


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Picturing Parental Love for Girls in Song (960–1279) China

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(Received 5 August 2022; revised 1 March 2023; accepted 11 March 2023)

Abstract

This essay examines the representation of young girls in Song dynasty literary and visual arts as period portrayals of an important human emotion: parental love. The literature on doting parents extends far back in Chinese history, but in Song times children become the focus of family manuals, pediatric manuals, and an expanding visual and material culture in which the imaginary lives of children in play are conveyed to readers and viewers. Girls are shown not only active in games with boys but engaged in guiding and supervising the play. Talented girls were praised and adored by Song dynasty parents. Children were portrayed as resolving conflicts among companions on their own, with little interference from adults. Song period art and literature adopted an indulgent attitude toward mischievous behaviors in boys and girls. There developed a conception of family increasingly based on affection rather than the authority of age.

Keywords: Song painting; children at play; girls; parental love; material culture; garden

The intriguing genre of picturing children at play—*yingxitu* 嬰戲圖—flourished in Chinese visual culture from the twelfth century through the nineteenth century.¹ Artists who championed the genre in the Song dynasty (960–1279) include Su Hanchen 蘇漢臣 (1094–1172) (Figure 1) and Li Song 李嵩 (ca. 1190–ca. 1230), as well as anonymous painters who worked for the urban art market responding to a

This article had its origin in a graduate seminar taught by Martin Powers, who offered substantial insights and feedback on the project. Comments from Ari Levine helped shape an early version. The constructive suggestions from the two anonymous reviewers for the journal inspired me to closely engage with material culture objects and encouraged me to advance the analysis of pediatric manuals. I am grateful for the erudite and generous insights shared by Journal editors Patricia Ebrey and Beverly Bossler on issues of social class and levels of education of women in the Song dynasty. Any mistakes and oversights that remain are mine alone.

¹For recent studies of this genre, see Huang Xiaofeng 黃小峰, “Gongzhu de hunli: baizitu yu nansong yingxi huihua” 公主的婚禮：百子圖與南宋嬰戲繪畫 [The Princess’ Wedding: A Hundred Children at Play and Southern Song Pictures of Children], *Meishu guan* 12 (2018), 107–114; Yang Zhishui 楊之水, *Cong haier shi dao baizitu* 從孩兒詩到百子圖 [From Poetry of Children to A Hundred Children at Play] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Zhonghe Press, 2014); see also Ann Wicks ed., *Children in Chinese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002).

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Figure 1. Attributed to Su Hanchen 蘇漢臣 (1094–1172), *Children Playing in an Autumn Garden* (秋庭嬰戲圖), early twelfth century, Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 197.5 x 108.7 cm, Taipei: National Palace Museum

broader social demand for such paintings.² Images of children also appeared in narrative paintings, illustrations to classics, as well as on objects such as clay figures and

²These anonymous works were often labeled as “Songren yingxitu” 宋人嬰戲圖 (Picture of Children at Play by a Song Artist) in catalogues and collections of later periods. Regarding the vibrant art market involving Song dynasty professional artists as well as court artists, see Huiping Pang, “Southern Song Freelance Painters (1127–1279): Commerce Between the Imperial Court and the Lin’an Art Market,” *Journal of Chinese History* 5.1 (2021), 23–58.

ceramic pillows. These lively portrayals of children thrived at a time when the genres of children's primers (*mengshu* 蒙書)³ and pediatric manuals (*xiaer yaozheng* 小兒藥證),⁴ as well as poetry on children and familial love mushroomed. It also corresponded to expansion in the manufacture of toys. Existing scholarship often interprets images of children as auspicious wishes for fertility and affluence.⁵ This article takes a different perspective, highlighting how such depictions exemplified the public display of familial affection for children, and in particular, for girls.

