Preface

Human children present a great mystery. Humans have a longer childhood than all other primate species. Our children are the most voracious learners the universe has ever seen, beating cutting-edge artificial intelligence in many respects. They take their time to learn about the world they live in, and they eventually change that world. One fundamental question especially intrigues me: How do children become moral persons? Or according to Chinese traditions, which take moral cultivation as the ultimate goal of learning and human development (Xu 2017), how do we "become human" (*zuo ren*)? This question is rendered more complex, and to me, more interesting, if we look at moral development in real life, with all its messiness, in cultural and historical contexts, instead of fixating on philosophical musings or neatly controlled laboratory studies. Several years ago, an unexpected but outstanding opportunity found me, concerning a rare archive of fieldnotes about childhood in rural Taiwan. These precious materials belong to the late anthropologist and sinologist Arthur Wolf, who conducted fieldwork in a Taiwanese village called Xia Xizhou, about thirty minutes by train from Taipei, from 1958 to 1960. Since I got access to this archive in August 2018, I have been fascinated by the sociomoral life of Xia Xizhou children represented in these texts and devoted myself to rediscovering these children's stories.

The earliest immigrants from Fujian, on the southeast China coast, settled in this village of the Taipei basin during the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries, when Taiwan was ruled by the Qing dynasty. Taiwan was ceded to Japan after China lost the first Sino-Japanese war (1894–95). Following the end of WWII and after five decades of Japanese rule (1895–1945), the Republic of China (ROC) regime, led by the Chinese Nationalist Party or the Kuomintang (KMT), took over Taiwan. In 1949, the KMT imposed martial law on Taiwan.[1]

The protagonists of this book, Xia Xizhou children, were born in and grew up in the Martial Law Era. Most of the villagers were Hoklo people, a group of Han ethnicity. They were part of what's called *benshengren*, in contrast to *waishengren* who fled to Taiwan from mainland after the Chinese civil war.[2] The village children all spoke Taiwanese Hokkien, their mother tongue. But unlike their parents, who grew up speaking Japanese as well as Hokkien, these children were among the first generation who were taught Mandarin (*guoyu*) and learned about the great motherland of China at school. In this Cold War context, the authoritarian KMT regime promoted itself as the legitimate ruler of China and the authentic embodiment of Chinese traditions. The regime redefined "Chineseness" by emphasizing an anti-communism element. It imposed Chinese nationalist education on the island.

When we think of the year 1958 from today's vantage point, what do we remember? The United States launched Explorer 1 satellite, a quick response to the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik 1 in the previous year. In the People's Republic of China (PRC), my home country, Mao Zedong commanded the Great Leap Forward movement and a horrific famine was inflicted on China between 1959 and 1961. In Taiwan, the

[1] Martial law was finally lifted in 1987, by President Chiang Ching-kuo.

[2] Hoklo and Hakka are two main Han ethnic groups in Taiwan whose ancestors migrated from coastal China's Fujian and Guangdong provinces largely during the Qing dynasty. After the end of Japanese rule, when the ROC regime, led by the KMT, retreated to the island in 1948–49, it brought massive migration of people from mainland China, which constituted another ethnic Han group. The labels *benshengren* and *waishengren* emerged after the KMT had taken over Taiwan: the former referring to Taiwan-born Hoklo and Hakka people and the latter referring to new immigrants from mainland China.

year 1958 was known to the world for the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis,[3] a conflict between the Communist PRC and the Nationalist ROC on and around the small islands of Jinmen (Quemoy) and Mazu (Matsu).[4] Childhood in the frontline of this conflict zone became a *New York Times* headline in 1958: "Children Live in Caves," many children living underground in Little Jinmen, short of food, with no medical supplies (see Szonyi 2008: 74).

With such geopolitical dramas unfolding in the wider region during the Cold War era, the life of my protagonists seemed quite ordinary to the adult eye. The strangest event in 1958, for Xia Xizhou children, was perhaps the arrival of an American couple, an anthropology graduate student at Cornell University named Arthur Wolf, and his wife at that time, Margery Wolf, an aspiring novelist. They lived there until summer 1960, for Arthur's dissertation fieldwork. His research was an improved replication of the Six Cultures Study of Child Socialization (hereafter "SCS"), a landmark project in the history of anthropology and cross-cultural research on childhood (LeVine 2010). With aid from their excellent Taiwanese research assistants, the Wolfs accumulated thousands of pages of fieldnotes, including systematic observations, interviews, projective tests, and demographic information.

From this field trip, Arthur and Margery Wolf launched their distinguished careers in anthropology and sinology. Through them, the ordinary life of Xia Xizhou children entered into an extraordinary intellectual history. The children had no idea that their everyday games, dramas, tantrums, and moments of boredom were all meticulously

[3] The First Taiwan Strait Crisis was 1954–55, see https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/taiwan-strait-crises.

