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Charles Stafford

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Children in the Taiwanese fishing community of Angang have their attention drawn, consciously and unconsciously, to various forms of identification through their participation in schooling, family life and popular religion. They read texts about 'virtuous mothers', share 'meaningful foods' with other villagers, visit the altars of 'divining children' and participate in 'dangerous' god-strengthening rituals. In particular, they learn about the family-based cycle of reciprocity, and the tension between this and commitment to the nation. Charles Stafford's study of childhood in this community (with additional material from northeastern mainland China) explores absorbing issues related to nurturance, education, family, kinship and society in its analysis of how children learn, or do not learn, to identify themselves as both familial and Chinese.

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Learning and identification in Angang

CHARLES STAFFORD

University of Cambridge



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Preface

The Chinese idiom *zuo ma guan hua*, ‘viewing the flowers from horseback,’ is used to describe superficial or hurried observations, and the conclusions they give rise to. Said with reference to anthropology, *zuo ma guan hua* would be a particularly telling criticism, because so much of life in China is rightly felt to reside beneath the surface, to be complex and hidden from view. But of course any perspective, ‘from horseback’ or otherwise, has strengths and weaknesses.

What follows is an account of childhood and learning based on fieldwork in the Taiwanese fishing community of Angang (with additional material from northeastern China). Rather than investigating in depth one aspect of the lives of children there, I have tried to hold many things in view: schools, families, money, food, spirit mediums, rituals and so on. Some may feel that this is an excellent example of ‘viewing flowers from horseback’. Each of these subjects could easily fill a book, and many have been discussed in greater detail by others (I will direct readers to this literature). But I wanted to present my own wide-ranging, if incomplete, account of childhood in Angang; and hopefully in doing so to show some connexions which others may not have seen.

Before beginning, however, I should raise several important issues, and ask readers to bear them in mind. First, Angang is in many ways not typical of Taiwan, much less of mainland China. It is an unusually isolated fishing community, with its own unique histories and traditions. Many of these are, of course, linked to broader patterns of Taiwanese and Chinese culture and history. But my rendering of childhood in Angang should not be taken as a model of childhood anywhere else.

Second, readers should be aware that the text includes Chinese terms in both Hokkien and Mandarin. This will not be obvious except in the

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glossary, where the system of transliteration is explained, and the dialect of each term is indicated. But the question of language is very important to many people in Taiwan, and has political implications (as does the notion that Taiwan exemplifies China). Although the official language is Mandarin, and almost everyone in Angang is able to speak it, villagers usually speak Hokkien as they go about their daily lives. Mandarin is the language of schooling, and children and young people often use it amongst themselves (and usually did so when explaining things to me). This bilinguality raises questions of great complexity which are not explored here.

Third, I should stress that my account often deals with notions of what *should* happen, rather than detailed accounts of what does happen. For instance, the conviction that ‘children should support their ageing parents’ is certainly widely held in Angang. It is also easy to provide examples of it being put into practice, because many children do in fact support their parents in some way. Readers should bear in mind, however, that closer examination reveals many ambiguities surrounding such traditions. An account which focuses on representations may easily produce an overly conservative and static view of things.

The final and perhaps most crucial point concerns gender. Margery Wolf has noted that: ‘Gender differences in personhood and the construction of the self in Chinese society are a much neglected topic. Much of the research either asserts that there are no differences . . . or ignores gender completely . . . by default taking the male self to be the Chinese self’ (1990:429). In many ways, the lives of young girls and boys in Angang are quite similar; and especially in this way: they mostly encounter the same representations (in school and in the community) as they grow up. They usually read the same texts, observe the same rituals, eat the same ‘meaningful’ foods, and so on. They often appear to be treated in more or less the same way by the adults around them. But the apparent sameness in what children see and do is misleading, for the representations themselves often proclaim profound and irreducible differences between daughters and sons, mothers and fathers, wives and husbands. It is not so much that girls and boys learn differently, rather that they learn difference. The issue of gender is, in this way, and as will become obvious, immanent in the experience of childhood.

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Acknowledgements

Fieldwork was conducted in Angang (a rural township consisting of several villages) during 1987–9. (In order to protect the privacy of informants, all place and personal names have been changed.) I first lived for several months with teachers at the Angang middle school (*zhongxue*), and then moved to the village of Beicun, where I lived with a local family for the remainder of my stay. I am very grateful to the many friends in Angang whose lives I undoubtedly disrupted, but who showed me unflinching warmth and generosity. I have not repaid their kindness, but I hope they would not be too disappointed by my account of their community.

During my stay in Taiwan, I was affiliated with the Institute of Ethnography at the Academia Sinica; I am particularly grateful to Lin Mei-rong, Huang Ying-kuei and Huang Hsuan-wei of the Institute for their help and assistance. Funding was received from the Taiwan History Field Research Project (Luce Foundation), the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the Central Research Fund (University of London). The fieldwork was part of my doctoral studies at the London School of Economics, and I am indebted to many people there. The research was supervised by Maurice Bloch, and I am especially grateful for his help and encouragement over the years in spite of my manifest thickness.

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