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Imagining China's Children: Lower-Elementary Reading Primers and the Reconstruction of Chinese Childhood, 1945–1951

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Abstract

In the years following the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), Chinese conceptions of children and childhood underwent a massive transformation. In particular, Communist educators in Northeast China and other parts of the country placed a new labor-oriented ideal of childhood at the center of the nation's modernizing project. This article focuses on two issues related to this “remaking” of Chinese childhood in the mid-twentieth century. First, how did lower-elementary reading primers and other textbooks help create for children the idea of a Chinese nation, of which they were part and with which they were expected to identify above and beyond the domestic spheres of their natal families? Second, how did such textbooks teach children to think of themselves as laboring contributors to national causes? Following the physical and emotional devastation of war, Communist textbooks reordered the social world of children not by resubjugating them under traditional Confucian hierarchies but by elevating them to the position of national co-subject. Moreover, productive labor—framed through agriculture, industry, and military service—became one of the primary criteria for children's inclusion into the nation. Through narrative, linguistic, and visual means, midcentury textbooks increasingly brought children into the fold of an imagined national community and, simultaneously, extended to society's youngest members the importance of productivity as the primary condition of their inclusion.

Keywords: Modern China, children, childhood, literacy, imagined communities, *Guoyu*, textbooks, labor, visuality, materiality, identity formation

Introduction: The Study of Mid-Twentieth-Century Chinese Children and Childhood

From female infanticide and starving orphans to “little emperors” and the One-Child Policy, China's children have long held a prominent place in the historical imagination. It is surprising, therefore, that historians of twentieth-century China have given such comparatively short shrift to the study of Chinese children.¹ What was life like for a six-year-old in Northeast China after

the Second Sino-Japanese War? What was it supposed to be like? And how did such children fit into the shifting sociocultural imagination of the modernizing nation? These are basic questions to which we still lack satisfactory answers, despite an extensive body of scholarship that has arisen on the broader phenomenon of Chinese youth mobilization and nation-building throughout the twentieth century.² This historiographical disconnect between our understanding of children and our narratives about the people they became is problematic not only for the obvious reason that adolescents did not emerge biologically *ex nihilo* to shape the nation—even Mao Zedong, as schoolbooks continually reminded their readers, was a child once—but more importantly because, after May Fourth, the “Chinese child”³ had become one of the figureheads of China’s modernization, whose changing condition served as a key litmus test for the success of the very nation-building project in which youths and adult reformers were engaged. Children’s lives served as critical battlegrounds for redefining what it meant to be Chinese.

This article takes as its premise the belief that the study of children and childhood can shed considerable light onto key historical questions—about nationalism, citizenship, family life, and more—because one cannot fully understand a society and the web of interpersonal and economic practices structuring it without understanding the place of its children. For societies and nations around the world, children serve as living embodiments of the future, objects of regulation and development at home and in school, and subjects of debates over cultural and national identity. Children motivate and inform the actions of men and women alike; childbearing and childrearing are fixtures of daily life, and children also occupy the center of a range of questions concerning families’ economic and social capital, lineal and inheritance practices, and cultural traditions. As objects of regulation by both state and family, children stand at the crossroads of national and local interests, ferried incessantly back and forth across the proverbial state-society divide. And perhaps most importantly of all, although children may begin life as society’s most basic dependents, they also eventually mature to become “agents of history” in their own right—in a process that is at least as much socially constructed, and contested, as it is biological.

In an effort to shed new light on the turbulent trajectory of Chinese modernization and state-making in the mid-twentieth century, this article investigates how Chinese childhood became reimagined and remade in lower-elementary reading primers from the last years of the Republic to the rise of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (ca. 1945–1951). In particular, I

attempt to trace the implications of modern state-making for the youngest members of Chinese society by analyzing what changing notions of childhood can reveal about mid-twentieth-century China's competing visions of modernity. First, how did textbooks help create for children the idea of a Chinese nation, of which they were part and with which they were expected to identify above and beyond the domestic spheres of their natal families? Second, how did textbooks teach children to think of themselves as laboring contributors to national causes? Building off of historian Janet Chen's argument that "productive labor became a condition of social citizenship" for China in the first half the twentieth century (Chen 2012, 3), I contend that in the postwar years this criterion of inclusion trickled down discursively to encompass children as well. Through narrative, linguistic, and visual means, midcentury textbooks increasingly brought children into the fold of an imagined national community⁴ and, at the same time, extended to society's youngest members the importance of productivity as the primary condition of their inclusion.

Although a range of questions concerning China's modernization have been addressed by Qing, Republican, and PRC historians alike, these issues have rarely been examined with mid-twentieth-century children at the center of the narrative, and even less commonly with a focus on textbooks. Robert Culp (2007) and Peter Zarrow (2015) have come the closest, but both their monographs ultimately focus more on education during the early to mid-Republican period than at its end. In *Articulating Citizenship: Civic Education and Student Politics in Southeastern China, 1912–1940*, Culp examines citizenship training in Republican-era secondary schools and argues that institutionalized student activism and exposure to calls for national salvation prepared China's youth for future involvement in the Nationalist and Communist Parties. In particular, he suggests that students' Nationalist-led civic education facilitated many youths' transition to engaging in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mass mobilization and organization during the period of Japanese occupation. But although Culp delivers a powerful argument about the shift toward active, participatory citizenship and engages directly with both issues of textbook education and questions of how the nation was constituted, he maintains a focus on the experiences of relatively well-to-do secondary school students, many of whom were already in their late teens or even early twenties.

By contrast, in the view of this article, lower-elementary schoolchildren matter because they drive closer at the heart of non-elite issues; anyone who had completed the upper grades of

primary school was already an outlier. Zarrow's *Educating China: Knowledge, Society, and Textbooks in a Modernizing World, 1902–1937* brings the narrative closer to the lives of such lower-elementary students and argues that textbooks played a critical role in China's modernization project, with their stories giving concrete form to political abstractions and relating reform goals to tangible lessons that were accessible to children. *Educating China* is an important intervention that outlines in exhaustive detail the dynamics of Republican knowledge dissemination and state-making; however, Zarrow's decision not to cross the 1940s divide leaves an opening for more closely examining the intersections of sociopolitical practice and belief during the Nationalist-Communist transition, at a time when competing visions of the modernizing world were gaining greater purchase.

As sources, textbooks provide unique windows through which to examine these contested constructions of childhood identity because they represented one of the primary means for socializing children into the imagined community of the nation. Coded with a range of social, political, and moral messages, textbooks were powerful vehicles for imbuing young children with a new sense of self-understanding. Scholars such as Ernest Gellner (1983) and Eric Hobsbawm (1990) have long noted how systematized mass education served as a critical link in the emergence of nationalism; this was no less true in China than in Europe. In addition to distilling abstract narratives into simple forms, textbooks were used publicly, in classroom settings that functioned as a kind of limited public sphere. Textbook learning was performative: children chanted aloud with their teachers, answered discussion questions, and participated in study groups after class. Textbooks were also highly visual. Images were not merely illustrations; for young children especially, whose journeys into literacy were only just beginning, images offered some of the most direct, memorable, and powerful impressions of knowledge. And children's own marginalia and illustrated responses mattered, too. As literary scholar Seth Lerer reminds us, "For the historian of childhood, the margin has long stood as the place of personal imagination," serving as a key locus of student engagement (2012, 127). For these reasons, I pay close attention to printed and illustrated images throughout the eighteen lower-elementary textbooks (twenty-seven separate volumes in total) upon which this article draws.

Pedagogical practices, too, were central factors in this educational nexus. As any teacher knows, schoolchildren are rarely passive recipients of knowledge. Children ask questions; they complain; they doodle in their books; they copy other children's answers. What mattered for the

construction of a new notion of childhood was not just *what* students learned but also *how* they learned it. The postwar ideal of the modern child was not simply produced from above and then enacted through the reading of the text. Rather, the idea of this child—as an active, industrious, and future-oriented member of a national community of peers—was produced in part by the very material practices of reading. Borrowing from educational sociologist John Ahier (1988) the idea of treating textbooks as a locus of power relations and material practices, I suggest that texts not only were read and understood by Chinese schoolchildren; the texts themselves read, understood, and reconstructed the Chinese child.⁵ In certain ways, it was precisely this two-way interaction—in which children as well as teachers became characters in the national narratives that they read, and in which those narratives changed through such interactive reading—that helped create the idea of the modern, invested Chinese child-citizen.

Schoolbooks in a Brave New World: Chinese Textbook Publishing after World War II

The winter of 1945–1946 marked a turning point for China’s publishing industry. In much of the nation’s east and northeast, the end of Japanese occupation had opened up a newly deregulated market for Chinese books, newspapers, and magazines. At the same time, in schools across the country, China’s victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War launched an ardent call for new schoolbooks that could replace outdated wartime materials, as publishers rushed to pitch new national narratives to China’s youth at a moment of perceived promise for China’s future.⁶ “In this victorious day and age,” commented one newspaper review of new textbook releases in December 1945, “it is more important than anything that elementary and middle school students can access materials on the Chinese victory” (*Shen Bao*, December 11, 1945). The combination of commercial opportunity, popular demand, and the exigencies of the Nationalists’ and Communists’ growing ideological warfare drew droves of new entrants into the publishing industry, effectively breaking what remained of the Shanghai-based oligarchy of Zhonghua Books, Commercial Press, and World Books.⁷ It was a brave new world for Chinese publishing.