In literature and visual arts across many cultures and societies, the representation of love and affection between family members tends to emerge late. In his analysis of *Children Playing in an Autumn Garden* (秋庭嬰戲圖, Figure 1) attributed to Su Hanchen, Richard Barnhart observes that a comparable depiction of children in such an "intimate and sensitive" manner did not happen in Europe until the Enlightenment period. Barnhart further notes that such portrayals of children "can be associated with periods of enlightenment and humanistic thought throughout the world."⁶ During the eighteenth century in Europe, a new concept of family and childhood emerged among urban residents, in contradiction to the ideals of the aristocratic system. In both the painting and literature of that period, we increasingly find representations of affective relations between children and parents instead of silent, obedient, children. Childhood came to be imagined as a distinct stage of human development cherished for its "innocence and naturalness."⁷ This new development in the perception of family and childhood in Europe coincided with a moment when the cultural criteria determining social status gradually shifted from those "based on kinship" to those based on personally chosen commercial products.⁸

During Song times, social order was likewise being re-configured along the lines of income levels and acquired material culture (paintings, fans, mirrors, tea utensils, gardens) rather than hereditary status.⁹ Jeehee Hong has observed that by the twelfth century, emerging "non-literati" social groups such as rich farmers and merchants consumed art works to express their taste and identity.¹⁰ With the rise of middle income

³Over one hundred types of children's primers were published in the Song dynasty. See Pan Weina 潘偉娜, "Songdai xianbian tongmeng duwu chutan" 宋代新編童蒙讀物初探 [A Preliminary Study of Children's Primers in the Song Dynasty] (MA thesis, Sichuan daxue, Chengdu, 2005), 51.

⁴For a discussion of a variety of Song pediatric treatises, see Chen Fang 陳芳 and Zhao Shiqi 趙詩琪, "Songdai ertong de huyang, jibing yu fushi" 宋代兒童的護養, 疾病, 與服飾 [Care, Illness, and Clothing of Song Dynasty Children], *Yishusheji yu yanjiu* 6 (2020), 32–38.

⁵Zheng Caiwang 鄭才旺, "Songdai yingxi muti xia de baizitu yu wunan ernü tu yanjiu" 宋代嬰戲母題下的"百子圖"與"五男二女圖"研究 [Pictures of 'A Hundred Children at Play' and 'Five Boys and Two Girls' in the Song Dynasty], *Meishu daguan* 2 (2018), 48–49.

⁶Richard Barnhart and Catherine Barnhart, "Images of Children in Song Painting and Poetry," in *Children in Chinese Art*, ed. Wicks, 38.

⁷Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, eds., *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 98–99. See also Martin Powers, "Humanity and 'Universals' in Sung Dynasty Painting," in *Arts of the Sung and Yuan*, edited by Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 135.

⁸Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

⁹Patricia Ebrey, "Shifts in Marriage Finance from the Sixth to the Thirteenth Century," in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, edited by Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Ebrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 112.

¹⁰Jeehee Hong, *Theater of the Dead: A Social Turn in Chinese Funerary Art, 1000–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016); see also Hong, "Changing Roles of the Tomb Portrait: Burial

taxpayers (*zhongmin* 中民, *zhongjia* 中家)¹¹ as well as an urban market economy, representations of loving relations between parents and children appeared in artistic as well as literary genres.¹² The public expression of indulgent love for sons and daughters may be understood in part in reference to the discourse of “*renqing*” 人情, or universal human emotions.¹³

Pediatric manuals instructing readers in the care of infants (*ying* 嬰) and toddlers (*you* 幼), as well as prescriptions for various kinds of ailments in little children (*xiaoyer* 小兒) flourished during Song times. The manuals emphasized love and affection (*ai* 愛) for all children, discussing therapies and medication for both boys and girls. In his preface to *Xiaoyer yaozheng zhijue* 小兒藥證直訣 (Prescriptions for Young Children), the famous pediatrician Qian Yi 錢乙 (ca. 1032–1113) proclaimed,

I believe that spreading love is the responsibility of a benevolent person. To care for the young is an instruction passed down from the sages; how can we fail to extend this favor? Thus I am transmitting this to those who like to help others, so that the young can avoid the bitterness of unnatural death, and the elderly will not have the grief of mourning for their children: this is my aspiration!

