

*Happy Childhood*: an Examination of Chinese Christian Literature  
for Children

by Geoffrey Johnston

The first issue of *Happy Childhood* (報幼福) appeared in Shanghai in March 1915, published by the China Sunday School Union. It continued publication as a monthly until 1935, when it became bi weekly. It ceased publication after Liberation. From 1917 to 1936, it was the particular responsibility of Mrs Donald MacGillivray.

Mrs MacGillivray was born Elizabeth Bovey, in Torquay, England, and went to China first under the auspices of the London Missionary Society. In 1900 she married Donald MacGillivray, a Canadian Presbyterian who had recently moved from Henan to Shanghai to join the staff of the Christian Literature Society. In addition to her work as editor of *Happy Childhood*, Elizabeth was deeply involved in other activities on behalf of women and children in Shanghai. When MacGillivray died in 1931, Elizabeth joined the staff of CLS and continued with the Society until her own retirement and death in 1936.

*Happy Childhood* was a magazine for Christian children. Its readers would have to be literate, and therefore eight or nine, but not yet interested in the opposite sex. There are no boy girl stories in *Happy Childhood*. The magazine consisted mostly of stories, but it also included puzzles, contests and games, along with a good dose of Bible study, one in every issue. The purpose of this essay is to compare the ethics of a Christian children's magazine, with literature for children from the Confucian period on the one hand, and the Communist era on the other.<sup>1</sup>

From the Confucian literature I have selected four works. The most important is the San Zi Jing 三字經 the Three Character Classic, a work of some 350 lines each of which had three characters. It was the text by which generations of Chinese children learned to read. Like teachers of literacy everywhere Wang Ying Lin could not resist the temptation to use the process to improve his students. The San Zi Jing provides us with a model of the ideal Confucian youth. The comparable work for girls is called Nuer Jing, (女兒經) or the Classic for Girls. Di Zi Gui (弟子規) the Rules of Behaviour for Children is described by its translator as "the foundation of all Chinese etiquette". Finally we have Zhu Zi Zhi Jia Ge Yan (朱子治家格言) Mr Zhu's Guide to a Better Family. On the communist side I have chosen the three texts from the Cultural Revolution, "In Praise of Norman Bethune," "The Old man Who Moved the Mountain," and "Serve the People." and the "Life of Lei Feng."

The first point to note is the shift in the context of ethics. The Confucian classics move in the ordered world of the Chinese gentry, the only people who could afford to keep their children out of production long enough to educate them. Nuer Jing, of course, is clearest on this subject. The proper young lady is to stay at home and learn womanly ways.

When the wheel at ten is turning,  
 You should never idle be,  
 To the making of their clothing and the mending you should see,  
 Your position should be daily sitting at your mother's feet,  
 Nor excepting on an errand should you go upon the street.

When the wheel has turned eleven,  
 You have grown to womanhood,  
 And all culinary matters should be clearly understood,  
 If for fancy work from cooking you can save some precious hours,  
 You should spend them in embroid'ring ornamental leaves and flowers.<sup>2</sup>

Di Zi Gui begins with relationships, a basic notion in Confucian ethics, and most relationships are within the family

Rules of behaviour for brothers and sons,  
 Teachings of ancient and virtuous ones;  
 First you be filial and brotherly, then  
 Try to be faithful and earnest as men.<sup>3</sup>

San Zi Jing is more blunt

Begin with filial piety and fraternal love  
 And then see and hear<sup>4</sup>

So also Maître Zhu

... la déraison et l'erreur dans les cinq relations sociales et cinq vertus fondamentales entraînent immédiatement le désastre.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, the families described in *Happy Childhood*, apart from the stories about princes and princesses, tend to be more nuclear, and a great deal poorer. In one of the earliest "How a Young Girl was Saved", (1915) the daughter is sold into prostitution. The same fate almost befell the mother in "The First Christmas" (1934). The father in "Treasure Outside Wan Li Village" (1929) is a weaver and something of a recluse. These are stories for children who lived in the cities and villages of twentieth century China, in a time when Confucian society was disintegrating all around them. Nor are the families necessarily well off. The household in "Contentment Always Makes for Happiness", (1917) or "Wearing Glasses" (1933) were reasonably comfortable. On the other hand little Loque (1929) worked in a textile mill and had one day off a year. The Shanghai newspaper boy (1933) lived on his mother's earnings as a washerwoman and his income from selling newspapers. Lei Feng the (probably) imaginary hero of post Liberation China was born to a poor peasant family in Henan, a family which suffered so much under the Guomindang that all the adults died, leaving Lei Feng an orphan.

