

*Shaping the Ideal Child: Children and Their Primers in Late Imperial China.* By Limin Bai. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005. Pp. xxiv + 311. \$42.00.

Before most children could take on the archaic and formidable language of even the simplest of the classics, such as the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經) and the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), they acquired a functional literacy by reading primers. For students who would go on to study the classics, these simple texts laid the foundation for their knowledge of the written word. For students whose aim was merely functional literacy, the primers would constitute the core of their book knowledge. The extent to which these texts were known in Ming-Qing times reveals itself in the fact that encyclopaedias were sometimes indexed using the characters from the *Qianzi wen* 千字文 (*Thousand Character Essay*) — the authors of these encyclopaedias obviously assumed that their readers would have already committed the *Thousand Character Essay* to memory. Despite the fact that primers have played such a crucial role in molding the way Chinese view the world, *Shaping the Ideal Child* is the first book in English that plumbs this long neglected but significant topic. Indeed, that very few works in any language have been written on the primers magnifies this tome's potential importance.

Bai examines the entirety of the history of primers from pre-Qin times to the end of the nineteenth century, which allows her to show how changing historical conditions transformed the primers' forms and goals. She tells this fascinating story with a prose that is straightforward and jargon-free. As the title indicates, her primary aim is to show what elite Chinese, particularly Neo-Confucians, envisioned the ideal child to be and how they hoped to use primers to transform the behaviour of youngsters. Ascertaining how children were to be trained is especially important, Bai maintains, because Neo-Confucians viewed it as a means to create an ideal society. At the same time, Confucian education had a class edge: Neo-Confucians encouraged children of the elite to practice self-cultivation to perfect themselves, whereas the children of the lower classes were merely educated to make them into law-abiding citizens.

The author endeavours to establish these points in eight chapters. The first chapter provides historical background for the rest of the book. It discusses traditional Chinese notions concerning the nature and upbringing of children. Chinese generally believed that children were born with a positive innocence; however, both their environment and the lack of a proper education could lead them morally astray. To ensure that this innate goodness was not lost, children had to be subject to *xi* 習 "practice." What this entailed was making sure that children lived in a wholesome environment and engaged in learning activities that nurtured their moral development.

Chapter two lays the book's foundation by looking at early primers and the Neo-Confucian transformation of basic education. Before the Tang, primers were wordbooks that helped students become functionally literate by offering a basic vocabulary of Chinese characters; in other words, elementary education consisted of *shuxue* 書學 "knowledge of words." The most famous of the early wordbooks was Shi You's 史游 *Jijiu pian* 急就篇 (*The Chapter on Getting There Quickly*), a Han dynasty work. During the Tang and Song, more sophisticated primers, such as the *Qianzi wen*, *Kaimeng yaoxun* 開蒙要訓 (*The Essentials for Beginners*), *Mengqiu* 蒙求 (*Inquiries of the Ignorant*), and the *Sanzi jing* 三

字經 (*The Three Character Classic*) superseded the earlier wordbooks and were used in village schools. Although these rhymed works, conveniently designated as the *San Bai Qian* 三百千 (*Sanzi jing*, *Baijia xing* 百家姓 [*Surnames of the One Hundred Families*], and *Qianzi wen*) conveyed more Confucian ideas than the previous wordbooks, their emphasis still resided more in transmitting basic literacy and knowledge than in disseminating ideology. Song Neo-Confucians took an entirely different tack towards elementary instruction: Zhu Xi 朱熹 thought that primary education's main aim, even at the earliest stage, should be moral cultivation. Hence, his treatise on elementary education, *Xiaoxue* 小學 (*Elementary Learning*) and his primer *Tongmeng xuzhi* 童蒙須知 (*What Children Should Know*) put more stress on children honing their skills in performing ritually appropriate acts than learning new characters. In doing so, though, Neo-Confucian thinkers treated children as if they were adults or adults-in-training — they were oblivious to the fact that children might learn in different ways than adults.