余念博愛者,仁者之用心, 幼幼者聖人之遺訓, 此惠可不廣耶! 將傳之好事者, 使幼者免橫天之苦, 老者無哭子之悲, 此余之誌也。¹⁴

Notably, medical treatment for both boys and girls were featured in pediatric manuals (discussed later). Girls received comparable parental love with boys, as demonstrated in epitaphs written by literati commemorating junior members of the extended family.¹⁵

Although female agency has been a burgeoning topic in historical and art historical studies of imperial China,¹⁶ the portrayal of young girls in visual arts has rarely received

Practices and Ancestral Worship of the Non-Literati Elite in North China (1000–1400),” *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 44.1 (2014), 203–64.

¹¹Martin Powers has observed that Song dynasty period terms such as *zhongmin* 中民 and *zhongjia* 中家 denoted population of middle-income level, without referencing to any particular social or occupational group. Martin Powers, *China and England: The Preindustrial Struggle for Justice in Word and Image* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 57.

¹²Ann Barrott Wicks argues that the Song dynasty witnessed the emergence of a new genre of paintings that portrayed children and their activities, which contributes to the rise of humanism. Ann Barrott Wicks, “Picturing Children” in *The Family Model In Chinese Art And Culture*, edited by Jerome Silbergeld and Dora C.Y. Ching (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 307. See also Pei-yi Wu, “Childhood Remembered: Parents and Children in China: 800–1700,” in *Chinese Views of Childhood*, edited by Anne Behnke Kinney (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995), 138.

¹³Martin Powers has discovered in Song literary and artistic sources the recognition and valorization of universality in human feelings, including both positive and negative aspects such as family love, romantic emotions, fear of poverty, want for food, etc. Powers, “Humanity and ‘Universals,’” 135–46.

¹⁴Qian Yi 錢乙 (ca. 1032–1113), *Xiaoyer yaozheng zhijue* 小兒藥證直訣 [Prescriptions for Young Children], in *Xiaoyer yaozheng zhijue leizheng shiyi* 小兒藥證直訣類證釋義 (1119), edited by Yu Jingmao 俞景茂 (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin, 1984), 214.

¹⁵Cong Ellen Zhang, “Brother, Uncle, and Patriarch: A Northern Song ‘Family Man,’” *Journal of Chinese History* 6.2 (2022), 269–94. The recent special issue on family relationships in the *Journal of Chinese History* fruitfully directs attention to the understudied relationships in between siblings and extended family members. See Zhang’s state of the field article: “Family Relations in Chinese History,” *Journal of Chinese History* 6.2 (2022), 193–200.

¹⁶See Wu Hung 巫鴻, *Zhongguo hui hua zhong de “nüxing kongjian”* 中國繪畫中的女性空間 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2019); Lara Blanchard, *Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire: Gender and Interiority*

close examination and nuanced interpretations. In this essay, a close look at the dynamic relationships between girls, boys, and parents in Song dynasty literature and arts reveals that parents doted on their daughters. Girls' talents were praised, and their education was encouraged. The playful nature of children was appreciated, and mischievous behaviors were tolerated. Examining the portrayal of girls in everyday life and interactions with family members around them, the essay revises assumptions of daughters as subservient followers of Confucian ethics.¹⁷ Song poetry and visual culture illustrate that one social ideal was to treat daughters with love and attention, as much as the boys, if not more.¹⁸ Representations of young girls in Song sources suggest significant personal autonomy, and also reveal family relationships that appear to have been characterized, at the time, as affectionate rather than authoritarian in nature.