These developments made themselves felt with particular intensity in the Communist-occupied *jiefangqu* (so-called liberated zones), especially in Manchuria, where the sudden dismantling of the Manchukuo regime left public education *en prise*. Communist teams moved swiftly to fill the void. In Liaodong Province alone, more than a dozen new Communist publishers formed in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese surrender, including Northeast

Book Company (Shenyang), Masses Books (Dalian), Liaodong Nation-Building Book Company (Andong), and Guangming Books (Tonghua) (Ying 1992, 47). The textbook industry had long represented a significant source of revenue for Chinese publishers, and new entrants such as these leapt at the opportunity to carve out pieces of the juvenile market for themselves.⁸ In 1946, *jiefangqu* publishers released quadruple the number of new textbook series that the Border Area Bureau of Education had released over the entirety of the preceding eight years, and by the end of 1948, production of primary and middle school textbooks in the northeast *jiefangqu* had reached well over six million volumes (Gao 1985, 207; Xie 2005, 448). These postwar texts would play key roles in shaping and nationalizing the beliefs and behaviors of the local people, helping children (as well as some adult readers) make sense of the devastation of the preceding years.

One of the new schoolbooks to emerge during this period was Liaodong Nation-Building Book Company's four-volume "New Democracy" textbook series, *Guoyu: Chuji xiaoxue* (Mandarin: Lower-elementary school, hereafter *Guoyu*), designed for use in the first and second grades (Andong 1946b).⁹ The series is undated, but the contents place its publication at early 1946, and as one of the earliest complete postwar textbook series to have survived in the historical record, it offers rare insights into the nationally framed yet locally embedded messages that Communist organizers strove to convey after the Second Sino-Japanese War.¹⁰ Moreover, because these particular volumes are filled with the written and illustrated commentary of the children who used them, they also offer a unique window into some of the ways that mid-twentieth-century Chinese children engaged with the materials they were taught.

Textbooks such as the *Guoyu* series employed a three-pronged approach to socializing China's children into the imagined community of the nation. They connected children to this supraregional community by teaching them the "national language"¹¹ and introducing issues of national relevance, such as the Japanese occupation. Second, they linked these issues to children's daily lives by showing how they affected what children were able to eat and what they could do every day. They then tethered this complex of associations to the physical institution of the school, which extended the state's biopower into the confines of the domestic sphere and undermined children's natal bonds while reaffirming their new nation-oriented outlook. Lessons on Chinese geography, minorities, and natural science reinforced these themes. In other words, learning to read was far more than just a matter of literacy. It was a fundamental part of the

project to integrate locally grounded children into a modern Chinese *Weltanschauung* that was not delimited by differences of dialect or village and that looked upward, to the nation, as its primary denominator of identity. By teaching children to envision their membership in the modern, postwar Chinese nation, primary school textbooks helped establish the conditions of possibility for that nation to exist.



Figure 1. Lesson 21: “Japan has surrendered; we are so happy. Not only can we eat white rice, but we also won’t be bullied by others.” *Source*: Andong (1946b, 1:21).

In the lesson shown in figure 1, a group of children celebrates the defeat of Japan. All four children are clothed in modern attire: the boys in shorts and short-sleeved shirts, one girl in a skirt, and another girl in a *qipao* (a kind of Chinese-style dress) cut above the knee in late-

Republican style. The reader has animated the scene with colorful green, yellow, red, and blue crayon marks and penciled the date of Japan's surrender in the left margin.¹² Notably, no adults are present; midcentury Chinese children's texts make abundantly clear that this is a child's world. Nonetheless, it is a world permeated by adult issues, and in order to help children take center stage in experiencing and shaping the national narrative, the *Guoyu* lesson translates the macrosocietal significance of Japan's surrender into concrete terms for its juvenile audience: now that Japan has surrendered, the lesson argues, children should be happy because they get to eat white rice and no longer have to be bullied.¹³ Relating national issues to students' personal lives was a crucial step in making children feel invested in the concept of "the nation."

At the same time that textbooks related the significance of the Japanese surrender to children's everyday lives, they also situated public schooling at the center of how Chinese children were meant to understand their place in society. "Your new [text]book is so interesting!" proclaims Lesson 3 of *Guoyu*'s first-semester second-grade text. "It has songs and dances, it has riddles, and it has stories of toppling Japan. Since Japan has been toppled, you no longer need to study Japanese" (Andong 1946b, 3:3).¹⁴ Beneath the textbook's cheeky self-praise lies the implication that students not only can but *should* study Chinese again and—as textbooks emphasized repeatedly throughout the postwar period—that they need to do so in the structured environment of school, because through classroom instruction and the performative and collaborative acts of singing, dancing, and solving riddles, schools could lead the way toward the necessary postwar reconstruction of Chinese child identity.

What were these schools imagined to be like, and how did they reflect the imagined behaviors of their students? Here, despite a general shared interest in producing "modern" children, Nationalist and Communist textbooks often varied considerably in their visions of children's relationships to schools. For example, lessons in both the 1948 *Chuji xiaoxue Guoyu changshi keben* (Lower-elementary Mandarin general knowledge textbook) compiled by the Ministry of Education's National Editorial and Translation Bureau (figure 2) and Liaodong Nation-Building Book Company's 1946 *Guoyu* primer (figure 3) portray students on their way to school, but the tenor of each scene is quite different. The Kuomintang (KMT) text, on the one hand, depicts an immaculate-looking three-story school complex enclosed by concrete walls. The Republican flag flies high in the courtyard of the District One School of the Republic of China as children file in one or two at a time, with an elegantly dressed teacher following in their wake.

The text highlights the waving of the flag and reminds students to bow to their teachers and greet their classmates. In contrast, the Communist schoolhouse (figure 3) remains mostly out of view and is bounded by a simple wooden fence. Adult figures and the flag of the Republic of China are nowhere to be seen. Instead of the student-teacher hierarchy enforced by the *Chuji xiaoxue Guoyu changshi keben*, the fraternity of “you, me, and him” is the focus as three boys amble toward a nondescript-seeming schoolhouse that one could imagine to be located in virtually any village in China.¹⁵



Figure 2 (left). *Chuji xiaoxue Guoyu changshi keben* (Lower-elementary Mandarin general knowledge textbook). Source: National Editorial and Translation Bureau (1948, 2:1).

Figure 3 (right). *Guoyu: Chuji xiaoxue* (Mandarin: Lower-elementary school). Source: Andong (1946b, 1:12).

Such differences roughly paralleled texts’ divergent approaches to the problem of China’s proverbial rural-urban divide. One of the major dilemmas facing textbooks as they sought to make children feel invested in a unifying national concept was how to address different

readerships in rural and urban areas. This was not only a practical concern due to the higher literacy rates in urban and commercial centers, which affected parents' abilities to support their children's studies, but also a narrative consideration due to the difficulties involved in creating textbook content that could adequately capture the interests of urban as well as rural schoolchildren. Stories about raising pigs and feeding chickens were far removed from the everyday lives of urban children, just as images of rapid-paced city life seemed alien to rural children who had never stepped foot outside the boundaries of their native villages.¹⁶

Notwithstanding the release of certain rural-focused literacy texts for adults under the guidance of James Yen and others involved in the Mass Education Movement, Republican textbooks of the 1920s and 1930s had typically catered to urban audiences. They did so partly because, as Zarrow has shown, the majority of Republican-era textbooks reflected the values of elite reformers who increasingly recognized the need to produce citizens who would be prepared for a Western-modeled modernizing world. The urban focus was also a function of Shanghai's overwhelming share of the national textbook market (Reed 2004, 212–213, 231). Even typically generic textbooks such as the traditional *Qianziwen* (Thousand-characters reading primers) were often recast with an urban bent, with targeted titles such as *Shimin qianzike* (Thousand-characters textbook for city folk) promising to teach readers the words they needed for navigating city life (figure 4).¹⁷ Urban language reflected urban priorities, and the *Shimin qianzike*—which was such a success that Commercial Press released eighty-one separate editions in under two years—reinforced municipal governments' concerns with teaching members of the lower classes to be more self-sufficient.¹⁸ “Eat one's own food, sweat one's own sweat. I should take care of my own affairs,” exhorts the primer. “People who rely on others are not good chaps” (Chinese National Association for Mass Education [1927] 1929, 1:37). Such enduring characterizations of the individuated urban adult contrasted sharply with the image of the nation-oriented, collaborative child later presented in CCP primers.