Chapter three examines the impact that the teachings of Wang Yangming 王陽明 had on Ming-Qing primers. According to Bai, during the Song and Yuan periods, the educated élite became increasingly disenchanted with the wordbook primers, so they turned to Neo-Confucian elementary texts. Yet, by the Ming, wordbook primers, such as the *Sanzi jing* and its knock-offs, were again popular among the élite. For Bai the reason for this change has much to do with both the ideas of Wang Yangming and the growing emphasis on treating the Three Teachings (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism) as one. Whereas the Cheng-Zhu school thought that only scholar-officials truly had a chance of becoming enlightened through book learning, Wang Yangming thought that everyone, no matter what his socio-economic condition, could become a sage through moral behaviour. Even though he too thought that elementary education should teach moral cultivation, unlike the Cheng-Zhu school, he believed that children were different in nature from adults — they like to play and be free from restrictions. Hence, children should enjoy learning and lessons should be fun; accordingly, children should be taught through songs. At the same time, Bai seems to imply that Wang's emphasis on everyone's sagely potential led to the development of primers for common folk to improve their moral selves. However, rather than just looking to Neo-Confucianism for answers, commoners increasingly practiced deeds that all three of China's primary religious traditions deemed meritorious. This happened because the Three Religions all shared a common moral outlook, predominately Confucian, that both the élite and non-élite found attractive. This eclecticism led to the creation of popular educational texts, such as the *Zengguang xianwen* 增廣賢文 (*The Enlarged Collection of Wise Words*) and the *Longwen bianying* 龍文鞭影 (*The Young Horse and the Whip's Shadow*) that drew equally from Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and popular literature. The appearance of these ecumenical primers reflected the growing importance of merchants and social fluidity that set Ming-Qing times apart from others.

Chapters four and five return to the content and intent of the primers developed by Neo-Confucians during the Song and Yuan. Chapter four focuses on how Zhu Xi and his admirers thought that the best way to morally cultivate children was by encouraging them to perfectly execute the quotidian rituals of everyday life. Bai labels this process "ritualizing the body." Since Neo-Confucians assumed that the state of one's mind is reflected in one's external behaviour, they believed that having children perform the rites correctly would also correct

their thoughts. Ritualizing the body was thereby a basic form of self-cultivation. Hence, Neo-Confucian primers, such as Zhu Xi's *Tongmeng xuzhi*, placed heavy emphasis on telling children how they should behave, dress, eat, and wait upon superiors. Ming-Qing Neo-Confucians continued this emphasis, but they tried to make this kind of primer more palatable to youngsters. For example, Li Yuxiu's 李毓秀 *Dizi gui* 弟子規 (*Regulations for Disciples*) sets out rules of conduct for students, but does so in easy to remember three-character and rhymed sentences. Chapter five discusses the exemplars that Neo-Confucian scholars put forward for children to emulate. These figures were filial sons or child prodigies who earned their success through diligence. One of their most remarkable traits was their lack of childishness: these exemplars, no matter how young they were all acted like adults.

The last three chapters tie up the study's loose ends. Chapter six reiterates the author's point that, in late imperial times, the acquisition of literacy was inseparable from moral education. She does this by showing how advocates of the Qing's evidential school, such as Wang Yun 王筠 in his *Wenzi Mengqiu* 文字蒙求 (*Explanations of Characters for Children*) used the study of written characters to teach moral development. That is, educators stressed the Confucian ideological content of each character being taught. For instance, in teaching students the character *nü* 女 (female, woman), the instructor would emphasize that it was a picture of a woman kneeling, thereby acknowledging the subordinate position of women. This chapter also contains a useful summary of the relative insignificance of mathematical education in pre-modern China. Chapter seven takes as its subject the education of peasant children during Ming-Qing times. Bai interestingly notes that even though the goal of Neo-Confucian education was to morally awaken children so that they could perfect themselves, when applied to the *hoi polloi*, it lost its lofty ideals. Despite the equalitarian rhetoric that anyone could become a sage, Ming-Qing Confucians merely hoped that education would make peasant children less likely to be morally corrupt or rebel. Nevertheless, the education offered to commoners was neither practical nor vocational. Ming-Qing literati attempted to deepen the reach of primers by writing them in the vernacular language and putting them in the easy-to-remember form of children's songs. The last chapter describes how western-influenced intellectuals, such as Liang Qichao 梁啟超, tried to adjust the content of primers to promote modernization. The elementary texts that they created were rhymed, written in the vernacular, and unlike their predecessors stressed practical knowledge. Bai also indicates that the curriculum of Christian mission schools in China probably heavily influenced the emphases of these modern primers.