Girls, Games, and Playful Childhood

Children Playing in an Autumnal Garden depicts a boy and a girl playing with a jujube spinner in a gorgeous garden of flowering plants.¹⁹ A jujube spinner was a popular toy made of three jujubes in the Song dynasty. One jujube cut in half exposes the upper part of its kernel. Balancing on the kernel's tip is a bamboo strip with one jujube stuck into each end. A push with the right amount of force and angle will set the spinner in motion and immediately excite the little ones. This will require nimble fingers and mental agility. In the painting, the boy dressed in a red silk garment with golden flower patterns looks at the spinner attentively and reaches out his hand to one jujube. The girl leans slightly forward to concentrate on his move, and points in the direction of her little brother. As her pearly teeth reveal, she seems to be speaking (Figure 2), perhaps reminding the boy not to push too hard, nor to over tilt the jujube. Her gleaming white robe and the red belt on her waist echo harmoniously with her brother's outfit. The

in Chinese Painting and Poetry (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Dorothy Ko, *The Social Life of Inkstones: Artisans and Scholars in Early Qing China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017); Bettine Birge, *Marriage and the Law in the Age of Khubilai Khan: Cases from the Yuan Dianzhang* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Beverly Bossler, ed., *Gender and Chinese History: Transformative Encounters* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015); Hui-shu Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency in Song Dynasty China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).

¹⁷Scholars have demonstrated pronounced divergence between social practice and Confucian precepts concerning family (see *Journal of Chinese History* 6.2 [2022]). Dorothy Ko also has insightfully critiqued the fallacies of viewing the history of Chinese women as well as Confucian values as a monolith. Ko proposed the study of Chinese women in the specificity of time, location, age, and socio-economic situation, and in the context of their everyday life and social relationships. Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 1–28.

¹⁸Of course, painting and poetry do not necessarily reflect social reality, but they nonetheless embody a society's "interests" and "deepest concerns." In his study of the rise of culture of romance in Mid-Tang dynasty, taking the example of *Huo Xiaoyu's Story*, Stephen Owen argues that fiction does not represent a society as it is but a society's interests. Stephen Owen, *The End of the Chinese 'Middle Ages': Essays in Mid-Tang Literary Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 133.

¹⁹Although it is still debatable whether the painting was by the hand of the master Su Hanchen, the fine details in the figures' facial expressions, the meticulous brushwork texturing the garden rock, the finely constructed toys and exquisite furniture, as well as the composition make it datable to the range between the late eleventh and the early thirteenth century; Barnhart and Barnhart, "Images of Children," 37–39. For a discussion on the painting's connoisseurship and authorship, see Liu Fang-ju 劉芳如, "Su Hanchen ying-xitu kao zhi yi er san" 蘇漢臣《嬰戲圖》考之一、二、三 [A Study of Su Hanchen's *Picture of Children at Play*], *Gugong wenwu yuekan* 4 (2000), 4–17; 5 (2000), 68–92; 6 (2000), 16–29.



Figure 2. A detail from Su Hanchen, *Children Playing in an Autumn Garden*.

pearls dangling from her hairband are a metonymy for the preciousness that she represents. This scene appears to contradict a conventional view of girls and women in imperial China, which largely characterized them as being suppressed and obedient in family and society.²⁰ In the painting, however, the girl is taking a more active role, interacting with the boy in the game.

Instead of portraying the children's playground as tidy and neat, the artist depicts toys and cymbals scattered on the lacquer stool and ground (Figure 1). A spinning wheel and its corresponding picture cards precariously sit on the stool, from which we are informed of the insouciance and naiveté of the children. Although the artist did not depict their parents, the pictorial space is teeming with familial affection for the girl and the boy. Their healthy looks and carefree play are evidence of loving care and nurture. In another painting, *Winter Play* (冬日戲嬰圖, Figure 3),²¹ the girl also takes the leading role. She holds a cat wand decorated with a colorful flag and a peacock's feather. She turns her eyes to the fluffy kitten, planning the next step to tease it. Her brother enthusiastically follows her moves. Blossoming camellia, flowering plum, interestingly shaped lake rocks, and a furry friend, all help stage a dynamic and ebullient scene. All these natural elements in gardens channeled intimate emotions.²² In Song pictures of children at play, the garden sets the scene as a safe and enjoyable playground for children to explore.