The courtly and well mannered homes of Nuer Jing and Di Zi Gui were not a meaningful context for the Christians and positively evil for the Communists.

If the classic Confucian family had become either irrelevant or evil, the values that family had tried to inculcate were another matter. *Xiào*, ( 孝 ) or filial piety was central, the most important of the five relationships. *Xiào* is the correct attitude to one's attitude towards parents, a mixture of deference, thoughtfulness and affection. One of the texts for good behaviour circulating in Confucian China was a set of twenty-four tales of filial piety<sup>6</sup>. *Di Zi Gui* and *San Zi Jing* both refer to one of them explicitly. In this story Huang Xiang was so concerned about his father that he would warm his bed in winter and fan it in summer.<sup>7</sup> *Happy Childhood* was anxious to avoid the charge that conversion meant the end of *xiào*, and published a number of piety stories including one from the set of twenty four paragons, "A Story About Piety" (1915). In this story the mother was sick and her son was extremely concerned. To help her recover he decided to make a fish soup. But it was winter and the river was frozen. He lay naked on the ice until he had melted a hole through which he could catch a fish. Having told the story the editors drove the point home with reference to "Honour your father and mother." Christian children should also demonstrate *xiào*. Updates on the idea appeared as "The Crown Prince Presents a Gift" (1927) and especially in "The Shanghai Newspaper Boy" (1933). In the second story Bob, the newspaper boy, saved a few pennies to buy eggs for his mother's supper. On the way home he bumped into a passerby and broke the eggs. He was so upset that he sat down on the curb and wept. He was discovered in his distress by a rich woman and her daughter. They were so impressed with Bob's love for his mother that they sent round a basket of food with the chauffeur. It is clear however, that by the later years of Mrs MacGillivray's tenure that the notion has lost its centrality, and indeed a good deal of the flavour that made *xiào* such a distinctive characteristic of Confucian ethics. Pulling one's weight in the family is a virtue commended to *Happy Childhood*'s readers. In "Wait a Moment," the girl in the story never does what she is supposed to when she is asked. Her mother went on strike, neglecting to make the breakfast or set out the clothes needed for a visit to grandmother. The daughter repented of her ways. In "Refusing Some Money," the daughter is told off to tend the sheep when she would rather fly kites with her brother. She is tempted to skip off anyway, believing she would not be caught. But she decided against it. Her grandmother used to tell her the story of a virtuous ancestor who was offered a bribe. "Take it," said the man with the money, nobody will know." "You know, I know, heaven and earth know." replied her ancestor. The girl did what she was told because she remembered the "four knows". The effect on the household of obedience and making a contribution to the common good may be similar to the effects of filial piety, but they are not the same thing as *xiào*. Lei Feng never had to think about filial piety; both his parents and his older brother had all died.

Even though *xiào* lost its centrality, and a good deal of its flavour there still remained a significant overlap between the virtues of Confucianists and Christians. Many of these virtues would be admired in any society.

Awake in the morning, arise with the sun  
Retire late at night when your lessons are done<sup>8</sup>

You should rise from bed as early in the morning as the sun,  
Nor retire at evening's closing till your work is wholly done.<sup>9</sup>

dès le point du jour levez-vous; arrosez et balayez le cour; nettoyez et rangez au dedans et au dehors: dès le crépuscule reposez-vous; assurez-vous en personne que toutes portes et fenêtres sont fermées et barrées<sup>10</sup>

Diligence is common enough in Happy Childhood; an example is "What You Plant is What You Get" (1933). In this story a man inherited a very sandy piece of land, and was so poor he was the subject of great derision by his neighbours. But he worked hard and managed to make a living growing flowers on his sand dune.

In "Brother Pig" (1922) the boy in the family is so dirty none of the animals will accept him except a very muddy pig. Cleanliness is recommended also for Confucian children, both boys and girls.

