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# CHILDREN IN CHINA

ORNA NAFTALI

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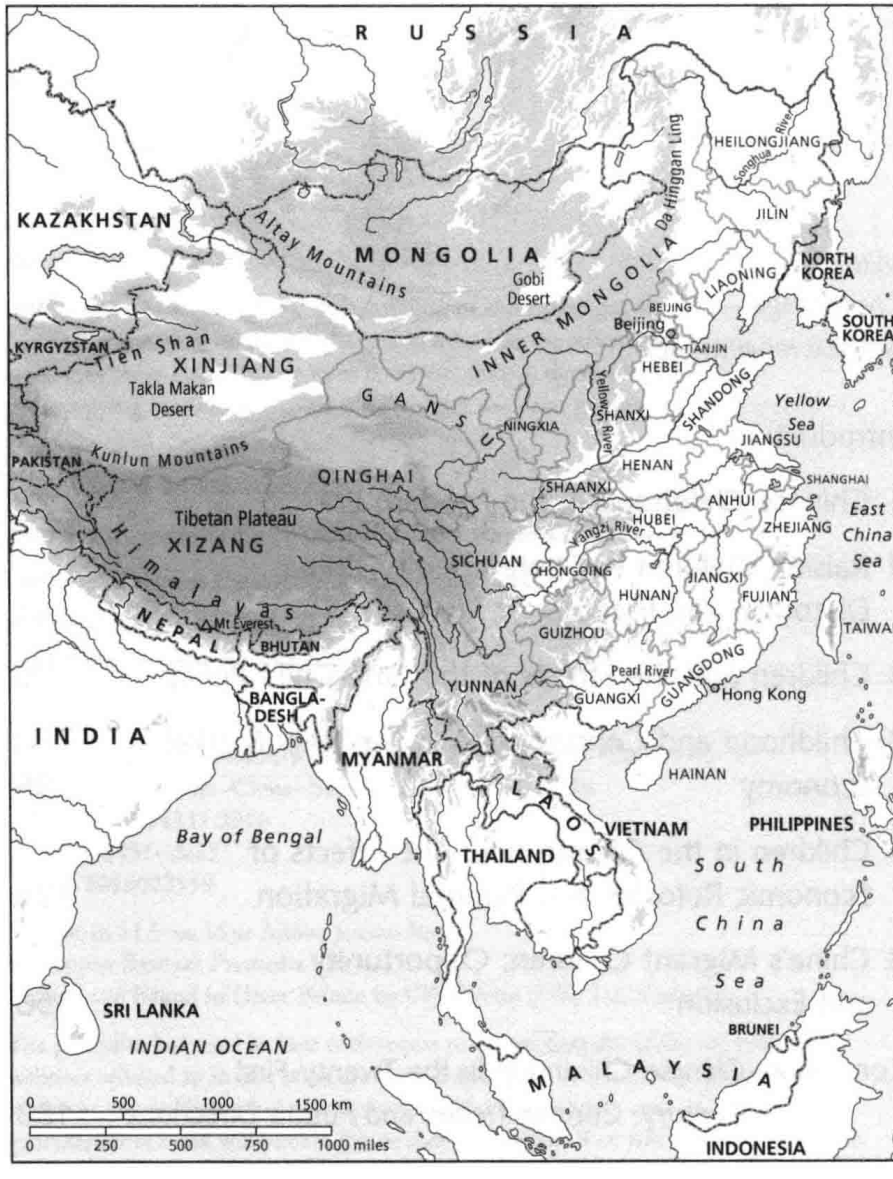
R U S S I A
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Altay Mountains
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VIETNAM
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Bay of Bengal
THAILAND
South China Sea
SRI LANKA
INDIAN OCEAN
BRUNEI
MALAYSIA
INDONESIA
0 500 1000 1500 km
0 250 500 750 1000 miles

# Chronology

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|---|---|
| 1894–1895 | First Sino-Japanese War |
| 1911 | Fall of the Qing dynasty |
| 1912 | Republic of China established under Sun Yat-sen |
| 1927 | Split between Nationalists (KMT) and Communists (CCP); civil war begins |
| 1934–1935 | CCP under Mao Zedong evades KMT in Long March |
| December 1937 | Nanjing Massacre |
| 1937–1945 | Second Sino-Japanese War |
| 1945–1949 | Civil war between KMT and CCP resumes |
| October 1949 | KMT retreats to Taiwan; Mao founds People's Republic of China (PRC) |
| 1950–1953 | Korean War |
| 1953–1957 | First Five-Year Plan; PRC adopts Soviet-style economic planning |
| 1954 | First constitution of the PRC and first meeting of the National People's Congress |
| 1956–1957 | Hundred Flowers Movement, a brief period of open political debate |
| 1957 | Anti-Rightist Movement |
| 1958–1960 | Great Leap Forward, an effort to transform China through rapid industrialization and collectivization |