²⁰Beverly Bossler has outlined scholarship that in recent decades has challenged the view of imperial Chinese women as sufferers in oppressive, patriarchal society; Bossler, *Gender and Chinese History*, 6–9. Patricia Ebrey has similarly critiqued stereotypical views in nineteenth- to twentieth-century studies of imperial Chinese women. See Ebrey, *Women and the Family in Chinese History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1–2, 10–12.

²¹Liu Fang-ju argued that the painting might be originally created as a pair (or one of a set of four) with *Children Playing at an Autumn Garden*; Liu, “Su Hanchen yingxitu,” 16.

²²Blanchard, *Figures of Longing and Desire*, 222.



Figure 3. *Winter Play* (冬日嬰戲圖), Song dynasty (960–1279), Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 196.2 x 107.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

If the purpose of such paintings were merely to express an auspicious wish for a fertile family of many sons,²³ why did the artists integrate girls into the scenes and treat them in such detail? That the artists chose to capture touching moments of interaction

²³A number of articles on pictorial representations of children in Song China emphasized that good wish for a family's fertility and success was the motivation for producing such images. See Tajima Tatsuya, "Karako Asobi: Images of Chinese Children at Play," in *Images of Familial Intimacy in Eastern and Western Art*, edited by Toshiharu Nakamura (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 185–217. See also Ellen Johnston

between exuberant children should not be taken for granted. As Barnhart has elucidated: “that Song painters unknown to us today were able for so brief a time to think of and depict human beings and human relationships in such tactile, intimate, and physical ways defies easy explanation, whether of discourse or essential feelings, yet remains necessary to our understanding of the nature of Song art and life.”²⁴

Notably, the engaging moment between siblings in both paintings centers on play, rather than on other actions such as reading or writing. Song social practices appear to presume that an ideal childhood is characterized by carefree play and merriment. The Song dynasty marked a moment in pre-industrial China when the greatest number of toys and toy types were invented and consumed in urban environments.²⁵ Song parents likewise acknowledged the value of games and toys for raising children.²⁶ Therefore it is not surprising that Song artists portrayed children playing a variety of toys and games. In Li Song’s *The Knickknack Peddler* (貨郎圖, Figure 4), for example, heaps of toys and daily goods²⁷ in the vendor’s portable stall have attracted a group of village children. Rattles, cricket pots, paper birds, gourds, lotus pods, wooden clubs, ball games, and so on, dizzy and dazzle viewers. Among the toys are some seated clay figures (Figure 5), which represent real miniature sculptures produced in the Song period for the enjoyment of children.²⁸ They survived in large quantities. For example, *Figure of A Seated Child* (Figure 6) captures an ebullient child with round and chubby cheeks. The size of the sculpture can easily fit the palm of little children, so it is easy to carry them and share with friends. The earthy tone of the clay and the crude texture absorb children’s energy and comfort them. The clay figures in forms of children, or *nihai’er* 泥孩兒, were popular toys sold in shops and streets of Song cities.²⁹ Period documents of urban life show that there were both boy and girl clay figures.³⁰ They enjoyed such a high demand that many of them were branded with workshop marks. Different makers had to compete for the market.³¹

Boys and girls were depicted interacting with each other in games. Apart from paintings, such portrayals appear in a wide variety of media. For example, a square mirror (Figure 7) portrays a group of seven children orchestrating a puppet show. Some figures’

Laing, “Auspicious Images of Children in China: Ninth to Thirteenth Century,” *Orientalism* 27.1 (1996), 47–52.

²⁴Barnhart and Barnhart, “Images of Children,” 51.

²⁵Ge Qifeng 葛奇峰, “Beisong dongjingcheng xinzhengmen yizhi chutu yulelei wenwu pinshang” 北宋東京城新鄭門遺址出土娛樂類文物品賞 [Entertainment Objects Unearthed from the Ruins of Xinzheng Gate of Kaifeng in the Northern Song Dynasty], *Wenwu jianjian yu jianshang* 6 (2015), 16–25.

