired that he didn't even realise that the Dongpo scarf on his head had been taken away by a naughty student. The other students were also taking the opportunity to engage in a lively farce. Although the student in green was holding brushes in their hands, he had already been attracted by the playful noises of the student behind him and stood up to look back. The student in red appeared to be writing seriously, but in fact he was also attracted to turn his heads. A child holding scrolls behind them, seemingly chasing playmates. The middle of a more indulgent, took off his shoes and socks lying on the table and performed a stool juggling, legs and upper body are exposed without caring. The right side of the child had a scroll on his head and stomped on the desk with a ghost face. The child in purple in the courtyard squatted on the ground and turned his head to draw a portrait of his dozing teacher. Another child beside him is even more comical, pretending to be the teacher as a king to worship. It was not difficult to see that, although the ancient society stressed the rules and discipline, it gave children a certain amount of space to show their natural nature. The ancients were not blindly exclusionary and critical attitude, on the contrary, to a certain extent, they also showed a considerable degree of tolerance and even love for children's free and lively, naughty and mischievous nature and behaviour[8].



Figure 5: Ming Dynasty, Chou Ying, *Village Children Messing with School*.

### 3.3. Image of lively and courageous girls

In traditional Chinese paintings of children, the image of the girls is relatively rare, which is also reflected in the pictures of infant games. Taking the widely circulated Southern Song dynasty painting *Hundred Children Playing in Spring* as an example, it showed 100 children with different movements and expressions playing among the pavilions and courtyards. However, upon closer inspection, it can be found that these children are all boys. This is related to the ancient cultural characteristics of China's preference for men over women and the inferiority of men over women. Boys are often regarded as a symbol of family reproduction, while girls are often neglected roles in the family as well as in society. However, it is gratifying to note that many images of girls appeared in the pictures of infant games of the Song dynasties. According to relevant statistics, among the heirloom pictures of infant games, those with the image of a girl in the Song Dynasty accounted for about 40% of the total[9]. In addition, in these pictures of infant games, the girls are lively, confident and brave. For example, in Su Hanshen's *Autumn Infants Play* and *Winter Infants Play* from the Song Dynasty, there was both a pair of siblings (Figure 6). The sister was in the centre of the picture, pushing the date mill and teasing the cat with the younger brother, and the artist had made a detailed depiction of the sister's dress, movement, appearance and demeanour. In the Song Dynasty's *Puffing Jujubes*, there were five girls among the seven children (Figure 7). The girl on the right was stepping on a stool and striving to hit the jujubes, and a girl next to her was struggling to support her. The image of the brave and lively girls was different from the traditional concept of the Song Dynasty's women who are skilful and elegant. In the *Infants Playing in the Court in Autumn* from the Song Dynasty, the image of a brave and confident girl was even more exquisite (Figure 8). The girl in the centre of the picture was competing with her brother for a red tasseled spear, leaning forward slightly, with a firm and powerful gaze. At the same time, the corner of the picture, a smaller girl took the opportunity to pick up the ground tasseled gun. While sneaking away, she did not forget to turn back to watch the war in the dispute between the older siblings, showing a small expression of satisfaction on her face.



Figure 6: Song Dynasty, Su Hanshen, *Autumn Infants Play* and *Winter Infants Play*.



Figure 7: Song Dynasty, *Puffing Jujubes*.



Figure 8: Song Dynasty, *Infants Playing in the Court in Autumn*.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Recognition of children's nature

Children went from being the sidekick to the centre of the picture, from wearing scaled-down versions of adults' clothes to dressing up in their own way, and from the role of agricultural labour and historical tales to appear in more and more diverse playful game scenes ..... These changes were not only embodied in the artistic expression of the pictures of infant games, but also deeply reflected the social understanding of the role and status of children. Children were no longer merely subordinate to adults, but were discovered and recognised as independent individuals who had their own feelings, thoughts and values. The rich game activities like playing water, teasing cats, hitting, fighting grass, cuju, pouncing on jujube and so on, not only showed the three-dimensional and rich images of ancient children for posterity, but also reflected the ancient people's recognition and appreciation of children's innocence and vivacity. In fact, tracing back to the roots, as early as the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the Taoist thought of Laozi had attached great importance to children, "Hengde is not separated from, and returned to the baby" [10]. In Lao Zi's view, children are natural human beings who do not need to follow the example of adults and "learn more and more". On the contrary, adults should gradually approach or return to the state of "containing virtue" through "purging the mystery". In addition, there are a lot of images of children rebelling against the school, and the children's mischievousness and naughtiness are also given a positive value and regarded as a natural and necessary part of the children's growth process. It is not difficult to see from this that the ancients had the tolerance and compassion for children to release their nature and return to themselves while they were subjected to strict education and rules[11]. In addition, the large number of images of children rebelling against the school in the pictures proved that ancient people regarded children's mischievousness and naughtiness as a natural and necessary part of children's development.