[4] On August 23, 1958, Mao, to deal "directly with Chiang [Kai-shek] and indirectly with the Americans" (see Szonyi 2008: 67), ordered the PLA (People's Liberation Army) to bomb Jinmen (Quemoy) and Mazu (Matsu) areas, small islands under ROC rule but only within a few kilometers of the southeast Chinese coast. ROC forces returned fire, and the Eisenhower administration provided aid. This event set the stage for a bizarre system, with both sides shelling each other on alternate days, which lasted until 1979 (Szonyi 2008: 76).

documented by the white, foreign anthropologist's team, as the first ethnographic research on Han Chinese children in the world. Nor did they anticipate that their village would become an iconic landmark in the map of sinological anthropologists (Freedman 1968: xii). Readers of anthropology and Chinese studies are familiar with this village, under the pseudonym *Peihotien* in Margery Wolf's classic ethnographies, such as *The House of Lim* (1968), *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (1972), and *A Thrice-Told Tale* (1992). From Arthur Wolf's foundational works on marriage and kinship (A. Wolf and Huang 1980),[5] readers know that this village is a patrilineal, patriarchal community, with an entrenched son preference and a historical tradition of minor marriage, adopted daughters as "little daughters-in-law" (*sim-pu-a*). Many, however, did not know that the main research subject of the Wolfs' first fieldwork in Taiwan was young children, because the bulk of the Wolfs' 1958–60 fieldnotes, although well preserved in the past decades, have not seen the light of the day until now.

Six decades later, through the introduction of Stevan Harrell at the University of Washington, Hill Gates, the holder of Arthur Wolf's library, invited me to the library up in the hills above Healdsburg, northern California, and generously gave me permission to analyze this fieldnotes archive, which I call "the Wolf archive." I dived into this rich mine of past children's worlds with great excitement. But I was also haunted by a question: How can one even write an ethnography without first-person fieldwork experience? Childhood in mid-twentieth century Taiwan is certainly a less familiar world to me than childhood in early 2010s PRC, which I have studied "in the field." It is also a less familiar world than my own childhood in the 1980s and 1990s, postreform China. Venturing into history and rediscovering previous anthropologists' fieldnotes,

[5] For a bibliographical list of research and publications by the Wolfs and their students and associates on the Haishan area, including this village and several neighboring villages and towns, see Harrell (1999) and A. Wolf and Huang (1980: Appendix B).

however, my interest in this archive was inevitably shaped by my own experience and expertise.

In the process of reading these fieldnotes, a familiar song rang in my mind again and again. Entitled "childhood" (*tongnian*), this nostalgic song likely portrayed the songwriter and Taiwanese cultural icon Lo Ta-yu's own experience, of growing up in the Taipei area during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Ever since it came out in the early 1980s, this song has enjoyed phenomenal popularity in the entire Mandarin-speaking world. It became part of my own childhood memory. I have long wondered what the childhood described in that song was like: With cicadas chirping in the humid summer heat, children were climbing the banyan tree, catching dragonflies in the lush green rice paddies, playing on the swing in the schoolyard, reading comics after school,[6] or whining for pocket money.

The song finally came alive when I read the fieldnotes and encountered the same scenes and landscapes of the hot Taipei Basin summer in the text. I was fascinated by the various games and pretend play that children ingeniously created, enacted rules for, and indulged themselves in, by their pervasive sense of humor across various playful scenarios, and by their mysterious capacity to find joy, however mundane the situation. Episodes in these fieldnotes posed a stark contrast to the grand, geopolitical narratives of that time. The scenes depicted in the fieldnotes also differed from what I saw in September 2023, at the site that used to be Xia Xizhou but was now part of the urbanized and industrialized New Taipei City: There were no children running around in alleys or climbing trees all by themselves. Children had all moved into segregated apartment units, and their free time was heavily structured and supervised by adults.

[6] For example, the song mentioned a Taiwanese comics series, Yeh Hong-jia's *Jhunge Shiro*, which was first published in 1958 and enjoyed unprecedented popularity among children. According to Wolf's fieldnotes, children in Xia Xizhou liked comics. I wonder if they were reading *Jhunge Shiro* too.

Reading these fieldnotes, I kept thinking about my own parents, who were born in the mid-1950s, just like the Xia Xizhou children. In a Chinese village about 600 miles away from Xia Xizhou, my father, then a small child, almost died from malnutrition in the famine during the Great Leap Forward years, the famine that he later remembered as "Three Years of Natural Disasters" (*sannian ziran zaihai*). At the height of Taiwan's Martial Law Era, Xia Xizhou children were learning anti-communist propaganda, such as "Eliminating Communist Bandits" (*xiaomie gongfei*) and "Maintaining Secrecy and Preventing Espionage" (*baomi fangdie*), as some of them still remembered when I interviewed them in 2023. They did ask political questions at the time, as were recorded in these fieldnotes, a few examples include, "Who do you think will win, the Chinese or the Communists?" and "Why don't we ask the Americans to fight the Communists?"[7] In the meantime, my parents were taught about "liberating Taiwan" (*jiefang taiwan*), among many slogans during China's high socialism era. My mother vividly recalled that they would cite a quote from Chairman Mao before engaging in a fight with other children.