In your personal appearance,  
You should ever take delight,  
Ne'er depend upon cosmetics, whether they be red or white,  
Comb and bathe at proper seasons; all the dirt remove with care,  
In the washing of your clothing no exertion should you spare<sup>11</sup>

In cleanliness beauty of clothing consists  
But beauty in gorgeousness never exists.<sup>12</sup>

With cleanliness comes simplicity, a virtue much recommended by Maître Zhu

que vos utensiles soient simples et propres,  
que la poterie soit préférée à l'or et au jade.<sup>13</sup>

buvez et mangez modérément, mais bien préférez les légumes du jardin aux mets recherchés<sup>14</sup>

Happy Childhood takes up the theme in "Fresh Air," (1915) and "The Best Food" (1923). In the first story the king, anxious about the health of his son and heir kept him locked up in an overheated room with the windows closed. He was denied exercise and fed only the finest of foods. Naturally he was chronically ill. A wise counsellor took the king for a walk in the country where they met a farmer who was the picture of health. He worked hard outdoors all day long, lived in a shack and ate rice and vegetables. If he was healthy under those circumstances, thought the king, he should thrive in my son's quarters. Naturally the farmer took sick at the palace, just like the prince. When that

happened, the counsellor was able to persuade the king to let his son lead a simple, healthy life. Lei Feng, we are told, made simplicity a fine art; he wore clothes with patches, even when he could wear new ones.

So also honesty;

When speaking, let this be your motto from youth-  
The first in all things in importance is truth,  
And words of deceit or expressions untrue  
Should ne'er be reported as coming from you<sup>15</sup>

First of all a woman's virtues  
Is a chaste and honest heart<sup>16</sup>

We speak of charity of heart and duty to one's neighbour  
Of prosperity, wisdom and truth.  
These five virtues  
Admit of no compromise.<sup>17</sup>

Happy Childhood returns to the theme again and again, in "A Good Name" (1918) "A Dream on New Year's Eve" (1923) "A True Story" (1929) and "Rabbit, a Cheat" (1932). In the last story the rabbit got tired of the island he was living on and by a ruse, persuaded the crocodiles to line up, nose to tail so that he could get to the mainland. On reaching the other side he boasted how he had fooled the great reptiles. But the oldest crocodile replied. "You are not on the mainland but on an island not as good as the one you left. If you had levelled with us we would have told you." Lei Feng, naturally, was both honest and hard working.

Discretion, an important feature of the Confucian tracts, underwent a sea change in the twentieth century.

Of the virtues of a woman,  
Conversation is the third,  
By your friends 'tis often better to be seen than to be heard.  
But to speak at proper seasons will incur no one's disdain,  
And one fit word o'er a thousand will the victory often gain.<sup>18</sup>

Let others loquacity constantly teach  
That for you it were well to be sparing of speech;  
For the truth of whate'er you report to a friend,  
For proof on your eloquence never depend.

You should never insult any person 'tis plain,  
 Nor utterance give to expressions profane  
 'Gainst market-place habits and street-talk keep guard,  
 That your talk be not sullied, your manners be marred.<sup>19</sup>

à la maison éviter disputes et critiques  
 qui mènent finalement au malheur.  
 dans le monde évitez l'abondance de paroles,  
 qui mènent inévitablement à l'erreur.<sup>20</sup>

Cautious speech is recommended as seemly or prudent; it is appropriate behaviour for a well born person. But in *Happy Childhood* discretion is recommended because of the effect loose talk has on others. In *A Good Servant*, (1915), the hero was concerned about the loose talk in which his young master indulged. He prepared two meals, the best food and the worst food. Both consisted entirely of tongue. "Tongues can be good or bad," the servant explained, "depending on whether they help or hurt other people."

I will say more about this shift in emphasis in a moment, but first a word about sacred texts.

Basic to all these documents is the importance of right thinking through study of the canonical texts. The *San Zi Jing* leaves us in no doubt.