### 4.2. Respect for children's play

The respect and recognition of children's play by adults was significantly reflected in the pictures of infant games after the Tang Dynasty. This was not only reflected in the fact that children became the main characters of the pictures, but also adult characters gradually disappeared from the children's play

scenes. Adults mostly appeared in the role of spectators even when they occasionally appeared. For example, in *Batting Balls Under Banana Trees* from Song Dynasty, the adult characters appeared as spectators as they watched children's games (*Figure 9*). Even when children were in potential danger from such a game, adults did not intervene directly, choosing instead to observe in a silent manner. In addition, most of the games in the pictures of infant games were generated naturally by children themselves, not because the adults wanted them to play. For example, a picture of Reflection game in the bathtub from Ming Dynasty showed a scene of children's spontaneous play that several children who were about to take a bath were attracted by the reflection in the bathtub (*Figure 10*). One child reached out to touch himself in the water, while the other two shifted their body movements to watch their reflection in the water. In this mindless game of exploration, there was no pre-set goal or instruction from adults, and the game is entirely motivated by the children's spontaneous curiosity and desire to explore. It shows that the ancients did not deny and prohibit children's games as we traditionally believe, but rather had full respect and recognition for them.



*Figure 9: Song Dynasty, Batting Balls Under Banana Trees*



*Figure 10: Ming Dynasty, Reflection game in the bathtub*

#### **4.3. Diversity of gender roles**

An image of a girl was shown in the *Infants Playing in the Court in Autumn* from Song Dynasty, which is very different from the modern gender stereotypes. In today's society, many parents do not consider weapons to be girls' toys and take it for granted for older sisters to take care of their younger sibling out of gender stereotypes. Older sisters will most likely be reprimanded if she fight for her younger sibling's toys. However, what surprising is that unconventional witty and brave image of the girls appeared in the pictures of infant games of Song Dynasty. These scenes were not only painted in the round fan, but also widely circulated and appreciated. With the rise of foot binding and the emphasis of Confucianism on the concept of women's chastity, the image of girls in the pictures of infant games began to decrease gradually from the Yuan dynasty. It was only about 9% in the Qing dynasty. Although it was only a short-lived phenomenon, the lively, confident and courageous images of girls in the infant games pictures of the two Song Dynasties still revealed another aspect of the perception of women's roles in ancient society. While restrictions and limitations did exist, girls were still somehow given the space to express their free nature vivacity and bravery, which were praised and promoted in works of art instead of being suppressed. The recognition and respect for the nature of girls in these pictures of infant games provide us with a fresh look at gender roles in antiquity.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. *Having a comprehensive view of the Chinese ancient view of children*

Confucian school of idealist philosophy of the Song and Ming dynasties emphasizes that children should study diligently and abide by strict moral norms, which is fully reflected in Chinese classical textbook named the Three Character Classic, which states that diligence is rewarding, but play is not beneficial. However, the innocent, lively, free and happy scenes of children at play depicted in these paintings, the image of children who were different from adults and rebel against the school, and the image of girls who were courageous and confident in the pictures of infant games, conveyed concepts different from Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties. The widespread popularity of infant games pictures provide another perspective. At the same time, this conflict precisely reflects the multi-dimensionality of ancient Chinese view of children[12]. On the one hand, ancient Chinese society restrained and limited children through feudal rites, expecting children to be civilized and thus become little adults in line with the standards of adult society. On the other hand, ancient Chinese society also respected children's innocence and playfulness to a certain extent, encouraging them to release their nature and return to the beginning. It can be seen that the ancient Chinese definition of children and the adult world was not as binary as the modern Western view of children, but showed more dynamic changes and relativity[13]. Therefore, we should take a more comprehensive view of the ancient Chinese view of the children, recognise its complexity and relativity, and discover and recognise other small but rich tributaries besides the mainstream of the elders orientation.

### 5.2. *Tapping and building on the best of the Chinese ancient view of children*

John Dewey put forward the concept of play, that is “the activity is its own end in play, not that it has future results”, which is widely respected in contemporary education. However, one would be surprised to find that the attitudes towards children's play coincide with Dewey's views when travelling through history with a different perspective and looking at Chinese ancient pictures of infant games. The scenes depicted in the infant games pictures, such as children's rich play patterns, the non-interference of adults and the respect for the autonomy of children's play prove that the educational ideas of discovering, respecting and liberating children advocated today were already possessed and practiced by Chinese ancestors thousands of years ago. The pictures of infant games are not only the results of artistic creation, but also the witnesses of history. Chinese ancient attitude and practice towards children's play still shines with the light of educational wisdom today. Despite the feudal backwardness of the ancient view of children, they were constantly developing and deepening, and formed a set of simple concepts of children's education with traditional characteristics. Therefore, it is worthwhile to selectively draw on and carry forward the valuable elements and combine them with modern educational ideas in the process of digging deeper and understanding the ancient view of children and educational thought. In this way, it can enrich the connotation of contemporary educational science and inject the genes and blood of Chinese culture into the progress of contemporary educational science.

