Epilogue: Taking Children Seriously

On an early September morning, a group of young girls went to the ditch to wash clothes. Chen Shi-lin, a four-year-old girl, was washing diapers of her aunt's baby. She started a most hilarious game:[1]

Shi-lin started to wash a very dirty diaper and put lots of soap on it. She gathered the soap suds in her hands and said: "Who wants to eat this? Who wants to eat feces?"

She turned to Wang Su-chen, another four-year-old girl: "Do you want to eat it?"

Su-chen burst out some dirty words, and said: "You eat it!" She shouted to the other girls: "Chen Shi-lin always likes to play with feces. Dirty Girl! She's feces' child!"

Su-chen's mom scolded her: "Su-chen! Why do you always say those…." Su-chen interrupted before her mom finished the sentence: "Those dirty words? Is that what you mean?"

Mom laughed and said: "Oh you!"

But Shi-lin continued her funny game, holding up the diaper with feces all over her hand and laughed out: "Who wants to eat feces?" She held it under Su-chen's nose and Su-chen cursed her again, and after a few rounds Su-chen got angry at her. Then Shi-lin turned to MC: "Sister Chen likes it!" She kept teasing MC.

[1] CO #194, 09/03/1959.

Somehow this scene stuck in my mind ever since I first read it. As a spoiled young girl, a singleton child growing up in postreform China, I never had to handle diapers for any relative's babies. To my own child born in the 2010s U.S., the idea of washing a filthy diaper is probably nothing but disgusting,[2] not to mention that he never had to take care of any diapers. Yet there they were, some four-year-old girls turning their moral responsibility of a dirty chore into a mischievous game. Different historical contexts bring different material, symbolic, and structural constraints to children's lives. But we can learn some timeless truths from children: their creativity and spontaneity, their ability to find joy, have fun, and even humor themselves under all kinds of circumstances. All these are connected to, and probably propelled by, their insatiable curiosity about the world, their capacity for learning.

I told this story to my mother, who was also born in the 1950s, like the protagonists of this book. My mother excitedly shared with me her memories:

> When I was ten, the year Cultural Revolution began, my niece was born and I had to wash her diapers. I did not clean them very well, just muddling through. But I remember walking across the woods by my house, beautiful woods, still somewhat green in the winter. I carried the cloth diaper with two fingers, put it in the stream, and saw it swinging with the water. In that moment I forgot everything.

Shi-lin's lifeworld is not the same as my mother's world, or my world, or my child's world. But no matter what world, in every child's life journey toward adulthood, in that irreversible unfolding of growing up, there must have been many such moments of "forgetting everything," of being genuinely engaged in the present, being thoroughly absorbed in the moment, and being playful and imaginative. A child's life is full of surprises to the adult eye. What looks like the most mundane everyday

[2] These were old-style cloth diapers in mid-twentieth century rural Taiwan, not the fancy ones in today's middle-class American families.

life, as the Wolf Archive documents, presents numerous surprises to me. The desire to spotlight these intriguing experiences of childhood and make sense of them prompted me to write this book.

Rethinking Chinese Childhood, Family, and Morality

The washing diaper scene, like the "opening an orange" scene in Introduction and many other scenes I portrayed throughout the book, of children teasing, maneuvering, and fighting, together provide a rare picture of "unruly" children in mid-twentieth century Taiwan. Unlike mainstream sinological anthropology, which prioritizes parenting and parent–child ties, I take children's active learning as a central concern and rediscover voices of children who defy parental expectations – therefore "unruly," who negotiate with peers and siblings and develop their own moral understandings – that's why I use quotation marks around "unruly." By offering this revisionist account of the so-called "traditional Chinese family," from the learners' instead of parents' perspective, the story of "unruly" children sheds new light on Chinese and East Asian childhood, family, and morality from the past to the present.

"Unruly" children have always been there, but somehow sinological research rarely focused on this topic, because it goes against the orthodox discourse: Philosophical views extending from the innocent child representing the bright human nature, historiography of the filial sons and daughters in the past, and ethnography of obedient children stressed out by academic competition today. Together with a few other studies that looked at less well-behaved children,[3] this book reminds us of "the darker, less regimented, certainly funnier, possibly crazier – and in some respects very un-Confucian" (Stafford 2011) aspects of

[3] For a brief review, see (Xu 2020b). A recent edited volume looked at "bad children" in early and medieval China (Rothschild and Wallace 2017). Missionaries also noticed the ubiquitous presence of *taoqi* children in late-imperial China (Headland 1901: 35–36).

those small, close-knit communities organized by patriarchal kinship system. Moreover, the general public in the West today still rely on the lens of essentialized "Confucian" morality, encapsulated in the values of obedience and conformity, to understand East Asian childhoods in general, leading to racial biases and stereotypes. This alternative account of childhood, based on systematic evidence, can offer critical reflections on popular Western discourses crystalized into the Model Minority myth.