At the same time, Nationalist-approved lower-elementary textbooks such as the *Xin xuezhi Guoyu jiaokeshu* (New system Mandarin textbook) also focused on the urban experience, extolling the wonders of electrical lightning, steam power, and the telegraph and depicting treaty-port scenes filled with Chinese junks and Western vessels (*Xin xuezhi Guoyu jiaokeshu* 1928, 7:32–33, 8:42–44). They explained traffic signals and provided students with advice on how to cross urban streets safely (Hua et al. 1934, 1:20–21). In doing so, they projected an

overwhelmingly urban vision of China's modernization to children (figures 5 and 6). Where agricultural life was depicted at all, it frequently showed a fantasy world populated by talking tigers and dancing dogs or comical stories of city boys such as Wen Nan, who misunderstands his grandfather's work in the garden and plants his toy drum, a bell, and a reed flute in the ground in an effort to make them grow larger (Hua et al. 1934, 2:53).¹⁹

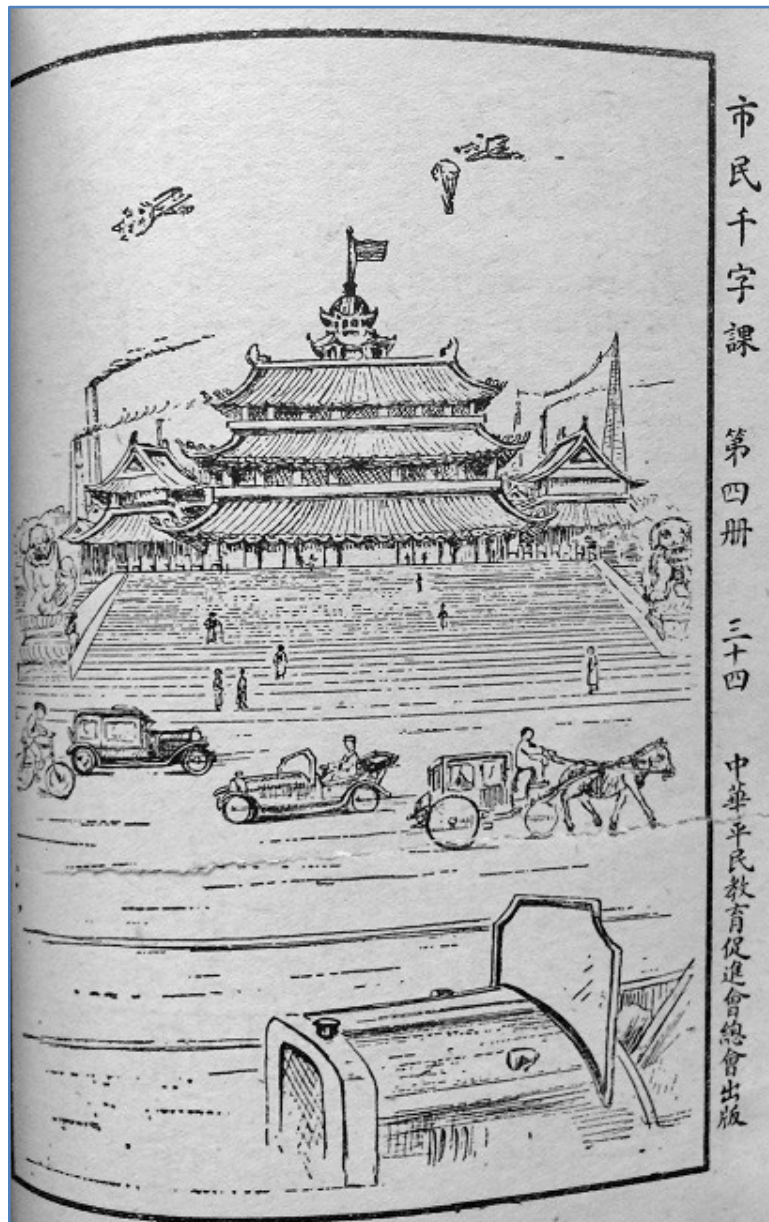
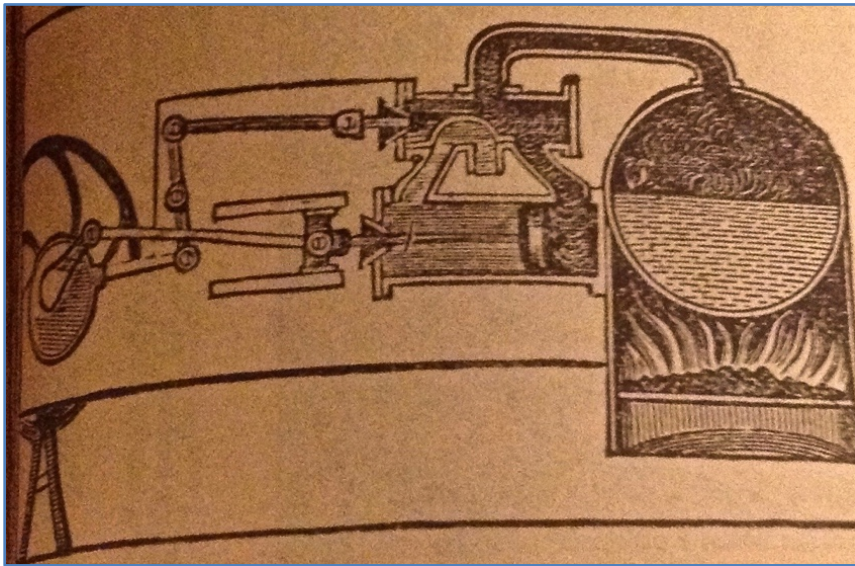
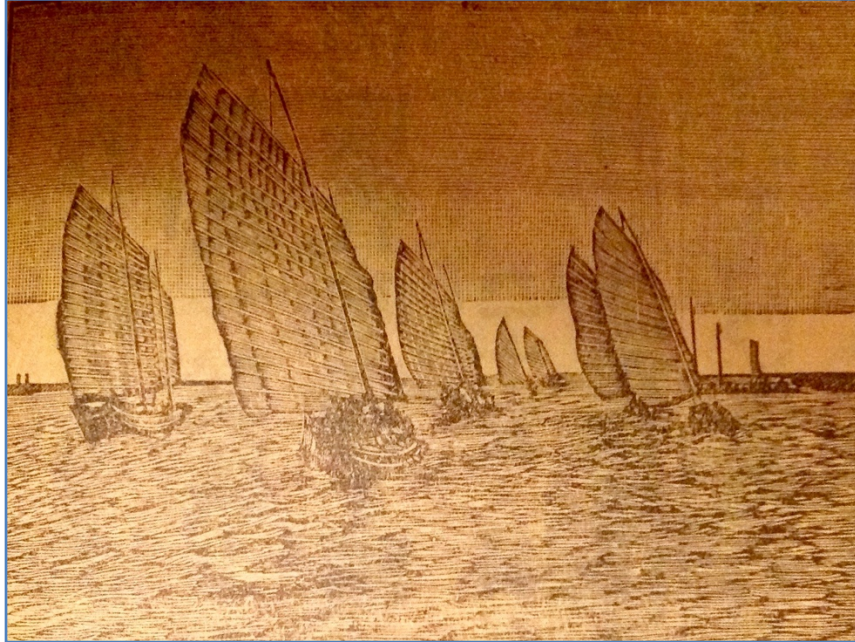


Figure 4. *Shimin qianzike* (City scene). Source: Chinese National Association for Mass Education ([1927] 1929).



Figures 5 and 6. Harbor scene and steam pump. *Source: Xin xuezhì Guoyu jiaokeshu* (1928).

It is hardly surprising that CCP texts, by contrast, focused on rural audiences. But what *is* surprising is the extent to which these texts nonetheless sought to bring the city into the worldview of rural children (and vice versa). Just as urban children needed to understand why rural production mattered to the fate of the nation, rural children needed to understand how urban industry mattered in their everyday lives. “Where do pots come from?” asks a lesson. “They are made by urban workers,” is the answer (Andong 1946b, 1:30). Stories such as “Rifle’s

Autobiography” detailed the urban manufacture of firearms and described how a single gun could pass from hand to hand and travel from province to province. The story’s titular protagonist, Bu Qiang (“Rifle”), begins his life in an urban factory, is seized by Japanese soldiers, and is forced to kill many Chinese before the Communists rescue him from his plight and put him to work protecting the countryside (Andong 1946b, 3:24). Such stories broadened children’s mental horizons and plugged them into an integrated socioeconomic landscape that sought to narrow the spatial and conceptual rural-urban divide.²⁰

Whereas KMT textbooks mostly maintained their urban focus in the postwar period, CCP textbooks thus sought to socialize children into a joint rural-urban worldview that made the city relevant to rural children’s lives. The economy, along with the productive labor that enabled it, was what linked the urban and rural worlds. Even as Communist teams prioritized the countryside, they invited many urban children into a shared discourse about how production was important for all. As the preface to the seventh volume of the 1946 *Chuji xin keben* (New lower-elementary textbook) explains, “This book takes village and township children as its primary intended audience, but it can also appropriately meet the needs of children from small and midsize cities. Its purpose is to cultivate new citizens...in order to instill them with a general knowledge and culture of production, as well as scientific knowledge” (Huang’pu Shuyu 1946, 7:i).

The preface goes on to highlight the contents of the book’s forty chapters, which each consist of eight lessons and cover the following distribution of topics: production (eight chapters), history and geography (eleven chapters), citizenship (ten chapters), nature and hygiene (six chapters), and commonly used language (five chapters). That production should come first in this list and language last is a telling sign of where the ultimate emphasis of texts such as the *Chuji xin keben* lay. The “needs of children” and the aim of turning readers into “new citizens” converged on the behavioral goal of teaching children to produce. Below, let us examine more concretely how texts instilled that “general knowledge and culture of production.”

The “Productive Turn”: Children as Laboring Members of the Nation

Following the physical and emotional devastation of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Communist textbooks reordered the social world of children not by resubjugating them under traditional Confucian hierarchies²¹ but by elevating them to the position of national co-subject.

As we have seen, textbooks did so in several ways: by constructing an increasingly child-centric world in their narratives, infusing this world with discussion of national issues, and employing the physical institution of the school as a gateway for facilitating children's transition from the natal family to society at large. While some of these developments in identity-building were an extension of earlier Republican trends, in the 1940s they came laden with critical new responsibilities as production-oriented behavior became the primary criterion for children's inclusion in the national polity. If children were to become full-fledged members of the nation, they would need to pull their weight as laboring contributors to the national cause (figures 7, 8, and 9).



Figure 7. Orphaned girls weave shoes in 1930s Nanjing. *Source:* Archives of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia.