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|---|---|
| March 1959 | Tibetan Uprising in Lhasa; Dalai Lama flees to India |
| 1959–1961 | Three Hard Years, widespread famine with tens of millions of deaths |
| 1960 | Sino-Soviet split |
| 1962 | Sino-Indian War |
| October 1964 | First PRC atomic bomb detonation |
| 1966–1976 | Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution; Mao reasserts power |
| February 1972 | President Richard Nixon visits China; "Shanghai Communiqué" pledges to normalize US–China relations |
| September 1976 | Death of Mao Zedong |
| October 1976 | Ultra-Leftist Gang of Four arrested and sentenced |
| December 1978 | Deng Xiaoping assumes power; launches Four Modernizations and economic reforms |
| 1978 | One-Child family planning policy introduced |
| 1979 | United States and China establish formal diplomatic ties; Deng Xiaoping visits Washington |
| 1979 | PRC invades Vietnam |
| 1982 | Census reports PRC population at more than one billion |
| December 1984 | Margaret Thatcher co-signs Sino-British Joint Declaration agreeing to return Hong Kong to China in 1997 |
| 1986 | Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China introduced |
| 1989 | Tiananmen Square protests culminate in June 4 military crackdown |
| 1991 | Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of Minors introduced |

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|---|---|
| 1992 | Deng Xiaoping's Southern Inspection Tour re-energizes economic reforms |
| 1993–2002 | Jiang Zemin is president of PRC, continues economic growth agenda |
| 1994 | "Outline on the Implementation of Patriotic Education" published |
| 1999 | "Education for Quality" reform plan introduced nationwide |
| November 2001 | WTO accepts China as member |
| 2002–2012 | Hu Jintao, General-Secretary CCP (and President of PRC from 2003) |
| 2002–2003 | SARS outbreak concentrated in PRC and Hong Kong |
| 2006 | PRC supplants US as largest $CO_2$ emitter |
| August 2008 | Summer Olympic Games in Beijing |
| 2010 | Shanghai World Exposition |
| 2012 | Xi Jinping appointed General-Secretary of the CCP (and President of PRC from 2013) |

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# Contents

# Introduction

The period of life prior to adulthood is always a time of dramatic change. It is during childhood that social and gender roles are learned and personal identity is formed. But the perception of these changes in different historical and cultural contexts and the way these perceptions are felt in the lives of children of different social backgrounds is far from uniform. This book explores how recent processes of social and economic change are re-shaping the experience of childhood and the subjectivities of children in the People's of Republic of China, a country that has undergone a period of exceptionally rapid transformations, reversals, and innovations over the past decades.

Due to rapid economic development and demographic transitions, especially since the implementation of the One-Child Policy in the late 1970s, the size of China's child population has declined in recent decades and particularly over the past ten years or so. Yet China still has the largest population of children in the world. According to data from the country's Sixth National Census conducted in 2010, people under the age of 18 make up 21 percent of the nation's population and number 279 million (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2013). The massive size of the country and of its child population render any attempt to generalize about the nature of Chinese childhood or the experiences of individual children difficult.

Recognizing this limitation, this book nonetheless seeks to identify some of the major transformations that have occurred in the lives of children and in the meanings of childhood in post-1978 China. These

transformations include the rising importance of global, scientific models of childrearing and education, and the growing attention to children's personal rights and psychological needs – developments that in turn contribute to Chinese children's increasing empowerment and individualization at home and at school.

These developments are similar in many respects to those that took place in liberal, capitalist societies from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards (see Ariès 1962; Zelizer 1985; Stephens 1995; James et al. 1998; Heywood 2001; Archard 2004; Walkerdine 2005). What makes the Chinese case unique is not just the distinct political and socioeconomic conditions under which these processes have occurred, but also the exceptional pace and scale of the changes. As this book will show, a modern notion of children as autonomous individuals separate from the family and the kinship group had already begun to form in China during the republican and socialist periods. This idea became much more salient, however, following the introduction of market reforms, the One-Child Policy, and the Open Door Policy in the late 1970s. Due to the country's rapid demographic shift to an aging society, contemporary Chinese children have in a relatively short period been provided with an increased "scarcity value" and have been viewed as more deserving of precious attention. The emergence of a globalized consumer culture in post-socialist China, particularly since the 1990s, has further contributed to children's empowerment and individualization. New products, media, and services geared specifically towards the needs and interests of the young have reached the market, and children have won a new role as independent consumers and as key agents of cultural interpretation and social change.