One can use the book's scholarly apparatus with unusual ease. At the top of each endnote page is the subheader of "Notes to Chapter X." Although that might not sound like much, it enabled me to find the endnotes quickly and efficiently. The bibliography not only offers the usual primary and secondary sources sections, but also a list of selected primers. For each of the major primers discussed in the text, the author provides its Chinese title, English translation, and publication information. For those primers that can only be found in collectanea, the author likewise provides its title, in both English and Chinese, and the work's publication information. Through her conscientiousness, Bai has made it a snap for readers to see her notes and find her sources.

In a similar fashion, she has written a book that is interesting and readable. Her prose is clear and crisp. She relates a fascinating story about how books that started out merely to

help children become literate soon turned into ideological tools in the hands of Neo-Confucians. Nevertheless, they had a limited appeal to children because they were difficult to understand. As a result, Ming-Qing authors advocated teaching moral cultivation to young students, but they made a greater effort to generate primers in formats that were more user-friendly to both children and commoners. By extending the treatment of the subject into the twentieth century, Bai is able to indicate how, once Neo-Confucianism proved out of sync with modernity, primers once again promoted basic literacy; however, this time they also stressed practical knowledge. In short, the author does a commendable job of describing how primers fundamentally changed over a long stretch of time.

Yet, the picture that Bai paints is too vivid; the contours of its subject too well delineated. In other words, to lucidly present the primers' transformations, she has glossed over facts that complicate the image she is trying to put forward. To emphasize the significance of the ideological content of Neo-Confucian primers, she downplays the Confucian content of early primers, such as the *Qianzi wen*, *Mengqiu*, and even the *Sanzi jing*. Although their emphasis is on character acquisition, these works, especially the *Sanzi jing*, deliver a heady dose of Confucian moral teachings.<sup>1</sup> Bai herself confirms this in chapter seven when she notes that reformers like Lü Kun 呂坤 used the *Qianzi wen* and the *Sanzi jing* to instill Confucian norms in peasant youth (pp. 166–67). Consequently, in terms of ideological emphasis, the Neo-Confucian primers were different from earlier ones in degree rather than kind. Bai discounts the Confucian content of these earlier primers probably because she is echoing the prejudice of her Neo-Confucian subjects who disliked these texts because they conveyed some non-Confucian values. Here, I think Bai's argument would have been much more convincing if she delved more deeply into the primers' contents.

Again, in an effort to present a seamless picture, the author overemphasizes the importance of Neo-Confucian primers. Bai argues that the Song and Yuan educated élite despised the *San Bai Qian* texts and immediately adopted Zhu Xi's primers and ideas on elementary education; henceforth, the former were relegated to village schools for commoners (pp. 40–47). Bai's evidentiary basis for this contention, though, is merely the sentiments of two Yuan adherents of the Cheng-Zhu school: Cheng Duanli 程端禮 and Xiong Danian 熊大年 who hardly qualify as disinterested observers. Since the *Sanzi jing* appeared after Zhu Xi's death, in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, and is considered by many scholars as advocating Neo-Confucian ideas, Bai's dismissal of it seems particularly ill-considered. Moreover, since the primers written by Neo-Confucian philosophers proved to be too difficult for youngsters to read, it was precisely the *San Bai Qian* texts that continued to be used as primers, for both the élite and commoners, from the

<sup>1</sup> On the Confucian messages that the *Sanzi jing* seeks to convey, see James T. C. Liu, "The Classical Chinese Primer: Its Three-Character Style and Authorship," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105.2 (1985), pp. 191–96.

Song all the way through the Qing.<sup>2</sup> Underestimating the vitality of the *San Bai Qian* primers and their ideological content leads her credit the renewed Ming-Qing intellectual interest in primers to the influence of Wang Yangming's more liberal attitude towards children and basic education. Yet, unlike Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming never composed a primer, nor does Bai submit any convincing evidence that his ideas influenced later authors of primers. She does mention that one writer, Lu Shiyi 陸世儀, was impressed by his ideas and wanted to create a primer based on them; however, Lu's primer never saw the light of day. Consequently, one is left wondering why Bai bothered to devote a chapter of her work to his ideas and influence.

An important reason for the sketchy quality of Bai's narrative is that she seems to have relied mainly on the educational theories of major Neo-Confucian thinkers and the primers themselves as her sources. Bai can tell us what important Neo-Confucians thought about elementary education, but she cannot give us a vivid sense of how the primers were actually used. That is because she does not make much use of autobiographical and biographical accounts that could flesh out many of the details of her story. By relying on precisely these sources, Wu Pei-yi's essay "Education of Children in the Sung" provides us with a much more vivid and immediate feeling for how these texts were used and to what end.<sup>3</sup> Only when Bai describes peasant children through examining their appearance in paintings known as *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* does she look at alternate sources. By the way, this is the only place in the book where Bai has an extended discussion of the characteristics and conditions of children. The author's use of iconographical evidence to depict the hard, but relatively unrestricted lives of peasant children is refreshing and welcome. Nevertheless, here information from other historical sources would have well supplemented the pictorial sources and furnished a much fuller and convincing depiction.