This turn to emphasizing children's productive capacity was a rhetorical move made possible in part by the lived experiences of the Second Sino-Japanese War. As M. Colette Plum has argued, the massive wartime increase in orphaned and homeless *liulang ertong* (vagrant children) altered the discourse on Chinese childhood in two primary ways: rhetorically, it tied this discourse to Chinese society's traditional distrust of *youmin* (vagrants) and other unrooted figures who wandered the margins of society, and physically, it rendered visible an underutilized labor pool that could be mobilized for the purposes of nation-building (Plum 2012, 237–258). As a result, the state began placing *liulang ertong* in workhouses and encouraging them to learn

productive skills. Through these efforts to bring *liulang ertong* back into the fold of mainstream society, the notion of childhood underwent a radical shift. The war thus created a break from “the other modern ideal promoted by early childhood specialists prior to the war: that childhood is a protected sphere of human development. With the [newly arisen] child-citizen-worker ideal, children sacrificed themselves through labor, relinquishing their entitlements to protection in exchange for conscription into a new body of citizenship” (Plum 2012, 255–256).



Figure 8. Two young city boys carry a bucket of water at a Shanghai camp in 1941. *Source: Spokane Daily Chronicle* (March 4, 1941).

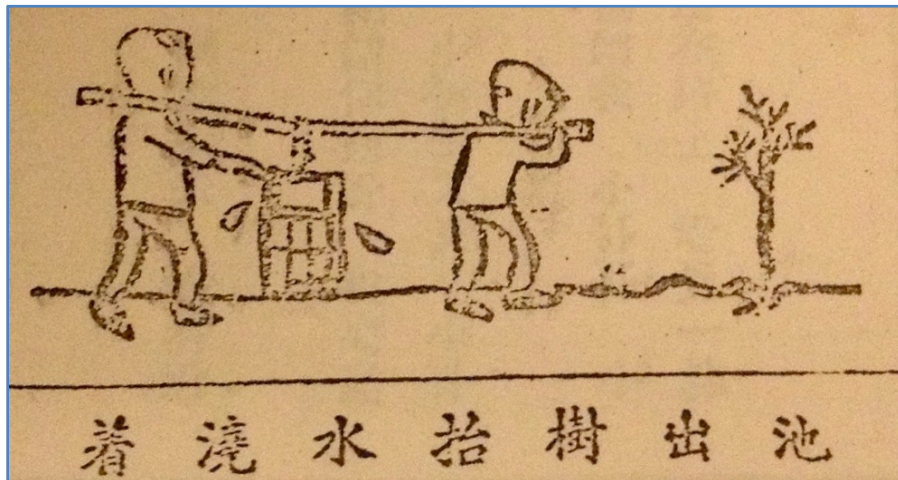


Figure 9. Two young country boys carry a bucket of water in a 1946 textbook lesson on the importance of hard work and persistence. They water a peach tree every day, and as it grows from a sapling into a mature tree, they grow into adults. *Source: Liu* ([1946] 1974, 1:27).

Once society had rendered children visible as laboring members of the nation, however, this image of their new place in the fabric of modernizing society could not be so easily unseen. While the dissolution of the Japanese military threat lessened some of the urgency of the wartime call for children to “sacrifice” themselves through labor, the core discourse about children’s laboring capacity not only continued into the postwar years but spread to encompass all children; it was no longer confined to the displaced *liulang ertong*. As a special issue of *New Education Magazine* explained in 1947, the key to modern Chinese education lay in the recognition that all children “have power [*liliang*]...and not only do they have power, but they have creative [*chuangzao*] power” (“Special Issue on Child Education” 1947, 1:1). It was through labor that all children would earn their place in modern adult society. This democratization of social productivity fit easily into Marxist theories of evolution and societal progress.²² As one textbook lesson reminds readers, laboring with one’s hands is what makes us human, and “those who have hands but do not employ them in labor are no better than pigs and dogs” (Liu [1946] 1974, 1:37). The lesson depicts an adult male sitting among pigs and dogs as he smokes a pipe, an outcast on the margins of society; since he has devolved from man to beast, he serves as a stern warning about the kind of future that awaits lazy children (figure 10).

At the same time, by emphasizing a shared ideal of labor for all children, Communist textbooks integrated the rhetorical nationalization of Chinese childhood in the mid-Republican years, which had given priority to elites, with the physical nationalization of Chinese childhood during the war, which had primarily concerned *liulang ertong* on the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. No longer did only elite children need to become national actors, and no longer did only uprooted children need to work; in a nation that urgently had to rebuild itself, a single labor-oriented notion of childhood was extended to all. Thus, it was not so much that children had fully “relinquish[ed] their entitlements to protection” but that they gained responsibility for earning national protection through their own labor. This “productive turn” articulated visions of children as contributors to the nation in three primary capacities: agricultural, industrial, and military.

Given its close alignment with Communist ideology as well as the realities of the CCP’s geopolitical strategy, agricultural production naturally took a prominent position in Communist textbooks, despite its muted presence in earlier, urban-oriented visions of Chinese modernity.



Figure 10 (left). Lesson from *Chuxiao Guoyu* (Lower-elementary Mandarin). Source: Liu ([1946] 1974).

Figure 11 (right). Lesson from *Changshi: Yinianji keben* (General knowledge: First-grade textbook). Source: Shandong sheng jiaoyuting (1949).

“We love peasants and learn to be little peasants,” reads Lesson 6 (figure 11) of a first-grade textbook on general knowledge (Shandong sheng jiaoyuting 1949, 2:6). The top panel depicts a young boy as he carries a pail of water into a field where a man and a woman, perhaps his parents, are busy at work, backs bent and faces obscured as they plant rice and tend to cabbages. Notwithstanding the adult presence, the boy—with his upright posture and the facelessness of the adults emphasizing his centrality—is clearly the focus of the image. In the bottom panel, a child looks on as a woman sees her husband off to work. Whether they are meant to be the same figures from the top panel is unclear; the man is bald but no longer faceless, while the presence of cattle and the replacement of the farmer’s hoe with a pitchfork suggest a possible

shift of environment from China's rice-growing south to the wheat-heavy north. On the one hand, this change could represent an attempt at appealing to a broader geographic readership. On the other hand, it could also represent a temporal shift meant to speak to children's understanding of themselves: if children "love peasants and learn to be little peasants," then someday they too can become peasants in their own right. The facial similarities between the man and the boy suggest that the child here might even be seeing a future, adult version of himself. If the top panel sets forth a model for how children should behave in the present, the bottom panel thus seems to offer an image of their future: good children are those who embrace agricultural labor from an early age and grow up to become laboring adults.

Although Chinese primary school textbooks generally tended to teach by positive rather than negative example, certain cautionary tales made clear that bad children, conversely, were those who did not pull their weight. For example, in February 1946, Lesson 4 of the fall third-grade curriculum of the *Chuji xin keben* introduced readers to the life of Wen Fugui, a talented but lazy boy who dislikes labor and rarely does what others tell him. At home, he always wants to eat noodles, but his family is too poor to satisfy his craving, so he often runs off into the hills and loafs around for a day in protest; at school, he does things like stand on his desk and belt out inappropriate songs (Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Area Ministry of Education 1946, 5:5). His behavior is not only unproductive but actively disruptive to the productivity of others, with his bourgeois²³ complaining and sporadic home presence hampering his family's labor efforts and his classroom behavior preventing his peers from reaching their educational goals.

"I only drink one or two cups of water a day," he protests, "so why should I have to fetch an entire bucket of water?" But through the intervention of his peers and teachers, Wen Fugui learns the importance of thinking beyond the limitations of his personal needs, and he eventually reforms his behavior and becomes an upstanding member of the community. Although he never enjoyed labor before, he now "regularly sweeps floors, feeds pigs, fetches water, and does all kinds of work of his own initiative" (Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Area Ministry of Education 1946, 5:6). Ensuring that Fugui fulfills his obligations to his community enables Fugui's peers to integrate him back into that community.

Wen Fugui's example testifies to the striking turnaround from the ideal of mid-Republican texts such as Commercial Press's *Shimin qianzike*, which had lionized the model of the self-sufficient urban adult.²⁴ Instead of warning that "people who rely on others are not good

chaps” and arguing for readers to “eat one’s own food, sweat one’s own sweat, [and] take care of [one’s] own affairs” (Chinese National Association for Mass Education [1927] 1929, 1:37), the ideal of autarkic behavior acquired a sharply communal inflection. For example, slogans such as *zijizizu* (self-sufficiency), which had conventionally taken the individual as the unit of reference, assumed new interpretations that Yan’an educators had to explain to confused teachers in other Communist-controlled areas. As the journal *Positions on Education* clarified in a 1946 article, the saying *zijizizu* was “a production slogan from the war of Japanese Resistance” that implied not individual self-sufficiency but that “the things Border Area residents produce should collectively meet the Border Area’s needs” (Lu 1946, 56–57). It was not that self-sufficiency was no longer the aim; rather, it was that the “self” was no longer just the individual. Eating mutually grown food (rather than “one’s own food”) and helping manage the community’s affairs (rather than “one’s own affairs”) became the new normative criteria. As the collective entity of the Border Area became the frame of reference, the *zi* (self) rhetorically merged with the collective, and the maintenance of the self was recast as an act that occurred on a communal level.²⁵

For children, textbooks made clear that “learning to be little peasants” was not simply meant to be an individual, family-bound effort; it was a goal toward which “we” should all strive. In invoking this “we” of a broader reading community of children who studied together in the same school and were embedded in a broader network of relationships and responsibilities (or who, even if they lived far apart and would never meet in real life, were connected to each other by having read the same printed texts), textbooks underscored that what was critical was not just production but production in the context of a broader community, beyond the confines of the home. For children, the school provided the institutional setting for such production. As with literacy education and schooling as a whole, this emphasis represented a key intervention into the domestic sphere as the state continued to turn children into national subjects.²⁶

The following two lessons from the *Chuji xin keben*, which was published in Yan’an in 1946 and here features an exchange of letters between two rural schools, depicts how children were positioned as laboring members of a school community and how they were imagined to compete with each other to embrace their productive responsibilities.