Given the duality of the Wolf Archive – its significance in anthropology and its unique historical nature, these ethnographic fieldnotes provide an extraordinary archival source about children's actual life, rather than mere discourses, impressionistic generalizations, or anecdotal recollections about childhood in most other sources. Young children are "the most blatant, intellectually innocent, and professionally overlooked among the unrepresented" people in historiography" (Hsiung 2005: 261). What's more, ethnographies that focused on young children's experience did not exist in prior studies of "the Chinese family." As Arthur Wolf proudly remembered, his work in Xia Xizhou was "the first attempt ever to record in a systematic manner the behavior of Chinese children" (n.d.: 37). His archive offers a unique opportunity to tell stories of children in rural communities at the historical margins, stories that would otherwise unlikely figure into scholarly accounts.

This book presents systematic examination of children's moral life in an authoritarian, patriarchal society, before industrialization, urbanization, rapid economic growth, political democratization, and transformations of family values took place in postwar Taiwan. Also, departing from Wolf's vision of looking through Taiwan to see a timeless "traditional Chinese" society, I demonstrate how the historical context of Martial Law Era shaped even the youngest children's moral consciousness. When he revisited what used to be Xia Xizhou village thirty-five years later, Arthur Wolf realized the irreplicable nature of his original research (n.d.: 36):

The path I walked from the train station to the village is now a paved thoroughfare lined with high-rise apartment buildings. The school my subjects attended has been demolished and replaced with a modern multi-storied facility. Three of the village houses still stand but only because a strip of land along the river has been designated a green area. They are unoccupied. A few of the villagers live in apartment buildings near their old homes, but the majority have moved away. What I knew as a village is now an ill defined urban neighborhood.

Maria Duryea, then an anthropology doctoral student from the University of Washington, accompanied Wolf on this trip, hoping to replicate the research methods for longitudinal comparison (Duryea 1999). However, Duryea was not able to do systematic observations and interviews with children as Wolf's team had done earlier, the main reason was that children's social lives, "increasingly removed [as they were] from the interstices of the residential neighborhood," were not as readily accessible (1999: 105). Today, the original community is thoroughly urbanized, economic conditions have greatly improved, and many of the children in the original research have become grandparents. When I met some of them in September 2023, they recalled Wolf's research as a fun childhood memory, but their childhood is very different from that of their grandchildren today.

This ethnographic case also contributes to understanding childhood in East Asia more broadly. "The child" is a key "sign of value" (Anagnost 2008) in the long project of modernization and national development in China (Jones 2011), Taiwan (Lan 2018; Stafford 1992), Japan (Arai 2016; Tanaka 1997), and South Korea (Jung and Ahn 2021). Children today have much better material resources at their disposal and fewer siblings to compete for resources. But they also face much higher educational pressures. As East Asian societies are grappling with a complicated history of familism and compressed modernity, fertility rates have reached ultra-low levels (Cheng 2020; Ochiai 2011). Childrearing has become an important issue in public discussion,

generating enormous anxiety for policymakers and individual families. The story of Xia Xizhou childhood (1958–60) provides a precious reference to compare and contrast with both historical representations about and contemporary transformations to family values and children's lives in East Asia.

As families and societies are coping with changing material and structural conditions today, the change and continuity of Chinese moralities have become a prominent topic.[4] Presenting a more accurate picture of how children learn everyday morality provokes us to rethink our shared assumptions about the past, the starting point of our vision of contemporary moral transformations. Also, the study of Chinese moralities tends to emphasize the authoritarian state and how the state incorporates Confucian discourses to control the society, whether it is the CCP in the PRC or the KMT in Martial Law Era Taiwan.[5] This book brings to light a rare, vernacular account of everyday morality and explores the complex reality beneath moral ideologies, even for children, the least powerful actors in a society. It adds a much-needed perspective of moral life that transcends the authoritarian state framework, especially given the heightened focus on geopolitical tensions today, both in scholarly and public discourses.

Where Does Knowledge Come from?