### 5.3. *Breaking traditional gender stereotypes*

In ancient Chinese pictures of infant games, girls could not only play freely, but also used weapons as toys, and were brave and confident to pounce on dates. These lively and courageous images of girls challenged the traditional concept of “women are weak” and “men are strong”, showing the diversity of gender roles in ancient society. However, although modern society has made great progress in gender equality, there is still a long way to go in eliminating gender stereotypes. A study of a corpus of 247 popular children's books (under the age of 5) showed that 40 percent of the vocabulary was related to traditional gender bias, with females more often associated with language such as mental states, interaction and art[14]. There are more than twice as many male characters as female in Chinese award-winning children's books, a ratio that is also evident in the Caddick Award picture books in the United States[15]. Scientific studies have shown that children begin to learn about gender in infancy and will gradually develop a gender identity in early childhood[16]. Therefore, it is advisable to take the baby play charts as a model to abandon gender restrictions on children's play and activities. We should support and encourage children to develop according to their own interests and abilities rather than based on the gender presupposition of adults, both in the choice of toys and in the way they play, so that children can confidently explore gender expression and start their lives without being bound.

**References**

- [1] Yang, X.W., & Lu, L. (2023). *The Evolution of the View of Children and the Future of Children's Philosophical Education*. *Journal of Central China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 62 (02), 154-164. doi:10.19992/j.cnki.1000-2456.2023.02.014.
- [2] Liu, X.D. (2006). *Children's culture and children's education* (pp. 1). Beijing: Educational Science Publishing House.
- [3] Hong, C., & Cheng, T.J. (2024). *Discourse Construction of Modern Concept of Child: A Research Based on Pluralistic Discourse Analysis Perspectives*. *Studies in Early Childhood Education*, 2024(05): 1-13. DOI:10.13861/j.cnki.sece.2024.05.004.
- [4] Lu, X. (1973). *How we can be fathers now* (pp.116). Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- [5] Cai, F.M. (1997). *History of Games* (pp. 4). Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House.
- [6] Peter, B. (2018). *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images As Historical Evidence* (Yang, Y., Trans.) (pp. 9). Beijing: Peking University Press.
- [7] Liu, X.D. (1994). *The view of children in traditional Chinese culture and its modernisation*. *Studies in Preschool Education*, 1994 (04): 8-11. doi:CNKI:SUN:XQJY.0.1994-04-002.
- [8] Du, C. X. (2009). *Traditional Chinese Views of Children through Children's Songs, Games and Paintings*. (eds.) *Proceedings of the 20th Anniversary of the Research on the History of Education (2) - Studies on the History of Chinese Educational Ideas and Characters* (pp. 1427-1432).
- [9] Cheng, Y. (2021). *The era of girls: the changes in the concept of fertility between the Song and Yuan Dynasties from the picture of infant play*. *Image Historiography*, (02), 121-154. doi:CNKI:SUN:XSY.0.2021-02-007.
- [10] Feng, D.P. (2007). *Translation of Laozi* (pp. 20-23, 46-47, 66-68). Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House.
- [11] Wang, K.N., & Yu, H.B. (2015). *The First Historical Voice of Who the Child Was in Eastern Culture: An Analysis on Viewpoints on Children from Tao Teh King*. *Studies in Early Childhood Education*, (07): 3-8.
- [12] Xu, S. (2019). *The Evolution of Children's View in Ancient China—Based on the Artistic Image of Children in Ancient Art*. *The Modern Education Journal*, (03):77-85.
- [13] Xiong, B.Z. (2008). *Childhood Memories: The History of Chinese Children*. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press.
- [14] Lewis, M., Borkenhagen, M. C., Converse, E., Lupyan, G., & Seidenberg, M. S. (2022). *What might books be teaching young children about gender?*. *Psychological Science*, 33(1): 33-47.
- [15] Qi, G.H., Yang, Z.J., & Wang, Y.M. (2018). *A Comparative Analysis on Gender Stereotyping in Children's Picture Books in China and the United State*. *Early Childhood Education*, (12): 49-53.
- [16] Lei, L. (2017). *Developmental Psychology* (3rd ed.). (pp. 353). Beijing: China Renmin University Press.