Lesson 7: Gaozhuang Primary School's Letter of Challenge to Xuzhuang Primary School

Dear Mr. Li and the Student Body of Xuzhuang Primary School:

In order to improve agricultural production learning, we would like to issue a challenge to you. We propose a competition with the following conditions:

- 1) We will organize all thirty-six lower-primary students in our school into a labor team, open up two mu of new land for agriculture, and plant two mu of cultivated land. The earth must be fully plowed and furrowed. We will fertilize the cultivated land with twenty sacks of manure. We will weed plots of vegetables five times and weed plots of grain three times.*
- 2) We will raise two pigs, four chickens, and a clutch of chicks, and we will scour ten jin of wool.*
- 3) We will guarantee that we completely finish studying the *Chuji xin keben* and our mathematics textbook; moreover, we will ensure that we can effectively write, speak, and do arithmetic. Third graders will listen to our teacher read *Masses News* twice per week. If you dare to accept our challenge, we will invite District Secretary Liu and District Chief Zhao to serve as judges. What do you say? We await your prompt reply.*

Respectfully,

*Teacher Wang Yongzhi and the Student Body of Gaozhuang Primary School
March 16*

(Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Area Ministry of Education 1946, 5:9–10)

From the outset, the letter reflects the collective identity of the Gaozhuang Primary School community, emphasizing the collaborative, experiential learning that occurs there. These are children who know how to plow and furrow the land, use fertilizers, raise livestock, and scour wool. Specific goals concerning the number of times that students will weed different plots of land or how many chickens they will raise help readers concretely visualize the tasks at hand and relate them to their own lives. Similarly, the educational benchmarks also tie directly back to the lives of the students, who themselves were third graders studying the *Chuji xin keben* in which this letter appeared.

The next lesson features Xuzhuang Primary School's reply four days later:

Lesson 8: Xuzhuang Primary School Accepts the Challenge from Gaozhuang Primary School

Dear Mr. Wang and the Student Body of Gaozhuang Primary School:

We were delighted to receive your letter of challenge. All twenty-eight students in our school are willing to take you up on your challenge. Below are the terms of our acceptance for this competition:

1) We will also organize a youth labor team, and we will work alongside the people to plow the earth.²⁷ We will plant three mu of cultivated land and one mu of riverside land, and we will open an irrigation canal and convert the riverside land to irrigated land. Just like you, we will fertilize and weed the land, and we will also organize a weeding team to remove weeds on the behalf of the people.

2) We will raise two pigs and three chickens, and we will weave fifteen wicker baskets.

3) Just like you, we will also study the Xin keben and our mathematics texts to the end and read Masses News. Moreover, all third graders will write three big-character sheets and one small-character sheet every week.

We have no objections to the judges you have proposed. We have already finished our preparations. Let everyone give it their all!

Respectfully,

*Teacher Li Changsheng and the Student Body of Xuzhuang Primary School
March 20*

(Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Area Ministry of Education 1946, 5:10–11)

In addition to concretizing these labor-related tasks, Xuzhuang Primary School's reply highlights the textbook's attentiveness to the regional differences between schools. Xuzhuang, which borders a river, plans to focus on irrigation, whereas Gaozhuang turns its attention to opening up currently uncultivated wasteland. Xuzhuang's students will weave wicker baskets instead of scouring wool, presumably because sheep husbandry does not play a large role in the local economy. The relatively small number of students in each school—thirty-six in Gaozhuang and twenty-eight in Xuzhuang—reinforces the rural setting of these schools, again underscoring how different this world was from that of the three-story concrete complex imagined by the 1948

Chuji xiaoxue Guoyu changshi keben (shown earlier in figure 2). And in both Gaozhuang and Xuzhuang, although adult figures are present for support, it is the children who take center stage.

Schools drew students out of the family and aligned them with the community at large. By studying from the same textbook series and reading newspapers such as *Masses News*, students became connected to an imagined community of other readers they might never meet in real life. They read fictional letters from Mongolian children to Mao and learned about other children's experiences in other distant corners of the Chinese nation (*Yuwen: Chuji xiaoxue* 1949, 6:100; Andong 1946b, 3:27). At the same time, this cognitive alignment with a community of peers was paired with the physical separation of building a new identity outside the home. Some students who attended regional schools even lived away from home for weeks at a time.²⁸ In a letter to his parents, a boy named Niwa writes:

It's been a month since I last wrote you. I'm sure things are very busy at home. How has our piglet been recently? Today, Teacher gave us a lecture on the proper diet for pigs. It was a very good lecture, so I have written down the details below. Please feed my piglet in this way. (Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Area Ministry of Education 1946, 5:19)

Not only is Niwa physically outside the home, living and working at a regional school; the letter frames his relationship to his parents as that of an equal, if not a superior. He gives them directions and educates them just as a teacher would a child. Indeed, children often *were* expected to teach their parents, reversing the traditional child-parent relationship and underscoring the sentiment that children could become authoritative adults.

It was partly through becoming teachers themselves that students learned to perform textbooks' new ideal of the productive adult. In certain ways, the reading process itself was integral to the production of the new ideal of the modern child. On the one hand, the habituating experiences of reading lessons aloud in unison with one's classmates, singing songs together, and collaboratively solving riddles helped cultivate a group identity. At the same time, the mechanics of reading mattered too: Communist textbooks' shift away from using the traditional *Zhuyin fuhao* phonetic system at a time when Pinyin was not yet developed posed special challenges for the young learner.²⁹ What did a student do when he or she forgot a character? How could she read it? This problem was particularly acute in the countryside, where literacy rates were lower and many children could not rely on parents for assistance.

One solution was that textbook use became reconfigured as an inherently collective process. Schools provided a place where children of different ages, from neighboring villages, could come together in a shared community of learning and identity-building. The small size of village schools and the shortage of qualified teachers meant that younger students and older students often shared a single classroom. For example, while a teacher lectured to fourth graders about language or geography, first graders might be doing mathematics exercises at their desks.³⁰ Older students were expected to serve as mentors to their younger comrades. “Older students are like big brothers,” explains the 1946 *Chuxiao Guoyu* (Lower-elementary Mandarin). “They can read better and recognize more characters than I can. Please help me more often” (Liu [1946] 1974, 1:10).³¹ Such discourses of brotherhood were common in 1940s textbooks.



Figure 12. Cover image of the *Chuji xin keben* (New lower-elementary textbook), showing two boys reading together. *Source*: Shaan-Gan-Ning bianqu jiaoyuting (1946).

As textbooks actively encouraged students to form study groups and assist one another, the goal of turning children into collaborative, laboring citizens became embodied in the process of learning itself (figure 12). The 1946 *Changshi* (General knowledge) textbook for third graders recommended that learners form groups of half a dozen children each as the optimal way to study: “If we want to learn well, the best thing we can do is create mutual-aid study groups of five, seven students each. Every day we should study our homework together. If you forget

something, tell each other, help each other; through group discussion, you will remember everything more clearly” (Andong 1946a, 5:6).

Even for students who were unable to attend school regularly, group study became the ideal (figure 13). In volume 3 of the *Guoyu* primer, the child-narrator Li Aihua (“Loving-China Li”), explains:

Children of liberated zones all study happily. Those who are unable to attend school organize cow-herding character-learning classes [*gecao fangniu shizidui*, i.e., study groups for children to learn characters while watching cattle]. In the early morning or at night, they find a teacher to study with. Then they write the words they have learned on a small wooden slate and take it with them into the fields to review. If there are characters that they forget, they remind each other what they are, and they also hold competitions with one another. In this way, they learn quickly and well. (Andong 1946b, 3:19)

The issues of remembering forgotten characters, learning collaboratively, and holding friendly competitions invoke familiar themes. At the same time, Li Aihua’s explanation also points to the practical difficulties involved in turning children into national actors, reminding us that the reconstruction of the imagined child often moved much more quickly than its reality.

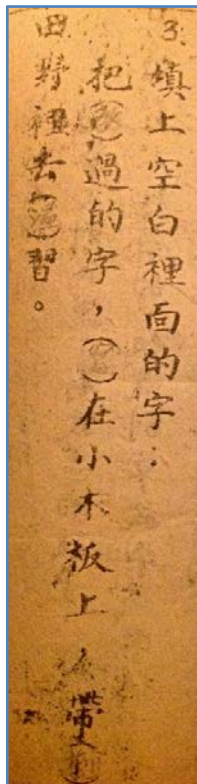


Figure 13 (left). Fill-in-the-blank homework exercises of second grader Shi Changrong. His answers read: “Take the characters that have been 教 [*jiao*, taught], 寫 [*xie*, write] them on a small wooden slate, and take them with you 到 [*dao*, to] the fields to 溫 [*wen*, review].” Source: Andong (1946b, 3:19b).

Figure 14 (right). Lesson 28 of the *Guoyu* primer. Source: Andong (1946b, 1:28).