²⁶Yi Yongwen 伊永文, *Xingzou zai songdai de chengshi: Songdai chengshi fengqing tu ji* 行走在宋代的都市：宋代城市風情圖記 [Walking in a Song dynasty City: Song dynasty Urban Life] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 237–39.

²⁷Huang Xiaofeng’s recent study also identified diverse types of medication in the peddler’s stall. See Huang Xiaofeng, “Huomai tianling: Songhuazhongde tougu yu yiyao” 貨賣天靈：宋畫中的頭骨與醫藥 [Medicine and Skulls in Song Paintings], in *Meishu guanqian* 290.10 (2019), 47–54.

²⁸For more discussion of clay figures and modes made as toys for Song children, see Wei Yuejin 魏躍進, “Cong songdai taomu zaoxing guankui songdai youxi fengsu” 从宋代陶模造型管窺宋代游戏风俗 [Song Dynasty Games Documented in Clay Modes], *Zhongyuan wenwu* 1 (2010), 105–9.

²⁹Meng Yuanlao 孟元老 (fl. twelfth century), *Dongjing menghualu* 東京夢華錄 [A Dream of Splendor from the Eastern Capital] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 208.

³⁰Jin Yingzhi 金盈之 (fl. thirteenth century), *Xinbian zuiweng tanlu* 新編醉翁談錄 [A New Edition of the Records of Conversations of the Drunken Elderly] (Zhengzhou: Daxiang, 2019), 235. See also Zhou Mi 周密 (1232–1298), *Wulin jushi* 武林舊事 [Past Events of Hangzhou] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji, 2015), 58.

³¹Lu You 陸遊 (1125–1210), *Laoxue’an biji* 老學庵筆記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 58.



Figure 4. Li Song 李嵩 (ca. 1190–ca. 1230), *The Knickknack Peddler* (貨郎圖), 1212, Fan mounted as album leaf, ink and color on silk, 24.1 x 26 cm. Accession number: 1963.582. Cleveland Museum of Art, Columbus.

forms are obscured due to usage and damage. Nevertheless, we can distinguish little boys with their hair partially or fully shaved, from girls with their hair tied and decorated with ribbons. The hair style of the girl on the left side matches the hair type represented in *Pillow in the Form of a Reclining Girl* (Figure 8).

A fan painting titled *One Hundred Children at Play* (百子圖, Figure 9), depicts literally one hundred young children engaged in a variety of games and toys in a garden, among whom twenty are girls.³² Bustling with exuberant children, the lush summer garden emanates fragrance from blooming flowers and a lotus pond. Here again, the artist painted girls mingling with boys.³³ Even if one function of such a painting might be as a wedding gift to express a good wish of having many children,³⁴ we should note that

³²Huang, “Gongzhu de hunli,” 107.

³³Xiong Bingzhen has observed that, by Ming times, “most families and adults would permit girls to play together with boys at an early age.” Hsiung Ping-chen, *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 190.

³⁴Zheng, “Songdai yingxi,” 48–49.



Figure 5. A detail of *The Knickknack Peddler* showing clay figures among the toys.

girls were also considered precious. Girls with double chignons (and not shaved in the middle) tied in red hairbands are actively engaged in activities. Some are playing flutes, some are playing little drums, and some appear to be supervising play. The artist showed the intimate relationship between sisters and brothers (Figure 10). Some of them hold each other's hands or arms; some perform in a music band. One little boy is holding a toy umbrella for his sister who is playing make-believe. Love between siblings overflows the painted fan.