Men at their birth  
 Are naturally good  
 Their natures are much the same  
 Their habits become widely different.  
 If, foolishly, there is no teaching  
 The nature will deteriorate<sup>21</sup>

même si les ancêtres sont loin respectez  
 scrupuleusement l'observance des rites.  
 même si les enfants sont benêts  
 ne les dispensez en aucun cas l'étude  
 des quatre livres et cinq classiques.<sup>22</sup>

Nor is there doubt about what is to be taught. Maître Zhu's nine works are just the beginning. The central section of *San Zi Jing* sets out a complete book list, the curriculum of an educated Chinese gentleman. That which one must know to become a *jun-zi* (君子) a superior person, can be found in the Confucian classics. *Happy Childhood* is equally strong on education, as "Tran Sit and Da Hua" (1929) makes quite clear. These two boys played hooky one afternoon, but were shown the error of their ways in a dream. But the canon has changed. In *Happy Childhood* the source of right

thinking, and therefore right conduct, has become the Bible. Every issue, without exception, contained some kind of Bible Study. Lei Feng was also a conscientious student, but his canon was drawn from Marxism-Leninism and Mao Tzedong thought. The opening lines of the San Zi Jing state the fundamental optimism of Chinese thought, an optimism which the Christians could, with some reservations share, and which the Communists also stressed. Lei Feng was a self taught craftsman; he became the best truck driver in his company, and was assigned to teach the art to newcomers. The Chinese tradition, in whatever form, does not doubt the primacy of nurture over nature.

Not only do the canonical texts change, the focus of the good life changes as well. In Confucian thought education is for self improvement.

If a jade is not polished  
It cannot become a thing of use<sup>23</sup>

First be you filial and brotherly, then  
Try to be faithful and earnest as men.<sup>24</sup>

celui qui agit selon les préceptes  
approche de la réalisation.<sup>25</sup>

Nuer Jing sets out as of first importance the classic relationships, piety towards parents, respect for the elders, acceptance of dependence as a woman's role. It then goes on to spell out the virtues of domestic competence, discretion, cleanliness, chastity and so forth.<sup>26</sup>

In other words a good person was defined primarily by the way he or she respected the standard relationships, between parent and child, husband and wife, elder and younger, sovereign and subject, friend and friend. It was an ethic for a small, face to face society, deliberately designed to ensure stability in hierarchy. There was a notion of benevolence or *rén* (仁) but it tended to be discussed last, or only mentioned in passing.

To the people around you, below or above,  
Your duty is clear, every one you should love;  
One circling heaven is over all spread,  
One flowering earth produces our bread.<sup>27</sup>

If a man does not learn  
He cannot know his duty towards his neighbour

We speak of charity of heart and duty to one's neighbour  
 Of prosperity, wisdom and truth.  
 These five virtues  
 Admit of no compromise.<sup>28</sup>

ne pas appuyez pas sur la force  
 et n'outragez pas le veuve et l'orphelin.  
 ne soyez pas glouton  
 et ne tuez pas inconsidérément bétail et volailles.<sup>29</sup>

But compared to the amount of space devoted to proper relationships, benevolence doesn't get much attention. Nuer Jing doesn't mention it at all.

In *Happy Childhood* the emphasis is reversed. Children are, as we have seen, expected to be obedient, courteous and responsible members of the household. They were also expected to be humble. Pride of station was simply not acceptable, whether among aristocrats "A Very Proud Prince" (1929) or the bourgeoisie "Wearing Glasses" (1933). But above all, Christian children are to be altruistic. Stories like "The Happiest Thing is Doing Good" (1917) "A Boy Who Lost His Way" (1925) or "The Palace of the Rich Man" (1932) all make the same point in different ways. In the 1925 story the hero set out to find the happy country. On the way he met all kinds of people who asked for his help. He told them he was too busy looking for the happy country and they all told him he was lost. Then he met a girl with a basket of cakes. Since the boy was famished he accepted her offer to share the cakes. She told him he would find the happy country if he stopped to help people along the way. And so it turned out. But the Christmas editions provide the principle source of "serve the people" stories "Xa Du Sa" (1922), "The Red Cap" (1929) "A Boy Who Went to the Holy Infant in a Dream" (1933) and "The First Christmas" (1934) all come from December issues. In "The Red Cap" a girl was keen on having a particular hat. When she found she hadn't enough money, a woman in the store helped her out. Then the girl had qualms of conscience because many of her neighbours were even poorer than her family. She went to the woman who had helped her, Mrs Smith, offering to trade in the hat for the money. The woman was a wealthy recluse, but she had taken a shine to the girl. She asked why the child wanted the money instead of the hat. When the girl explained Mrs Smith sent for the car and together they went to see the neighbours. Of course one of them was Mrs Smith's long estranged daughter. They were reconciled and the other people in the tenement profited from Mrs Smith's largesse. All this happiness came because the heroine of the story wanted to use the price of the hat, two dollars at current rates, to help her poor neighbours. In "The First Christmas" the mother in the family told her life story. She had been born on a farm but a couple of years of famine drove the family to destitution. In desperation her father sold her, probably for prostitution. She ran, stowed away on a river boat and by good fortune fell in with a kind Christian woman who brought her up. She told this story because her children were complaining that Christmas wasn't shaping