This book is not just about one particular society. It also explores some universal aspects of humanity through directing our attention to the experience of children. If lack of direct access to the world of the young

[4] Nichols (2022); Yan (2009, 2014, 2017); Kleinman (2011); Kleinman et al. (2011); Ning and Palmer (2020); Kuan (2015); and Xu (2017).

[5] For an anthropological review on the state and morality in the PRC, see Yan (2020). State-led moral and political socialization in Taiwan used to be a prominent research topic before Taiwan's demographic transition, see for example (Meyer 1988).

contributed to the relatively marginalized status of children in historiography, the problem with sociocultural anthropology is perhaps of a different nature: The reluctance to recognize children's critical role and unique capacity in the acquisition, transmission, and creative transformation of cultural knowledge (Hirschfeld 2002). We look past children. We take them for granted. Cognitive anthropologists have reasserted the significance of studying children as part of "taking people [who we study] seriously": This means understanding the multiple sources of children's knowledge and the different ways of knowing that they mobilize in particular contexts, for particular purposes, at different ages, and fueled by different kinds of experience and cognitive resources (Astuti 2017).

Following these cognitive anthropologists' footsteps, I anchor this book in the fascinating world of children's socio-moral cognition. I make sense of "unruly" children through the lens of learning morality. I take inspiration from children's learning to interrogate the nature of anthropological knowledge. Although morality has become an explicit theoretical focus in anthropology, my book highlights a child development perspective that is still underappreciated. I show how children's emerging social cognition – "cognition" as a general term that also encompasses emotional and motivational processes – underpins their moral intuitions, evaluations, and reflections in everyday speech and action. Reconstructing this ethnography of children is also an opportunity for me to experiment new methodologies and reflect on the question of how we know what we know. I rediscover the ethical textures inherent in fieldwork experience and fieldnotes making through children's eyes. I further show that the ways children learn to discern layered intentions, moral sentiments, and cultural meanings constitute the foundation for ethnographic epistemology. In a word, I urge anthropologists to take children seriously and interrogate where humans' complex social knowledge and moral sensibilities come from.

Such an approach distinguishes this book from the one that Arthur Wolf would have written. His draft manuscript was entitled *Chinese*

Children and Their Mothers, about childrearing and childhood in a generic sense, whereas my book pursues the specific question of learning morality. Even though he did not live to write the content chapters, the "Table of Contents" he left behind shows how he would have organized his manuscript: The four content chapters were intended to focus on four types of materials, children's words (CI), children's behaviors (CO), mothers' words (MI), mothers' behaviors (MO), and half of the book was devoted to topic of parenting. This book, of course, is organized quite differently: All the chapters center on children's active learning experience, with each chapter featuring one important aspect of children's moral life. Each chapter integrates materials from various types, including projective tests data that Wolf did not plan to systematically write about.

To fully understand children's learning in diverse contexts requires conversation and collaboration between anthropology and psychology. While psychology tends to focus on individual cognitive mechanisms and anthropology on sociocultural environments, this book facilitates dialogues between the two disciplines. It integrates ethnographic thick description and systematic behavioral analysis and shows how sociocultural contexts filter through children's minds to shape children's early moral experience.

In particular, I highlight the role of peer learning in moral development, an understudied topic across anthropology and psychology. We tend to focus on intergenerational, adult–child ties in the transmission of cultural norms and moral values. But recent interdisciplinary research has emphasized the significance of peer learning, how children transmit and acquire instrumental skills and social knowledge in peer interactions, for the evolution and development of human cultures (Lew-Levy et al. 2023). Children not only learn *from* peers, they learn *with* peers, especially in face-to-face interactions, syncing at behavioral, cognitive, and neural levels (De Felice et al. 2022). Peer play, including sibling interactions, is a vital site where children negotiate social norms

and develop subtle moral sensibilities. Children complain to their peers about adults' unfair punishment. They gossip about other children. They form coalitions. They navigate cooperation and conflict and blend the two in spontaneous teasing and pretend play that is full of creativity and humor.

The story of "unruly" children also urges us to look beyond children's prosocial behavior in neatly controlled psychological experiments, a recent trend in moral development studies, or adults' moral socialization beliefs and strategies, what anthropologists have focused on. I spotlight the darker side of children's realistic experience, that is, defiance, dominance, and fighting, through the lens of their own reasoning and feelings, in a community where parents prohibit children's fights for the sake of neighborly harmony. By doing so the book speaks to the inherent tension between moral ideology and practice, and between cultural model and its discontents. It also reveals the influence of authoritarian political atmosphere and local patriarchy on children's understanding of violence, explores the role of children's moral psychology in mediating such influences, and shows how those in a disadvantaged position, for example, young girls, assert their agency.