In addition to figuring children as collaborative producers, students, and teachers for their uneducated parents, textbooks also imagined children as industrial workers.³² As we saw earlier, textbooks sought to bring the distant urban world into rural children's imaginations and construct for them a single national worldview by asking them to consider where their pots and other household goods were manufactured. Presumably, most rural children never would have had a chance to visit the factories where workers made such goods. But, as textbooks argued, there was no need to bring children to see those centers of industrial production; industrial production could be brought to them, into the countryside, as children figured as adultlike blacksmiths engaged themselves in the manufacture of weapons and household objects. Lesson 28 of *Guoyu* (figure 14) reads:

Clang! Clang! Clang!
 Busy hammering iron—
 Hammering into knives, hammering into guns,
 Hammering into pots to cook food to eat,
 Hammering into guns and knives to defend one's home.
 (Andong 1946b, 1:28)

As was common in lower-elementary lessons, the Chinese lines rhyme to aid memorization. Here, unlike earlier depictions during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the lesson portrays children as the primary actors. Rather than receiving weapons from adult blacksmiths (figure 15), the children become blacksmiths themselves and, in subsequent lessons, learn to fight their own wars. Thematically, we again see the practical significance of labor translated into children's terms: metalworking allows children to produce "pots to cook food to eat" and "guns and knives to defend one's home." Fang Peigong, the child who owned this particular copy of *Guoyu*, depicted the sword on the anvil in blood-red coloring to reflect its intended use. He used this color on swords, guns, and other weapons throughout the textbook.

After the Chinese Communist Revolution, textbooks such as the 1951 *Gaoji xiaoxue Guoyu keben* (Upper-elementary Mandarin textbook) raised the image of the productive, industrial child to new heights. The text's cover (figure 16) makes a powerful declaration of the sort of modern Chinese world into which it aims to socialize its readers. In the foreground, children in crisply tailored clothes are huddled together, reading newspapers and maps, seemingly engrossed in discussion as they gesture toward their surroundings. The sole adult is a

comrade in the background, whom a second group of children seems to be consulting for advice, just as they might consult a teacher in school. From there, a sleek, speeding train draws the viewer's gaze toward the municipal center of the new nation in the background, while on either side stand the two mainstays of China's economy: agriculture in the front and a massive industrial complex rising in the back.

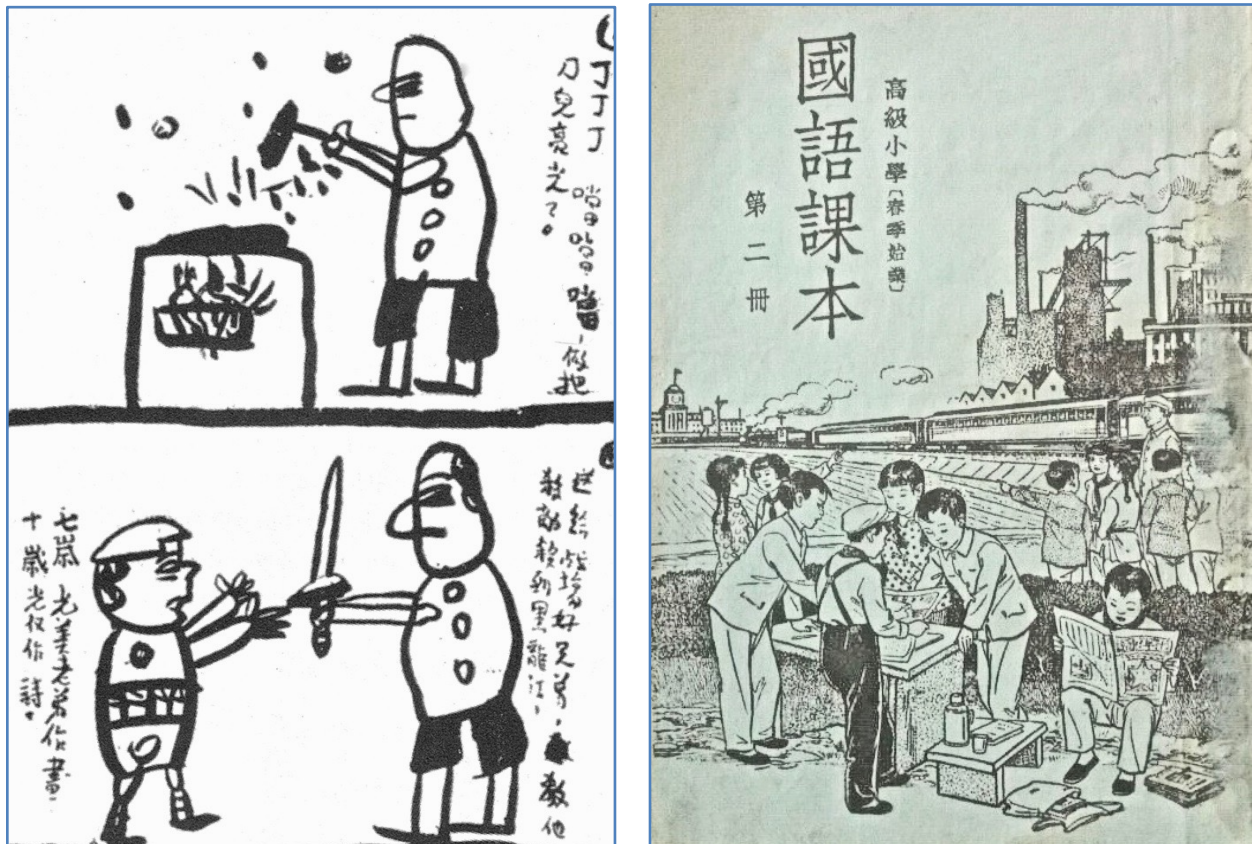


Figure 15 (left). This cartoon, drawn by a seven-year-old in 1938 and published in *Resistance Cartoons*, shows a man forging a sword and handing it to a boy dressed as a Boy Scout. Note that this early cartoon casts the blacksmith as an adult and the child as a soldier, whereas the 1946 *Guoyu* depiction of metalworking in figure 14 merges these roles into the single image of two collaborating children.³³ Source: Shen (2005, 224).

Figure 16 (right). Cover of the *Gaoji xiaoxue Guoyu keben* (Upper-elementary Mandarin textbook). Source: *Gaoji xiaoxue Guoyu keben* (1951).

In this new world, children would be not just builders of the new nation but also its defenders. “I love guns, I love guns,” begins Lesson 36 of the *Guoyu* reader (figure 17). “There

are pistols, rifles, and even machine guns; they protect my home.” The emphasis on weaponry is evident from the repetitive rhetoric of the metalworking lesson as well, and language lessons further reinforced such imagery through the wordplay of terms such as *dapao* (cannon) and *dapao* (to defeat and rout) (Andong 1946b, 1:37). Of course, as the story of Bu Qiang reminds readers, the people who wielded these weapons were at least as important as the weapons themselves. Starting with the first grade, Communist textbooks thus taught children to imagine themselves as soldiers in the service of the nation (figure 18). “How orderly is a troop of small soldiers,” declares a lesson on the subject. “Sticks as guns, rags as flags, they march forth. One, two, three!” (Andong 1946b, 1:35). Note again the red, blood-tipped sword, as well as the red flag of the Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army and the uniform dress and coloring of the children (figure 19).



Figure 17. “I love guns, I love guns.” *Source*: Andong (1946b, 1:36).

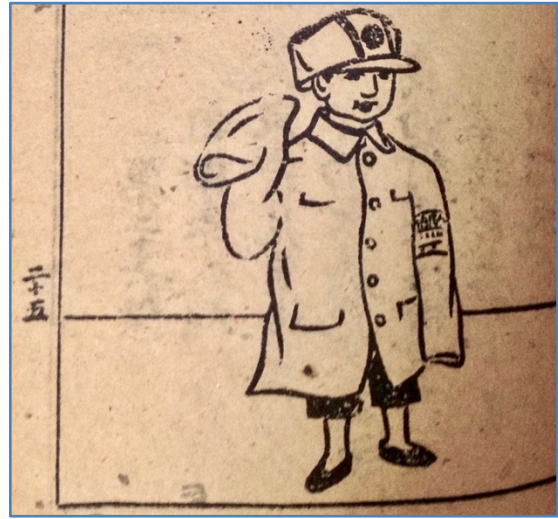


Figure 18 (left).³⁴ A troop of small soldiers. *Source:* Andong (1946b, 1:35).

Figure 19 (right). “Dressing up in big brother’s uniform.” *Source:* Andong (1946b, 2:25).



Figure 20. Cover of the *Chuji xiaoxue suanshu keben* (Lower-elementary arithmetic textbook). *Source:* *Chuji xiaoxue suanshu keben* (1949).

The militarization of children even extended to some unlikely corners of the schoolbook genre, such as mathematics workbooks. Communist mathematics texts such as the 1949 *Chuji xiaoxue suanshu keben* (Lower-elementary arithmetic textbook)—the cover of which (figure 20) again depicts children as modern, adultlike actors engaged in productive and collaborative activities—made military conflict a common narrative framework for mathematics instruction. As one question asks, “If you kill 1,561 Japanese devils [*guizi*] and kill 756 Nationalist puppet troops [*weijun*], how many have you killed in total? If you injure 684 Japanese devils and 1,187 Nationalist puppet troops, how many have you injured in total?” Lest there be any doubt that the actors here were intended to be children, a question a few lines down clarified the point: “If 1,300 of the youth soldiers themselves are injured and 730 are killed, how many are killed or injured in total?” (*Chuji xiaoxue suanshu keben* 1949, 5:23).³⁵

Although the nature of the labor may have been different in the case of militarization, partly because it was gendered in a different way, as with the visualization of agricultural and industrial work, asking children to imagine themselves as soldiers rewrote the terms on which children were meant to envision their childhoods. This co-opting of children’s imaginations for the sake of nation-building was partly an epistemic change—not only did childhood become nationalized and children become national actors, but the productive capacity of children became a national concern. It was also a real change for children’s lives, demanding children’s active participation in agricultural work in a context that looked beyond the household, through the institution of the school. And although most young children did not serve as actual soldiers or forge broadswords themselves, they could start contributing as workshop assistants or by fetching water and washing clothes for soldiers, before growing up to become just the sorts of soldiers and industrial laborers they imagined themselves to be. The 1940s reconstruction of children as constituting a community that both could and should harness their labor potential for the sake of the nation—as peasants, industrial laborers, and soldiers—marked the culmination of the Chinese state’s turning of children into citizens.

