

“UNRULY” CHILDREN

How do we become moral persons? What about children’s active learning in contrast to parenting? What can children teach us about knowledge-making more broadly? Answer these questions by delving into the groundbreaking ethnographic fieldwork conducted by anthropologists Arthur and Margery Wolf in a Martial Law Era Taiwanese village (1958–60), marking the first-ever study of ethnic Han children. Jing Xu skillfully reinterprets the Wolfs’ extensive fieldnotes, employing a unique blend of humanistic interpretation, natural language processing (NLP), and machine-learning techniques. Through a lens of social cognition, this book unravels the complexities of children’s moral growth, exposing instances of disobedience, negotiation, and peer dynamics. Writing *through* and *about* fieldnotes, the author connects the two themes, learning morality and making ethnography, in light of social cognition, and invites all of us to take children seriously. This book is ideal for graduate and undergraduate students of anthropology and educational studies.

JING XU is an anthropologist at the University of Washington and the author of *The Good Child: Moral Development in a Chinese Preschool* (Stanford University Press, 2017). She pursues interdisciplinary research, bringing together humanistic and scientific perspectives to study how humans become moral persons.

NEW DEPARTURES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

New Departures in Anthropology is a book series that focuses on emerging themes in social and cultural anthropology. With original perspectives and syntheses, authors introduce new areas of inquiry in anthropology, explore developments that cross disciplinary boundaries, and weigh in on current debates. Every book illustrates theoretical issues with ethnographic material drawn from current research or classic studies, as well as from literature, memoirs, and other genres of reportage. The aim of the series is to produce books that are accessible enough to be used by college students and instructors, but will also stimulate, provoke and inform anthropologists at all stages of their careers. Written clearly and concisely, books in the series are designed equally for advanced students and a broader range of readers, inside and outside academic anthropology, who want to be brought up to date on the most exciting developments in the discipline.

Series Editorial Board

Michael Lambek, University of Toronto
Laura Bear, London School of Economics and Political Science
Naveeda Khan, Johns Hopkins University

“Unruly” Children

*Historical Fieldnotes and Learning
Morality in a Taiwan Village*



JING XU

University of Washington



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-1-009-41627-6 — 'Unruly' Children
 Jing Xu
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
 New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009416276

DOI: 10.1017/9781009416269

© Jing Xu 2025

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
 of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
 place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009416269

First published 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Xu, Jing, 1983– author.

TITLE: “Unruly” children : historical fieldnotes and learning morality in a Taiwan village /
 Jing Xu, University of Washington.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY, USA : Cambridge
 University Press, 2025. | Series: New departures in anthropology |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2024001559 | ISBN 9781009416276 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781009416269 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Children – Taiwan. | Moral development – Taiwan. |

Child psychology – Taiwan. | Children – Research – Taiwan.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC HQ792.T33 X82 2025 | DDC 155.4/1823–dc23/eng/20240526

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024001559>

ISBN 978-1-009-41627-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-41625-2 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
 or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
 publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
 remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-41627-6 — 'Unruly' Children
Jing Xu
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

In Memory of Arthur Wolf

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Foreword</i>	xiii
<i>Stevan Harrell</i>	
<i>Preface</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxvi
<i>Notes on Transcription and Terminology</i>	xxviii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xxix
Introduction: Learning Morality in a Taiwan Village	1
1 Fieldwork beyond Fieldwork: Reconstructing an Ethnography of Children through Historical Fieldnotes	36
2 Crime and Punishment: Parenting and the Disobedient Child	72
3 Playful Creatures: Learning Morality in Peer Play	103
4 Gendered Morality: Fierce Girls and Naughty Boys	138
5 Care and Rivalry: An Untold Tale of a Sibling Dyad	176
Epilogue: Taking Children Seriously	212
	vii

Contents

<i>Afterword</i>	224
<i>Hill Gates</i>	
<i>Appendix: Topic Modeling List (Corpus: Child Observation)</i>	231
<i>Glossary</i>	232
<i>References</i>	234
<i>Index</i>	253