These developments do not necessarily imply that contemporary Chinese children are "freer" or "happier" compared to their predecessors. The introduction of market reforms and the country's increasing integration within the global market economy may have provided

many children, especially those in urban areas, with better life conditions, but these processes have also contributed to a growing commercialization and standardization of Chinese childhood. As elsewhere in the post-industrial world, the lives of many children in China are also becoming more regimented to suit the demands of a neoliberal market economy while children's subjectivities are increasingly embedded in the normalizing regimes of modern psychological science.

Further, like adults, contemporary Chinese children do not escape structural constraints (see Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007: 242). Their ability to exercise their personal agency in the spheres of education, consumption, and family relations is crucially shaped by their socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as by their gender and ethnic identities. One of the central arguments I wish to make in this book is that the recent transformation in the nature of Chinese childhood and the increasing empowerment and individualization of Chinese children have been most evident among the ranks of urban, middle-class families of Han descent. Among these relatively affluent city families, a majority of children are now singletons whose lack of siblings has given them more power vis-à-vis their teachers, parents, and grandparents. Furthermore, urban caregivers who belong to – or wish to become members of – China's newly formed middle classes also tend to encourage their only-son or only-daughter to assert their individuality while viewing children's empowerment as a sign of their own "civility" and "progressivity".

In contrast, with the decline of social security and the widening gap between rich and poor in China, many rural families have to scramble to ensure their basic economic survival. Unlike urban boys and girls of middle-class backgrounds, China's migrant children living with their parents in the city, and rural children or ethnic minority children residing in the country's poorer areas, have also been much less able to assert their personal interests and desires at home or at school. These children must struggle for the attainment of a full course of basic education

and a physically and emotionally sound environment in which to develop.

Recent transformations in the nature of Chinese childhood are marked by additional contradictions and dilemmas. Even in the country's urban, more affluent areas, children's growing independence and consumer power have given rise to much apprehension among adults who fear that these developments might lead to moral chaos, social instability, or the loss of a distinctive cultural and national identity among China's young. As government institutions, teachers, and caregivers attempt to grapple with these perceived threats, they draw on – and negotiate with – divergent cultural models of childrearing and education.

These models are informed not only by global, neoliberal prescriptions for producing "high-quality", individualized citizens and workers for the new market economy, but also by a deep sense of nostalgia for the collectivist, egalitarian ethos of the Maoist period. Contemporary educators and caregivers further draw on the indigenous precepts of filial piety. Though this long-held ethos has undergone considerable mutations and modifications in the modern and contemporary period, it nonetheless continues to offer people in China a meaningful framework for raising a child who would become not only a successful laborer and consumer but also – and no less importantly – a moral, caring person.

## THE STUDY OF CHILDHOOD AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Unlike biological immaturity, "childhood" is neither a natural nor a universal feature of human groups but a specific structural and cultural component of societies (James and Prout 1997 [1990]: 8). Now a common theoretical premise for researchers working in the field of childhood studies, the idea of childhood as a social construction is in

fact a relatively recent theoretical development. Until the late 1970s, the anthropological study of childhood largely concentrated on how childrearing practices accounted for a particular "cultural personality"; on how socialization practices allowed a person to learn the ways of a given society or social group; or on linguistic and cognitive development in children (Hardman 1973; Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007). This body of work has supplied rich evidence for the variety of childrearing practices across different cultures. It has nonetheless overlooked the fact that childhood is a social category that is historically constructed and has also failed to consider that children may themselves contribute to the production of their own social lives (James and Prout 1997 [1990]; Schwartzman 2001; James 2007).

Recognizing these weaknesses and informed by developments in history, sociology, gender studies, and cultural studies, scholars have in recent decades begun to formulate a new conceptual framework for the study of childhood worldwide. This new framework posits that every society must recognize children as distinguishable from adults since such a recognition plays a crucial role in assuring physical care and socialization for vulnerable, immature human beings (Stephens 1995; Corsaro 1997: 53). However, different societies may at different times hold unique notions concerning the duration of childhood. Societies may also differ in the perceived features that distinguish "children" from "adults," and in the significance these features acquire in particular social and political contexts (Caputo 1995; Archard 2004: 31).

The study of childhood as a social construction therefore aims to analyze how different discursive practices produce different childhoods, "each and all of which are 'real' within their own regime of truth" (James and Prout 1997 [1990]: 27). When asking which set of attributes are accorded to children in a given time and place, scholars recognize that in all societies, notions of childhood are shaped in relation to structural variables, such as rates of fertility and life expectancy, organization of family life and kinship patterns, and different