Conclusion

In the fall of 1945, at the close of one war and on the brink of another, China was home to perhaps eighty million children under the age of ten—a number roughly equal to the populations of England and France combined. Is it any wonder, then, that at this time of crisis

China turned to its children? Its efforts to incorporate lower-elementary students into the production of the national polity fundamentally transformed Chinese notions of children and childhood. Indeed, the growing rhetorical push to recognize that “children are not only ‘the masters [*zhuren*] of the future,’ but, moreover, the ‘little masters of the present,’” as one parenting journal (Fang 1945, 11–12) put it, made the reconstruction of Chinese childhood one of the focal points of China’s modernization.

To be sure, both Nationalist and Communist educators, in urban as well as rural areas, were keen to teach children “how to love one’s country and how to manage national matters” (Fang 1945, 12), and part of the reimagining of children as national actors certainly built on earlier Republican trends. But the postwar years marked a key turning point.³⁶ If mid-Republican-era educational efforts to produce newly modernized national citizens made the idea of child-citizens thinkable, and if the lived experiences of the Second Sino-Japanese War made them socially visible, then the years that followed gave the child-citizen concrete expression as a new universal ideal. The creation of a national community of future-oriented, laboring child-citizens who shared a common set of goals and responsibilities, across conventional geographic and socioeconomic divides—this was a novel phenomenon.

For Communist educators, projecting this vision was fraught with difficulty, due partly to the tension between wanting children to be producers and wanting them to be students: educators desired that children imagine themselves as adults and engage in adult behavior, but they also had to preserve a distinction between childhood and adulthood to give children a reason to attend school at all. Additionally, because most rural children were in one way or another already involved in productive work at home, most probably knew that, in reality, there was little to idealize about peasant life. Children of the 1940s lived in a state of tremendous instability, with older brothers dying in war, younger siblings dying of disease, and everyone vulnerable to famine or banditry.

Writing about Chinese textbooks earlier in the century, Peter Zarrow has concluded that on the one hand textbooks fostered “an image of a world that did not exist.... On the other, the gap between reality and ideal was precisely the point: students were being equipped to build such a world” (2015, 247). Although this tension applied to postwar textbooks as well, the vision of that world, along with the image of its builders, had changed. Textbooks promised children not just a return to normalcy, but the creation of a new vision entirely. CCP textbooks addressed the

contradictions of rural ideals and realities by tying the idealization of rural life to a conception of the nation in which all children could feel invested. Moreover, these books held that although children would need to work, they no longer had to do it alone, for now they could do so in a network of communities that together constituted the nation. Teaching Chinese children to imagine themselves as part of a larger community, together with other members facing similar problems, was a critical intervention. What solace it provided is difficult to gauge, but at the very least it provided the promise thereof. And for children like second grader Shi Changrong (see figure 13), the promise seems to have sufficed: “This year is better than previous years,” he wrote in 1946 (Andong 1946b, 3:5).

Educators addressed the tension between wanting children to be producers and wanting them to be in school by both imagining school as the primary locus of children’s agricultural work and casting study as a kind of labor itself. “Little friend, you must be diligent!” the *Guoyu* textbook warns. “Don’t play, don’t fool around. You should labor enthusiastically, you should study diligently; only by improving every day are you a good member of the nation [*guomin*]” (Andong 1946b, 3:20). This recasting of study as labor had two effects. Discursively, it placed children at the center of the nation; in practice, it removed children from home economies and transplanted them to regional schools. At the same time, it empowered children to imagine themselves doing things adults could not: through schooling, they could learn and pass their knowledge on to adults who had grown up under the “old society” and had lacked the opportunities that children now had.

Textbooks made these transformations possible. Textbooks mattered because they were one of the primary means for socializing children into the imagined community of the nation: they systematically exposed children to issues of national importance (such as the Second Sino-Japanese War and the importance of economic production), made children feel invested in these issues by relating them to their daily lives, and then tethered this complex of associations to the institution of the school, which in turn helped undermine children’s natal bonds and reinforce their newly nation-oriented outlook. Textbooks socialized children into another kind of “imagined community” as well: a community of young readers who were bonded to one another, across village and regional lines, by having read the same stories and used the same books—not only in the schools that brought them together, but also jointly with thousands of children they did not know, in schools across China. The plight of Bu Qiang, the redemption of Wen Fugui,

and the example of the indolent smoker relegated to living among pigs and dogs—these created a shared canon from which all could learn.

Ultimately, by bringing the borders of the nation to readers' doorsteps in locally inflected ways, textbooks achieved a kind of cognitive "time-space compression" (to adapt Harvey 1990, 201–291), which rewrote the terms of children's relationships to their surroundings. Temporally, late-1940s schoolbooks lent a sense of immediacy to the future by teaching children to visualize it in concrete terms and imagine living it out in adult roles—as soldiers, peasants, factory workers, and other productive members of "new society." Spatially, by encouraging children to think in terms of the nation rather than their natal families, textbooks helped readers develop a translocal mindset under which any child could, at a moment's fancy, leap onto a wooden horse and ride to Yan'an,³⁷ or embrace his or her individual responsibilities toward building the new nation.

Perhaps most importantly of all, the making of modern China became an enterprise that was opened to every child—rural and urban, male and female, *liulang ertong* as well as bourgeois boys such as Wen Fugui. Nation-building was no longer just an elite enterprise, and nation-builders were no longer just adult reformers and adolescents. These discourses and identities had trickled down to the youngest and poorest members of society. Suddenly every child could be, and was expected to be, a modern Chinese national whose social value lay in his or her productive capacity. This functional democratization of Chinese childhood created a shared set of ideals regardless of the experiential differences separating children of different classes, genders, and regional identities. Although textbooks were not the only factor in this process, they were arguably the most powerful vehicle for articulating and realizing the new vision. Textbooks taught children to imagine themselves as part of the nation, work for the nation, and reorient their labor from their families to that nation. Starting at the age of five or six, all children would know not only that they belonged to a nation but also that they had to earn their place in it.

As first the Republican and then the Communist state situated the notion of the child and the problem of child pedagogy at the center of their nationalizing projects, the construction and reconstruction of the modern Chinese child became the necessary precondition to the construction of the new Chinese nation. The Second Sino-Japanese War lent this project particular urgency, and in its aftermath, the ideal of the productive child spread to encompass all

children. Whether in Northeast China or elsewhere, children increasingly learned to think of themselves as national, laboring adults: as factory workers who made pots and guns to be used across geographic boundaries, as zealous soldiers who counted the fallen bodies of their enemies by the hundreds, and as industrious peasants who farmed not for their families but for the state. Through this reimagining of China's children as part of a nationalized, child-centric world whose every member held productive responsibilities toward the nation, postwar elementary school textbooks provided both the model and the means for bringing that new nation to fruition.

Carl Kubler is a doctoral student in Chinese history at the University of Chicago. His research has been supported by the Henry Luce Foundation/ACLS Program in China Studies, the Esherick-Ye Family Foundation, the Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. Travel Fellowship at Harvard Business School, and the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Chicago.

Notes

- 1 Despite the pioneering efforts of Saari (1990) and Kinney (1995), only in recent years, in scattered articles and dissertations, have historians begun embracing mid-twentieth-century Chinese children and childhood as categories for sustained historical analysis. See, e.g., Apter (2013), Chang (2012), Plum (2006), Pozzi (2014b), and Tillman (2013); for an earlier, governmental perspective, see Ridley et al. (1971). For relevant discussion in the field of literary studies, see also Farquhar (1995) and Jones (2011). The relative historiographical neglect of Chinese childhood has several causes. The first is historiographical and is grounded in a common perception of children as primarily “passive” historical actors: because children exist as the fundamental dependents of human society, the reasoning goes, they typically lack the kind of agency that makes for fruitful historical analysis. A second reason is methodological and is grounded in the logistical difficulties that such research can pose for the researcher: not only do children leave few written records, but the operation of the subfield of children's history at the intersection of such varied disciplines as developmental psychology, sociology, education studies, comparative literature, and demography can also make it difficult to determine how best to approach such a multifaceted topic, with little consensus on what methods to employ or even what questions to ask. For an overview of some of these methodological debates in the social history of childhood, refer to Fass (2007).
- 2 See, among others, Culp (2007), Lanza (2010), Luper (1995), MacFarquhar (2006), Schmalzer (2015), and Wasserstrom (1991).
- 3 Regardless of whether one accepts Philippe Ariès's (1962) classic contention that childhood is a uniquely modern invention, it seems clear that notions of childhood, where they have existed, have varied across time and place. In the Chinese context, Hsiung (2005) has demonstrated the existence of childhood as a distinct phase of development since at least late imperial times. In this article, I treat both the “child” (*haizi*, *wawa*, *ertong*) and “youth” (*qingnian*, *shaonian*, *ertong*) as biosocial constructs. Although there