Figures

1.1	Village sketch map	<i>page</i> 42
1.2	Children playing at the irrigation canal in Shulin	43
1.3	Village houses and paddy fields	43
1.4	The Wang family house that Arthur Wolf lived in	45
1.5	MC with a girl	58
1.6	MC with young children	59
2.1	A boy in a fighting pose	86
3.1	A group of children playing	105
3.2	Child Observation co-occurrence network	107
4.1	Doll Play (DP) test materials	148
4.2	TAT Drawing #4	152
4.3	TAT Drawing #1	155
4.4	TAT Drawing #7	159
4.5	A girl contemplating	165
4.6	An adopted girl’s (#193) behavioral-interaction network	170
5.1	Child observation subset (#49 and #50) union network	187
5.2	(a) #49’s ego network of behavioral interactions, (b) #50’s ego network of behavioral interactions	189
5.3	Top 100 high-frequency words in the Child Observation subset (#49 and #50)	190
5.4	Top 50 high-frequency words in Child Observation subset (#49 and #50)	191
5.5	Word co-occurrence network in the Child Observation subset (#49 and #50)	192

List of Figures

5.6 A boy carrying his baby brother	194
5.7 TAT Drawing #5	201
5.8 TAT Drawing #2	204
5.9 TAT Drawing #8	204

Tables

2.1	Answers to the physical assault scenario in Child Interview Question 8a	<i>page 83</i>
2.2	Older children dominating younger children through coercion, according to behavioral grading of Child Observation texts	89
3.1	Number of behavioral-interaction entries grouped by age status and behavioral direction	108
3.2	A sample of high-frequency behaviors	122
4.1	Total number of behaviors by gender and interactional direction	142
4.2	Gender differences in initiated behaviors, two-sample proportion test, $df = 1$	143
4.3	Gender differences in received behaviors, two-sample proportion test, $df = 1$	144
5.1	Wang Yi-kun and Wang Mei-yu’s family, Household #7	181
5.2	Wang Yi-kun (#49) and Wang Mei-yu (#50) in children’s co-occurrence network	188
5.3	Behavioral grading results (Child #49 and #50)	193

Foreword

Anthropologist Arthur Wolf died in 2015, fifty-seven years after he and his then wife Margery Wolf had arrived in the north Taiwan village of Xia Xizhou to begin field research on the lives of children there. They stayed two years, collecting a huge trove of descriptive and quantitative data, including timed observations of child behavior, projective tests, parent interviews, and school questionnaires, all recorded on paper in that predigital age. Then those data sat. Margery Wolf clearly drew on some of the fieldnotes, although only a small part, for the three books she wrote based on that stay, and Arthur used some of them as background for his doctoral dissertation and his later research on the incest taboo. In his final years, Arthur returned to these data, beginning to digitize and analyze some of them, but he did not live to complete his analysis.

After Arthur died, his widow Hill Gates approached me asking if I could suggest a scholar who might make use of the data from the Wolfs’ stay in Xia Xizhou. As it happened, I knew the perfect person: XU Jing had recently arrived at the University of Washington as a postdoctoral researcher studying social cognition in American infants and toddlers. A native of Hunan in central China, XU Jing had never been to Taiwan, but she was a native speaker of Chinese, the mother of a young son, and the author of a recent book on moral development in a Shanghai pre-school. She also, like Arthur, combined insights from psychology and

Foreword

anthropology and was not afraid of supplementing ethnographic observation with quantitative analysis. I recommended her to Hill, who cautiously agreed to consider XU Jing for the job.

Arthur had built his dream house – mostly out of locally sourced lumber and with his own hands – on his family’s ranch in the hills of Sonoma County, but he succumbed to prostate cancer before he could enjoy retirement there. The house became a library, data repository, and workspace for scholars interested in Arthur’s legacy, and Hill invited XU Jing to visit in 2018 and look through the materials. Passing the five-day “probation,” XU Jing came away with the trove. She quickly set to work analyzing, with the help of research assistants, data science consultants, and a few people, now old, who had participated in the Wolfs’ original research.