up very well. "I didn't know about Christmas until I was ten," said their mother, "and then only because of the kindness of Mrs Wu" The children repented and went out to help the poor. The Communists continue the trend. Norman Bethune's spirit, said Mao Tzedong,

his utter devotion to others without any thought of self was shown in his boundless sense of responsibility in his work and his boundless warm heartedness towards all comrades and the people. Every Communist must learn from him.<sup>30</sup>

The same theme is picked up in the 1944 funeral address "Serve the People:" "The Chinese people are suffering; it is our duty to save them and we must exert ourselves in struggle."<sup>31</sup> and in Mao's use of the traditional story "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains"

It tells of an old man who lived in northern China long long ago and was known as the Foolish Old man of North Mountain. His house faced south, and beyond his doorway stood the two great peaks, Tai Hang and Wangwu, obstructing the way. With great determination he led his sons in digging up the mountains, hoe in hand. Another greybeard, known as the Wise Old Man, saw them and said derisively, "How silly of you to do this! It is quite impossible for you few to dig up these two huge mountains." The Foolish Old Man replied, "When I die my sons will carry on; when they die there will be my grandsons, and then their sons and grandsons, and so on to infinity. High as they are, the mountains cannot grow any higher, and with every bit we dig they will be that much lower. Why can't we clear them away?" Having refuted the Wise Old Man's wrong view, he went on digging every day, unshaken in his conviction. God was moved by this, and he sent down two angels who carried the mountains away on their backs. Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?<sup>32</sup>

Mao's summary of the story does not make clear, as other versions do, that lowering the mountains was a species of public works designed to give the whole community access to the Han River. in the same way, the removal of feudalism and imperialism would give the Chinese people a chance at a much better life. What is at stake is not just the wellbeing of the party members, but Chinese society as a whole. One no longer serves just the elders of the family, but the people as a whole.

Each year at the beginning of March the posters appear in Chinese schools "Xue Lei Feng", study or learn from Lei Feng. Lei Feng was an incorrigible do gooder. Since his family had all died off in the depredations of the Guomindang period he was free to

help whoever came his way. And he did, with a vengeance. Thus, every March the remembering of Lei Feng is the signal for a festival of good deeds, of simple acts to help others with no thought of reward, and with no thought of the connection these people probably do not have with your family.

In this vision of society, the vision shared by both Communists and *Happy Childhood*, the Confucian circle has both shrunk and grown. The families have shrunk; for the most part they consist of parents and children with the occasional grandparent at home and cousins some distance away. It is the kind of family Elizabeth MacGillivray probably knew in England and saw developing in China. The Confucian gentry, with the extended family all under the same roof of a rambling country house has faded from the picture. But the rest of the world has replaced it, and the marginal notion of benevolence ( 仁 慈 ) has become central. An ethic of self-improvement, of the cultivation of mind and habit to become an exemplary Confucian person has been replaced with an ethic of altruism, of serving the people.

