

Ancient China's Genre
Painting
Featuring Children



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Preface

Child imagery has played an important role in China's traditional art of painting. The earliest depictions of children were found during the Warring States Period (475–221 BC). However, it's after more than a millennium that genre paintings featuring children had their heyday in the Song Dynasty (960–1279).

A significant number of children's portraits had been created in history. Overall, child subjects fall into three categories: playing children, shepherd

boys, and peddlers.

Zhang Xuan and Zhou Fang were two portrait painters of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) good at depicting children at play. Popular children's games in ancient times include playing house, fighting on "horseback", cricket-fighting, and so on. Su Hanchen of the Song Dynasty began to establish romantic associations linking childhood with naivety in his artworks, which were drawn with meticulous observations. "Children at Play in

an Autumn Garden” was his representative work.

Both paintings of shepherd boys and of peddlers are full of local flavor. A peddler who sells toys and snacks can always attract children’s interest. Genre paintings featuring a peddler and the children around were very popular during the Song and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties. Li Song of the Song had painted three pictures under the title of “Portrait of a Peddler,” now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York,

Cleveland Museum of Art, and Palace Museum in Taipei respectively.

Famous painters focusing on child subjects in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties include Qiu Ying, Lü Wenying, Yao Wenhan, and Jiao Bingzhen. In addition, “baby imagery” derived from Spring Festival woodcuts became a great favorite of ordinary people, as it usually contains the auspicious implication of “many sons, many blessings.”

Contents

Portraits of Children in the Tang Dynasty

12	Feet of Chinese Unicorn (Partial)	Zhou Fang
14	Feet of Chinese Unicorn (Partial)	Zhou Fang
15	Feet of Chinese Unicorn (Partial)	Zhou Fang
16	Feet of Chinese Unicorn (Partial)	Zhou Fang
17	Two Kids (Incomplete)	Painter unknown

Portraits of Children in the Song Dynasty

20	Children at Play in an Autumn Garden (Partial)	Su Hanchen
22	Five Mascots (Partial)	Su Hanchen
23	Washing the Statue of Buddha	Su Hanchen
24	Children at Play (Partial)	Su Hanchen
25	Children at Play (Partial)	Su Hanchen
26	Children at Play (Partial)	Su Hanchen
27	Children at Play in an Autumn Garden (Partial)	Su Hanchen

28	One Hundred Children at Play (Partial)	Su Hanchen
29	One Hundred Children at Play (Partial)	Su Hanchen
30	One Hundred Children at Play (Partial)	Su Hanchen
32	One Hundred Children at Play (Partial)	Su Hanchen
33	One Hundred Children at Play (Partial)	Su Hanchen
34	One Hundred Children at Play (Partial)	Su Hanchen
35	One Hundred Children at Play (Partial)	Su Hanchen
36	One Hundred Children at Play (Partial)	Su Hanchen
38	Portrait of an Actor	Su Hanchen
39	Portrait of a Peddler	Su Hanchen
40	Children at Play	Painter unknown
41	Picking Dates (Partial)	Painter unknown
42	Children at Play in Winter Garden (Partial)	Painter unknown
43	Children at Play in Dragon Boat Festival (Partial)	Su Zhuo
44	Portrait of a Peddler	Li Song

45	Peddling	Li Song
46	Children Living in Harmony (Partial)	Painter unknown
47	Children Living in Harmony (Partial)	Painter unknown
48	Grazing in an Autumn Forest (Partial)	Liu Songnian
49	Children at Play in a Garden	Painter unknown
50	Children at Play in an Autumn Garden	Painter unknown
51	Ball-playing in the Shade of a Plantain Tree	Painter unknown
52	One Hundred Children at Play	Painter unknown
53	One Hundred Children at Play	Painter unknown
54	Returning Drunkenly on <i>Chun-she</i> Day	Painter unknown
55	Wenji Returning Home	Painter unknown
56	Child and Two Cats	Painter unknown
57	Children at Play Outside a Lotus Pavilion	Painter unknown