Related to this point is the author's apparent neglect of the most recent secondary scholarship on children and primers. Two glaring omissions are works that are directly pertinent to primers. First is Xu Zi's 徐梓 *Mengxue duwu de lishi toushi* 蒙學讀物的歷史透視 (*Perspectives on the History of Reading Materials for Elementary Studies*),<sup>4</sup> which explores the history and types of primers from antiquity through the Qing. Second is Thomas H. C. Lee's massive and magisterial *Education in Traditional China*, which Brill published in the year 2000 — five years before the publication of *Shaping the Ideal Child*. This work has a long and impressive section on primers in his chapter entitled "Literacy, Family and Technical Education" (pp. 435–76) that gives a much better sense of their contents and the

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas H. C. Lee, *Education in Traditional China* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 459–62, 467–68, and Alexander Woodside, "Real and Imagined Continuities in the Chinese Struggle for Literacy," in *Education and Modernization: The Chinese Experience*, ed. Ruth Hayhoe (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1992), pp. 30–38.

<sup>3</sup> See Wu Pei-yi, "Education of Children in the Sung," in *Neo-Confucian Education*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and John W. Chaffee (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 307–24.

<sup>4</sup> This work was published in 1996 by Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe.

extent to which they were actually used. Similarly, nowhere in this work does the author cite the work of Hsiung Ping-chen who, more than any author, has been illuminating the lives and circumstances of late imperial children since the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Hsiung has been particularly successful in showing how pediatric manuals can be used as important sources for discerning how children were viewed and raised. From perusing Bai's bibliography, what strikes one is that few of her references date after 1993, the year that she completed her dissertation on primers. Hence, it seems that she did not do much more research on the subject after that date, which might explain why there are no references to Hsiung and Xu's works. Perplexing too is the long stretch of time between the end of Bai's research efforts and the timing of the book's publication: the last reference work in her bibliography dates to the year 2000, but the book was not published until 2005. This overly long gestation period and the lack of reference to recent works have condemned Bai's work to be outdated even before it was published.

In sum, *Shaping the Ideal Child* tells a fascinating yet unconvincing story of how primers changed over the last thousand years, from being aimed at merely providing basic literacy to engines of Neo-Confucian moral cultivation, and finally to works designed to convey literacy and practical knowledge. However, if it had been published earlier and had consulted a much wider array of primary and secondary sources, the contribution that this book made would have been much greater. If one wants to learn general information about the primers and how Neo-Confucians envisioned them, then he or she must read this book. However, if one wants information about late imperial children, the primers' contents, or how they were actually put to use, one would be better advised to refer to the works of Hsiung and Lee.

For anyone who is interested in the two subjects of primers and children, in the past few years, a number of important studies have surfaced. Two of these concern primers found in the manuscript treasure-trove recovered at Dunhuang. Wang Fanzhou's 王泛舟 *Dunhuang gudai ertong keben 敦煌古代兒童課本 (Childrens Texts from Dunhuang)*<sup>6</sup> reprints, annotates, and analyzes three of the most popular Tang primers. Meanwhile, in their *Dunhuang mengshu yanjiu 敦煌蒙書研究 (Studies on Dunhuang's Primers)*,<sup>7</sup> Zheng Acai 鄭阿財 and Zhu Fengyu 朱鳳玉 present a complete survey of all the educational materials found in the Mogao Grottoes. In regard to primers and elementary education, a three volume work of essays entitled *Éducation et instruction en Chine*, edited by Christine Nguyen Tri and Catherine Despeux, is of the utmost significance.<sup>8</sup> In English, Anne Behnke Kinney has

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive bibliography of her works, see Hsiung Ping-chen, *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 313–16.

<sup>6</sup> Lanzhou: Gansu renmin chubanshe, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Paris: Louvain, 2003–2004.

published the first monograph on children in early China, while Hsiung Ping-chen has done the same on children in late imperial China.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Kinney's *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) and Hsiung's *A Tender Voyage*.