Consistent with this shift in emphasis is an appreciation of ordinary life. In "The Wisdom of the Poor" (1916) the nation decides to show their affection for a good king. Each of the estates chooses a representative to entertain the king on their behalf. The landowners choose a duke, the merchants a merchant prince, both of whom entertain the king as lavishly as they can. But the man the commoners choose simply takes the king for a summer afternoon in the country. The prize goes to the commoner. Similarly in "Choosing a Successor" (1917) the winner is a simple old man from the country. In "The Fruits of Study" (1933) the hero at first shows a typically Confucian disdain for the work his father does on the farm. But in due course he repents and studies hard to become a scientific farmer. The animal stories fit into this pattern, but they probably derive from a different source. Lei Feng, of course comes from the masses, from a family of poor peasants, but I don't know whether he made a point of being kind to animals.

The missionary intellectuals who contributed to the Chinese Recorder, the house journal of the Protestant missionary community took Confucian ethics very seriously. Many of them felt that the values of Confucian society were quite compatible with the gospel, as "noble" a system as any society had devised. But China in the late Qing lacked the will to put the ethic into practice. The necessary moral fibre as it were could be supplied by Christianity. Donald MacGillivray had made a similar argument in 1912.

The chief danger is the divorce of education and religion. A godless education we rightly fear in Canada. Is it not to be more feared in China? Godless teachers, school managers, pupils, what a fearful thing it would be for China, and for the world; assuredly China's great educational future sorely needs Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup>

A godless education was exactly what China got, but at one level it didn't seem to matter. Lei Feng turns out to be a Christian without the faith. If he had joined the

Scouts instead of the Young Communists, been a catechist instead of a truck driver in the PLA and read the Bible as assiduously as he devoured the thoughts of Mao Tzedong, he would have been an exemplary young Christian. The unstinting, unassuming altruism he showed was precisely what *Happy Childhood* recommended.

I do not suggest that there is any causal connection between *Happy Childhood* and Lei Feng. But it seems clear that the end of the Chinese monarchy brought with it a significant shift in the meaning of "junzi", a superior person, the orthodox role model. The similarity between the thinking of Elizabeth MacGillivray and Mao Tzedong is intriguing, even if the men of the Long March did not swap *Happy Childhood* stories over the camp fire.

1. *A relatively complete run of Happy Childhood was available in the library of the China Christian Council in Shanghai. I am indebted to Mr Shen Derong, the Secretary of the Council when I was in China for his courtesy in making the journal available to me. The translations were done by friends and colleagues in Suzhou, and in particular Zhang Lefoh, one of the ministers at the church we attended. I have added nothing to their work apart from clearing away ambiguities and grammatical mistakes.*

2. The "Nuer Jing: or Classic for Girls" translated from the Chinese by Isaac Taylor Headland, Professor in Peking University. The Chinese Recorder, December 1895, page 555.

3. "Di Zi Gui, or Rules of Behavior for Children", translated from the Chinese by Isaac Taylor Headland, Professor in Peking University. The Chinese Recorder, August 1895, page 368

4. The San Zi Jing, Herbert A Giles ed, Ch'eng-wen Publishing Company, Taipei, 1972, page 21.

5. Michel Deverge et Tan Swie Han. *les Préceptes du Bon Gouvernement Domestique de Maître Chu*. Taipei 1982. page 14

6. Donald MacGillivray published an edited and somewhat irreverent version of the tract in the Presbyterian Record, October 1900, pages 357-360

7. San Zi Jing, lines 33-34, Di Zi Gui page 360

8. Di Zi Gui, 371

9. Nuer Jing, 554

10. Préceptes page 1
11. Nuer Jing, 557
12. Di Zi Gui, 371
13. Préceptes, page 5
14. Préceptes page 6
15. Di Zi Gui, page 373
16. Nuer Jing, page 557
17. San Zi Jing, lines 69-72
18. Nuer Jing, page 557
19. Di Zi Gui, page 373
20. Préceptes, page 19
21. San Zi Jing lines 1-6
22. Préceptes, page 10
23. San Zi Jing, lines 25-26
24. Di Zi Gui, page 368
  
25. Préceptes page 32
26. Nu Er Jing, 556-557
27. Di Zi Gui page 374
28. San Zi Jing, lines 27-28, 69-72
29. Préceptes, page 20
30. "IN Memory of Norman Bethune", in Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tsetung, Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1971, page 180.
31. ibid. page 311
32. ibid. page 321

33. D. MacGillivray, "The Uplift of China", The Presbyterian Record, February 1912, page 66.