Portraits of Children in the Yuan Dynasty

60	Solidarity (Partial)	Painter unknown
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61	Solidarity (Partial)	Painter unknown
62	Children at Play in Summer (Partial)	Painter unknown
63	Children at Play in Autumn (Partial)	Painter unknown
64	Portrait of a Peddler	Painter unknown
65	Return of Child Cowherds in the Shade of Willow Trees	Painter unknown

Portraits of Children in the Ming Dynasty

68	Children at Play	Qiu Ying
69	A Facsimile Painting of Song Dynasty	Qiu Ying
70	A Facsimile Painting of Song Dynasty	Qiu Ying
71	A Facsimile Painting of Song Dynasty	Qiu Ying
72	Watching the Children Catching Willow Catkins (Partial)	Zhou Chen
73	Portrait of Figures (Partial)	Qiu Ying
74	Peddler in Spring	Lü Wenying
75	Peddler in Summer	Lü Wenying
76	Peddler in Autumn	Lü Wenying

77	Peddler in Winter	Lü Wenying
78	Peddler	Painter unknown
79	Portrait of the Laughing Buddha	Painter unknown
80	Peddlers	Painter unknown

Portraits of Children in the Qing Dynasty

84	Children at Play	Jin Tingbiao
86	First Day of the Lunar New Year (Partial)	Jin Tingbiao
87	First Day of the Lunar New Year (Partial)	Jin Tingbiao
88	Celebrating the First Day of the Lunar New Year	Yao Wenhan
89	Celebrating the First Day of the Lunar New Year (Partial)	Yao Wenhan
90	Celebrating the First Day of the Lunar New Year (Partial)	Yao Wenhan
91	Lunar Calendar Months (December) (Partial)	Painter unknown
92	Peace and Pleasure	Painter unknown
93	Peace and Pleasure	Painter unknown
94	Peace and Pleasure	Painter unknown

95	Peace and Pleasure	Painter unknown
96	Celebrating Lantern Festival	Painter unknown
98	Children at Play Under Palm and Banana Trees	Wang Ruxue
99	Auspicious Happiness	Feng Ning
100	Children at Play	Shen Qinglan
101	Early Spring	Painter unknown
102	Children at Play	Painter unknown
103	One Hundred Children at Play	Jiao Bingzhen
104	One Hundred Children at Play	Jiao Bingzhen
105	One Hundred Children at Play	Jiao Bingzhen
106	One Hundred Children at Play	Jiao Bingzhen
107	One Hundred Children at Play	Jiao Bingzhen
108	One Hundred Children at Play	Jiao Bingzhen

110 Appendix

Portraits of Children in the Tang Dynasty

In the flourishing Tang Dynasty (618–907) figure paintings were very popular. Many painters portrayed Buddha, immortals, emperors, beautiful women as well as children to cater to the tastes and interest of the upper-class society.

Child imagery can be found in some Buddhist murals and incomplete silk scrolls. For instance, the images of a donor's 12 sons were painted on the walls of cave no. 130 of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, northwest China's Gansu Province. And an incomplete