- certainly was some overlap between the two categories, with *ertong* encompassing the upper bound of the former as well as the lower bound of the latter, I focus here on those younger individuals who were traditionally viewed as full dependents of their natal families, in the first few grades of primary school, and (to use a biological yardstick for convenience's sake) approximately between the ages of five and ten.
- 4 On the idea of the nation as an imagined community, see Anderson (1991, 5–7).
- 5 Writing on the nationalization of English schoolchildren after the Industrial Revolution, Ahier called for a “move away from an account of the way textbook writers expressed the values of their class or of the class above them to a pre-given childhood.” Instead he focused on “questions of production; how a set of conventions became established and dictated what could be said; how the adjective ‘English’ was filled with meaning; how, in the attempted definition of national identity the images of the rural and the urban evolved.... These texts are not just to be read and understood by English schoolchildren but the English child is also to be read, understood, and constructed by the texts” (1988, 72).
- 6 This urgency was compounded by the fact that, due to wartime difficulties, many prewar textbooks had remained in use in areas under Chinese control, with only ad hoc supplementary materials addressing the Japanese invasion. The KMT’s *Wartime General Knowledge Textbook*, for example, was written in under a month from July 5 to August 1, 1938, just in time for the new school year. Others were even more hastily composed; the publishers of the CCP’s 1943 *General Knowledge Textbook* had to revert to woodblock printing because they were constantly on the move. See Shandong (1938) and Shanxi-Chahar-Hebei (1943).
- 7 On these publishers, see Reed (2010, 277).
- 8 For further discussion of the juvenile market’s commercial importance, see Jones (2011, 119–125).
- 9 Chinese primary education was traditionally divided into two stages: *chuji* (lower elementary), encompassing grades one through four, and *gaoji* (upper elementary), consisting of grades five and six. In theory, each *ce* (volume) of a textbook corresponded to one semester’s worth of material, although pacing often varied from school to school.
- 10 It is perhaps partly for this reason that the texts survived at all. Stamps on the back covers indicate that the *Guoyu* volumes were acquired by the Reference Division of the Department of State in November 1947, reflecting U.S. governmental interest in Communist (re)education methods. The four-volume series is currently stored in the East Asian Collection of the University of Chicago, although how they entered the library’s holdings is unclear; it is possible that they left the Reference Division as a result of downsizing during the 1948 integration of the department’s library with the holdings of the Office of Strategic Services. Roger Garren, e-mail communication with Ralph J. Bunche Library Reference Librarian, U.S. Department of State, February 1, 2016.
- 11 Scholars have generally traced the conceptual genesis of modern China’s “national language” to the New Culture Movement, citing a series of articles by Hu Shi in the journal *New Youth* in 1917 and 1918. In the words of Elizabeth Kaske, Hu’s articles “introduced two new concepts. First, Hu developed a holistic concept of the ‘national language’ as one inseparable entity of the written and the spoken. Second... he developed a synchronic concept of the ‘nation’ that was to give the territorial unity of the present

- priority over the cultural authenticity of the past” (Kaske 2008, 456; Hu 1917, 233–235). But despite the early crystallization of these discourses and their continued development among intellectuals after May 4, 1919, the idea of a “national language” likely remained distant from most children’s lives until the Nationalist reforms of 1928–1930, and even then it remained a primarily urban phenomenon. Due to subsequent interruption by the Second Sino-Japanese War, the majority of children probably did not begin engaging seriously with the idea of a national language until the 1940s.
- 12 “The fifteenth day of the eighth month of the thirty-fourth year of the Republic” (August 15, 1945).
- 13 The preceding lesson explains how during the period of Japanese occupation, Chinese children had to eat *gaoliang* (sorghum) because the Japanese took all the *dami* (white rice) for themselves.
- 14 During Japanese occupation, schools in occupied zones typically instituted bilingual instruction with Japanese alongside the local Chinese or Mongolian vernacular. For the mandatory civics courses that accompanied the history, geography, and language curriculum as part of Manchukuo’s identity-building project, Japanese-language instruction occupied just under half of the average fifteen hours per week that were allotted to teaching civics (Flick 2014, 225–227).
- 15 This came with a rapid shift away from the prominent role that Confucian morals had occupied in most Republican texts and under the Manchukuo educational system. For discussion of the role of Confucius in the 1920s–1930s and Manchukuo education, see Zarrow (2015, 77–96) and Hall (2003).
- 16 Unsurprisingly, CCP textbook authors saw the problem of establishing a unified “China view” for differing urban and rural audiences as one of the central issues of political education. See the discussion in Huabei (1949, 3–4).
- 17 For a more detailed discussion of traditional Ming-Qing primers such as the *Qianziwen* and similar texts, see chapters 2 and 3 in Bai (2005).
- 18 On Republican efforts to make the urban poor work, see Chen (2012).
- 19 For typical examples of mid-Republican animal fairy tales, see Wang et al. (1931, 5:56–57).
- 20 In fact, textbooks routinely encouraged students to use their imaginations to cross vast physical distances and shrink the size of the world. Traditional games of make-believe were adapted to such purposes. “Young sister and younger brother ride bamboo horses—where to?” asks a lesson in a Yan’an textbook from 1946. The answer comes on the following pages: “Go! Go! Go! One! Two! Three! Little sister rides her bamboo horse and says she wants to go to Yan’an. Go! Go! Go! Three! Two! One! Little brother rides his bamboo horse and wants to meet Chairman Mao” (Liu [1946] 1974, 1:16–18). Simple horseplay is no longer enough. It must be directed outward, toward the Party and the nation, bringing the boundaries of the nation to readers’ doorsteps along the way.
- 21 Susan Glosser (2003, 38–44), Wen-hsin Yeh (1990), and other scholars have discussed at length the critiques against the Confucian order during the May Fourth period, which had major repercussions for the restructuring of Chinese family life. Nonetheless, the *xiao jiating* (small family) ideal primarily concerned adult relationships and roles, and the domestic status of young children remained relatively unchanged even as mothers gained new responsibilities for educating them for a life outside the home. Ideas of Confucian

- order also endured in textbooks because of their relevance to practical considerations of classroom order.
- 22 Cf. the discussion of labor and Engels's thesis on evolution in Schmalzer (2008, 58–62); see also the discussion on the importance of cultivating children's *laodong guandian* (labor perspective) in Jiaoyu (1950).
- 23 The characters of Wen Fugui's name mean "literary wealthy noble." In the context of the rural community where he lives, his name and behavior testify to the expanding vision of childhood that grouped children of both elite and common backgrounds under a single ideal.
- 24 On Republican textbooks' emphasis on individual self-sufficiency, see also Zarrow (2015, 101–102).
- 25 This rhetoric prefigured, in a way, the communes of the Great Leap Forward; children using such postwar textbooks would have been in their late teens by the time the first communes were formed.
- 26 Writing about the mass-literacy movement of the 1950s, Glen Peterson has argued that, "contrary to what is often assumed, the early PRC state was not possessed of a consuming interest in mass literacy. Rather...early 1950s approaches to 'peasant education' were heavily conditioned by the Party's wartime experience in popular education, which emphasized political mobilization more than literacy acquisition" and which functioned primarily as a means of binding peasants physically to their agricultural units and mentally to the discursive world of the party (Peterson 2004, 218). Although my article does not intend to evaluate the extent of the CCP's 'true' interest in mass literacy, I would agree that both education in general and the specific recasting of Chinese children as productive citizens were efforts in social control. A key part of this endeavor was the school-mediated reconstruction of Chinese childhood as an extrafamilial state.
- 27 Literally, "do the labor of oxen."
- 28 In reality, such arrangements must have been quite rare in the countryside. But regardless of the frequency of their occurrence, the point is that textbooks routinized such occurrences and passed this imagined separation of child and home along to children.
- 29 For the reader, the absence of *Zhuyin fuhao* was also an immediately perceptible difference that visually marked Communist texts as distinct from Nationalist ones (see figures 2 and 3). However, not all characters had *Zhuyin* annotations, since lessons were cumulative and typically provided pronunciation guides only for those characters that had not been introduced previously.
- 30 See, for example, Jiang (1957, 5:25–27).
- 31 See also Liu ([1946] 1974, 3:1).
- 32 See also Plum (2012).
- 33 For further discussion of this cartoon, see Pozzi (2014a, 129–131).
- 34 The chapters on the child-soldier troop, guns, and cannons occur in consecutive lessons.
- 35 It is worth noting that although such mathematics problems did not make gender-based distinctions, and although texts related to child militarization left an opening for girls to imagine themselves as soldiers too, the printed images predominantly featured boys. In fact, throughout the texts examined, there appears to be a tension between describing a world of relatively gender-neutral possibilities on the one hand and portraying a world of gendered differences on the other. For example, even as texts exhorted both girls and

- boys to embrace work in service of the nation, references to readers' parents or older siblings tended to reproduce traditional gender divisions, showing older sisters spinning at home while older brothers were off at war. But local variation was considerable, and many publishers were fairly inconsistent with respect to gender. Further research is necessary for drawing firmer conclusions about gendered distinctions in the visions projected to children.
- 36 To the extent that this was a story of Nationalist "failure" and Communist "success," it was not entirely for lack of effort on the part of Nationalist educators. Although the dynamics of Nationalist and Communist approaches to early childhood education still need to be explored more fully, three other factors apparently hampered Nationalist educators: some textbooks' lingering attempts to cling to Confucian rhetoric as a way of renormalizing social order, the need for major Republican publishers to maintain continuity with existing textbook lines, and the difficulty of pitching radically new visions to children whose parents had grown up using more traditional texts (and who were the primary decision makers for purchases of supplementary textbooks).
- 37 Cf. note 20.

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