The result is *“Unruly” Children*, a unique and valuable book that addresses important issues, both substantive and methodological, for ethnography, Taiwan studies, family dynamics, and most importantly the anthropology of childhood. How does an anthropologist who has never been to the place she writes about reconstruct the local world of six decades before? How would her account have been different if she instead of her predecessors had made the observations and written the notes? What did they put in that she would have left out, and vice versa? How does the child-centered approach of the Wolf archive give us different insights into of childhood and learning from the parent-oriented, “socialization” approach of most ethnographies of childhood? How did growing up under martial law imposed by a military dictatorship, a factor that the Wolf’s did not write about (perhaps to protect their research subjects) affect children’s experiences? How did children’s process of moral learning in the Taiwan of that day, when the typical woman bore five or more children who took care of each other and spent most of the day outside, differ from the experience of today’s single children who spend solitary hours in front of a screen? Finally, what might be universal in the experience of Xia Xizhou children of the 1950s, and how might

Foreword

analyzing the meticulous and detailed records of their everyday lives inform our understanding of how human children everywhere learn to be moral beings?

XU Jing addresses all these important questions and more. Although she cannot, nor can anyone else, offer definitive answers, her perceptive analysis and innovative methodology can refine our understanding and point the way forward for future ethnographers, psychologists, and historians of childhood. They also bring to life a world that is no more, adding history to psychology and anthropology as disciplines to which she has something important to say.

Delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, XU Jing was finally able to visit Xia Xizhou at the end of September 2023.

Stevan Harrell*

* Stevan Harrell, a student of Arthur Wolf, taught at the University of Washington from 1974 to 2017.

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

Preface

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.

Preface

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).

Preface

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).

Preface

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.

Preface

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.

Preface

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

Preface

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

Preface

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.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I am deeply grateful to Hill Gates for her incredible generosity and trust. She welcomed me at the Wolf ranch and gave me unique access to her late husband Arthur Wolf’s precious fieldnotes. Our fun conversations have taught me a lot, not just about these materials but also about passion for knowledge. My gratitude also goes to Stevan Harrell, who introduced me to this hidden treasure of fieldnotes, helped me in each and every step of this research, and provided invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. I am very grateful to my collaborators and research assistants who contributed to the digitization and analysis of these fieldnotes, Gladys Wang, Lu Zhou, Jose M. Hernandez, Chang Liu, Yanchen Wu, and many others. Several funding agencies supported my research, including the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation, and Rockpile Foundation. Communications with Arthur Wolf’s friends and students, especially Myron Cohen, Huang Chieh-Shan, John Shepherd, and Maria Duryea, shed light on several puzzles in this research. Many colleagues at the University of Washington helped me at various stages of this project, especially Patricia Ebrey, Ben Marwick, Madeleine Yue Dong, Ann Anagnost, and James Lin. When I finally visited Taiwan in September 2023, Mr. Wong Min-Liang – the son of Arthur Wolf’s good friend Wang Shiqing, academic colleagues from various institutions, as well as former villagers at

Acknowledgments

Xia Xizhou – some of them participated in the original fieldwork – all welcomed me with open arms. I really appreciate their hospitality, help, and kindness.

I must extend my gratitude to my editor Michael Lambek and to Charles Stafford who introduced me to Cambridge University Press. I must also acknowledge my great intellectual debt to Pascal Boyer and James Wertsch at Washington University and Xiaojun Zhang at Tsinghua University, who always answered my questions with patience and guided me with kindness. In the past years while I was juggling between work and family and navigating a precarious academic system, lovely friends from all over the world gave me much-needed support. My very special thanks to Yang Zhan, Ming Xue, Chunyan Su, Chaoxiong Zhang, Helina Solomon-Woldekiros, Mary Wertsch, Bambi Chapin, and Lihong Shi. Finally, much love to my husband, my son, and my parents. Through them and with them I came to understand what really matters.

Notes on Transcription and Terminology

Romanization of the names of Taiwanese people in this book is done according to the Wade-Giles system, in respect of the choice made by Arthur Wolf, the original researcher whose fieldnotes this book is based on. I used pseudonyms for all research participants. Romanization of other Chinese characters, including place names, is done according to the Hanyu Pinyin system. A few exceptions, that is, local idioms, are marked by an H (Hoklo Taiwanese) in Glossary.

In terms of writing system, I used traditional Chinese characters according to the convention in the historical context of postwar Taiwan.

Throughout the book, I use the term “Chinese” in the broad sense of cultural heritage.