This book is not a conventional ethnography. It uses new methods to reinterpret old fieldnotes. Without first-person fieldwork experience, I have resorted to computational techniques and standardized measurements to complement ethnographic analysis. These methods, especially NLP "text-as-data" and social network analysis, are not common in sociocultural anthropology yet, but they are becoming increasingly popular and important in almost all other disciplines that study human behavior in the past or present.[6] These new methods helped me to piece together some parts of the puzzle in the fieldnotes, when all I

[6] This methodological movement is gaining impetus in social sciences (Grimmer, Roberts, and Stewart 2022), psychology (Jackson et al. 2021), and humanities like Chinese studies (Fuller 2020).

had were snapshots of children's life in a discrete array of temporal–spatial points, rather than a continuous flow of actual experience in the field. For example, I was quite overwhelmed by the several hundred persons' ID numbers appearing almost stochastically in the thousands of pages of fieldnotes. Computational results, such as each child's overall behavioral patterns and social network connections, helped me to focus on, and thus understand, a specific child's personality features and social circles. Computational approaches also provide an interesting angle to reflect on the nature and value of ethnographic method, for example, the comparison of human interpretation and machine-learning algorithms, including LLMs (large-language-models), in detecting children's nuanced teasing in peer play. But above all, humanistic close reading, dear to us ethnographers, remains indispensable to actually make sense of these fieldnotes: Tracing the stories of multiple authors, discerning the archive's polyvocality, contemplating how a certain text came into being, and pondering its context and subtext. It was through many rounds of reiterations, traveling back and forth between ethnographic details and computational patterns, and between the process of fieldwork and the product of it, that I slowly transformed the abstract person IDs into concrete personalities. This human–machine collaboration in "reading" children's social worlds via texts is a form of experimentation, an invitation for anthropologists to embrace new methods and explore different ways of knowing. To "know" is a never-ending process. This kind of experimentation will not compromise but augment the value of ethnography. This point applies not only to reanalyzing old fieldnotes, but to all ethnography, to any study of human behavior that requires an effort of interpretation.

The Wolfs' works span from bio-evolutionary to sociocultural anthropology and connect to the SCS (Six Cultures Study), a landmark project in American anthropology. Today, new synergy between evolutionary anthropology and cognitive science is reviving the SCS' legacies of examining childhood learning from a cross-cultural perspective. Many

researchers bring standardized psychological experiments to different fieldsites or promote the "big data" approach, using NLP text-analysis methods to synthesize previous ethnographies in eHRAF database (Amir and McAuliffe 2020; Henrich 2020). But neither approach has seriously addressed the question of how *fieldwork* itself bears on the knowledge it produced. My book therefore injects a core sociocultural anthropology concern, the question of meaning, into this cross-disciplinary conversation. At a time of divisiveness in anthropology (Horowitz, Yaworsky, and Kickham 2019), I hope to build linkages between multiple subfields and bring new insights to anthropological theory, history, epistemology, and methodology.

But the ultimate challenge and charm of this project is children. Young children are not easy to study. They probably cannot give a researcher elaborate answers about their own beliefs, life circumstances, and their society's problems, as many adult interlocutors can do. Perhaps that is one reason why anthropologists don't study them? Even for experimental psychologists, it is much easier and more efficient to get data from adults than from young children: For some inexplicable reason a child might decide not to cooperate in an experiment, or behave in a way that is hard to interpret. Still, some ethnographers might think that young children are too easy to study because they are so simple minded: What, then, is there to learn from young children about the mysterious thing called ethnography that is so contingent upon intersubjective encounters between complex minds? But as we've seen in this book, young children were scared by the anthropologists who looked too different and did not speak their language, even though they were curious about such strange people and gossiped behind their backs. Or, for an ethnographer like the teenage Taiwanese girl MC, who became children's good friend, these young interlocutors might cause trouble: They just wanted her to play with them, not observe/study them. They might even give her "feces" – throwing a dirty diaper toward her. After all, young children are more complicated than what we assume and

more unpredictable. That is exactly why they are fascinating. Scientists today turn to children to decipher many fundamental mysteries, from figuring out what is unique about Homo sapiens (Tomasello 2019) to making AI more human (Gopnik 2017). Children have much to teach us, with their unique positionality and enigmatic minds, about morality, learning, culture, and human knowledge in general. At the end of the day, many abstract anthropological concepts and theories would all fade away. But the stories of human children will live on.