Beneath all the geopolitical abstractions and ideological slogans, however, Taiwanese children in the fieldnotes must be similar to my parents, or to children in many other preindustrialized societies, in some fundamental ways. They were all playing around in courtyards, rice paddies, or by the river, while taking care of their younger siblings and sometimes fighting with other cliques of children. They were exploring all sorts of ways to have fun, despite lacking fancy toys or comfortable material conditions. They were growing up while playing, working, and learning, and in all this, constructing a sense of self. To me, the purpose of anthropology is not just about studying a particular society. We study a particular society in order to understand humanity more broadly. Childhood provides a unique lens to explore fundamental dimensions of human experience.

[7] See Chapter 1.

Plowing through these fieldnotes six decades later in Seattle, at a time of rising geopolitical tensions, I have been bombarded by the American news cycle on cross-strait relations, or more accurately, on the grand drama of the United States–China–Taiwan triangle. I couldn't help but wonder: What about the "human" part? How much do we know about people's everyday life, actual people who are or were living through those turbulent times? Even more rare is record of young children's world. Unlike many other historical accounts of childhood, the Wolf archive provides such systematic materials on the actual life of children, instead of representations and discourses about children, or adult recollections of childhood memory. Regarding the existential question of "becoming moral," which means the very essence of "becoming human" in the long tradition of Chinese thought, these fieldnotes offer precious insights into how young children in the past, on the margins of history, develop moral understandings and sentiments in their ordinary life.

As a Han Chinese daughter and mother, I couldn't help but insert myself into this narrative. I was intrigued by parent–child relationship and especially the question of punishment. For example, the tropes of "discipline" (*guanjiao*) and "obedience" (*shuncong*) are so popular in discourses and precepts about "traditional Chinese families." As a child, I was never truly obedient. As a mother, I have learned that, however much I want my son to listen to me, he is a little person of his own will, reason, and feeling. Were children of the past generation so different from us? Did they not have a rich inner life and some sort of agency too? It turns out that Xia Xizhou children were not docile either, even though their understanding of authority and justice was influenced by the historical context.

My point is that once we shift our attention from "parenting" discourses to children themselves a whole different picture of moral development emerges. One fascinating part of this new picture is Xia Xizhou children's peer play, as the rich repertoire of peer play encapsulates all sorts of moral dramas and lessons: They were learning tirelessly about

the social worlds. They were learning about particular norms and rituals, power relations, and cultural values in local society at that time. But more than that, they were also learning about common problems across societies, about cooperation and care, about authority and dominance, and all the gray areas in between.

I was also drawn to the gender question. Like quite a few mothers in this Taiwanese village, my paternal grandmother grew up as a "little daughter-in-law" (*tongyangxi* in Mandarin). She was adopted into my grandfather's family when she was young and got married to my grandfather at the age of fourteen. The last time I spoke to her, not long before she passed away, she was remembering her younger years and how badly she was treated. My father, like many Chinese men in his generation, preferred boys, but his hope for a son was dashed by the One-Child Policy in China. As a singleton child, I enjoyed all the love from my parents. But still, the idea of "proving myself as worthy" that haunted many Han Chinese daughters also shaped who I am. Encountering numerous young girls in these fieldnotes, most of whom had brothers, I was curious to learn how gender affected their sense of right and wrong, good and bad, in ways similar to or different from what I had experienced. I was wondering how these young girls thought about their often-times disadvantaged situations, and how they might assert their own voices in those situations. I was eager to witness their moments of joy and sorrow, anger and pride – witness vicariously, through texts.

The life of young boys, too, sparked a great level of curiosity in me. I am raising a boy, a Chinese American boy. He was a special "interlocutor" in my first book, *The Good Child*. When I was doing fieldwork in a Shanghai preschool a decade ago, he was a student in that school, a toddler. When I was working on these historical fieldnotes, he was about the same age as the oldest protagonists in this book. During the long COVID-19 pandemic, working from home and sharing the space with my son, many magical moments occurred to me, in which text blended

into reality and history became present: When I encountered episodes of mischievous boys defying parental orders or teasing each other, I could hear my own child's voice, literally and figuratively. In short, exploring the story of these Taiwanese boys and girls is to experience an alternative life that is remote yet intimate.

Writing *through* and *about* historical fieldnotes, this book also traces how I discern the multiple voices that shaped these texts, make sense of behavior via texts, and give new life to these old texts. Drawing from diverse methodologies and adopting a human–machine hybrid mode of text reading, I interrogate core questions of ethnography, from making sense of social encounters to producing and interpreting fieldnotes. For example, the book cover photo encapsulates the intersubjective nature of ethnography, as it captures a moment of mutual gaze between the anthropologist-photographer and his research interlocutors, in the context of children's play. I connect these reflections to children's social cognition and explore the limits and possibilities of knowing and meaning-making. Children's social world, within and beyond their familial realms, provides a fascinating window into the development of human morality, the subtleties of human relatedness, the complex processes of learning and cultural transmission, and ultimately, what it means to be human.