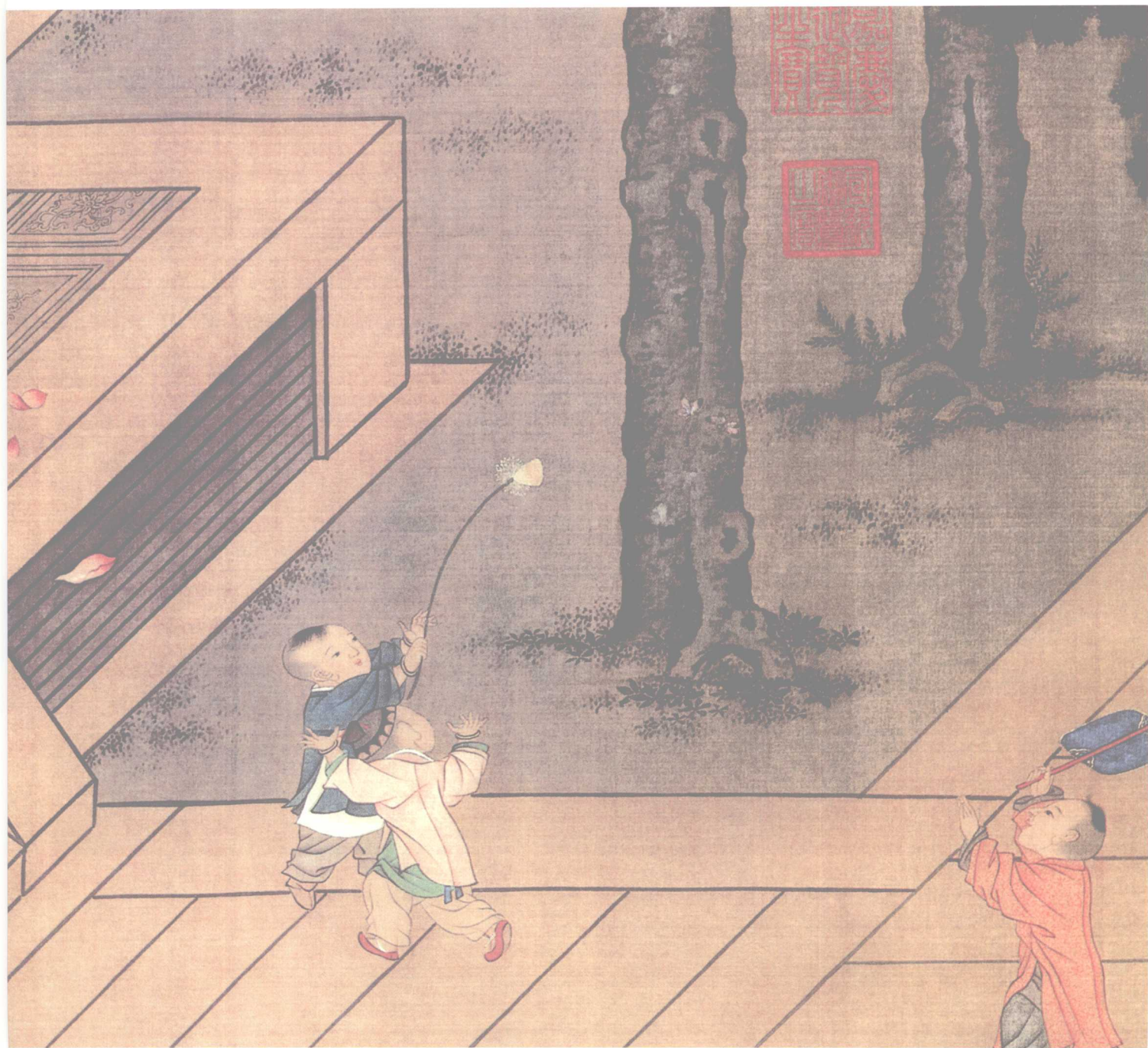
silk scroll kept in the Museum of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region portrays two kids who are frolicking on the grass.

Famous portraitist Zhang Xuan created a lot of genre paintings featuring noble ladies and their children. His "Court Ladies Preparing Newly-woven Silk" is spiced with images of several naughty kids. Another portraitist Zhou Fang, in his long scroll titled "Feet of Chinese Unicorn," vividly depicted the daily life of kids of the royal family.

Feet of Chinese Unicorn (Partial)
(attributed to) Zhou Fang
Tang Dynasty (618–907)
Color on silk
36.7 × 328cm

Zhou Fang, whose dates are unknown, came from an aristocratic family in Chang'an (the present Xi'an city of Shaanxi Province). He was celebrated for his portraits of court ladies and Buddha subjects. "Feet of Chinese unicorn (or *kylin*)" used to refer to virtuous scions of royal stock. This long scroll depicting the world of children was formerly attributed to Zhou, but now people believe that it came from the hand of a Ming Dynasty painter.







Feet of Chinese Unicorn (Partial)
 (attributed to) Zhou Fang
 Tang Dynasty (618–907)
 Color on silk
 36.7 × 328cm

This section of the long scroll portrays a noble lady on an arm-chair watching attentively her children being bathed by a maidservant.



Feet of Chinese Unicorn (Partial)
 (attributed to) Zhou Fang
 Tang Dynasty (618–907)
 Color on silk
 36.7 × 328cm

This section of the long scroll portrays a noble lady playing with her two children on a rug, while a third one led by a maidservant is eager to join them.