Typically, parents and adults are not shown in the paintings. However, the garden's thoughtful design reveal their agency. For example, railings are designed to protect the children from falling into a pond. Yuan Cai 袁采 (d. 1195), in his *Precepts for Social Life* specifically discussed the design of railings to guarantee children's safety. He wrote: "wells in people's houses should have railings around them, as should ponds. Care is



Figure 6. *Figure of a Seated Child*, 1127–1279, Earthenware with traces of slip and glaze, 6.7 x 5 x 2.8 cm. Accession number: S2012.9.3991. National Museum of Asian Art, Washington DC.

needed at spots with deep ravines and rapid streams, high points where one could fall ... If by any chance someone is careless, it will be too late to place the blame elsewhere.”³⁵

Gardens provided a space where children’s imagination could wander. Plants in the garden delivered special kinds of sensorial experience. Presumably it was the parents who had the plantains planted, but we know that children themselves also might plant herbs in the garden. Su Shi’s close friend Wen Tong 文同 (1018–1079) wrote a poem describing his son and daughter watching duckweed grow in a basin:

*Laughable Verses*³⁶

In our courtyard, my adorable son and daughter,
Fill the wash basin with water to plant duckweed.
I’m not sure where they heard it:
Each night one duckweed root sprouts seven stems.

可笑口號
可笑庭前小兒女，
栽盆貯水種浮萍。
不知何處聞人說，
一夜一根生七莖。

³⁵Yuan Cai 袁采 (d. 1195), trans. Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Family and Property in Sung China: Yüan Ts’ai’s Precepts for Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 284.

³⁶Wen Tong 文同 (1018–1079), “Kexiao kouhao” 可笑口號 [Laughable Verses], in *Songshi xuan* 宋詩選 [Selected Song Poetry], edited by Zhang Ming 張銘 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 2004), 134.

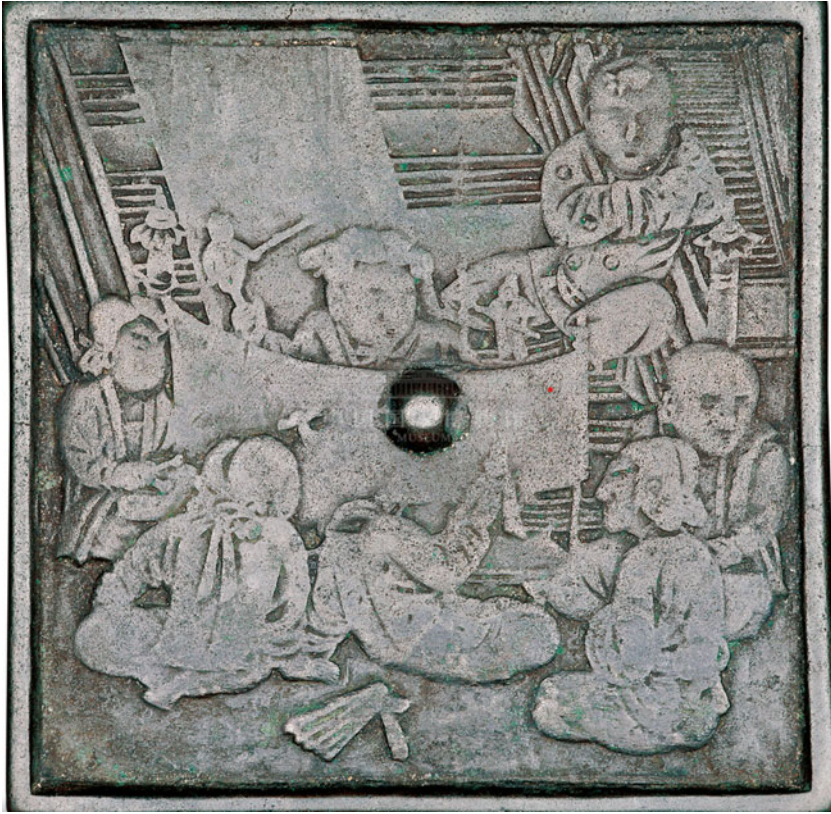


Figure 7. Bronze mirror showing children playing puppet show, Song dynasty (960–1279), 11×11cm. National Museum of China, Beijing.



Figure 8. Pillow in the Form of a Reclining Girl, twelfth century, Stoneware with underglaze slip decoration, Cizhou ware, 12.8 × 34 × 15 cm. Accession number: 1944–20–171a,b, Gift of Major General and Mrs. William Crozier. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

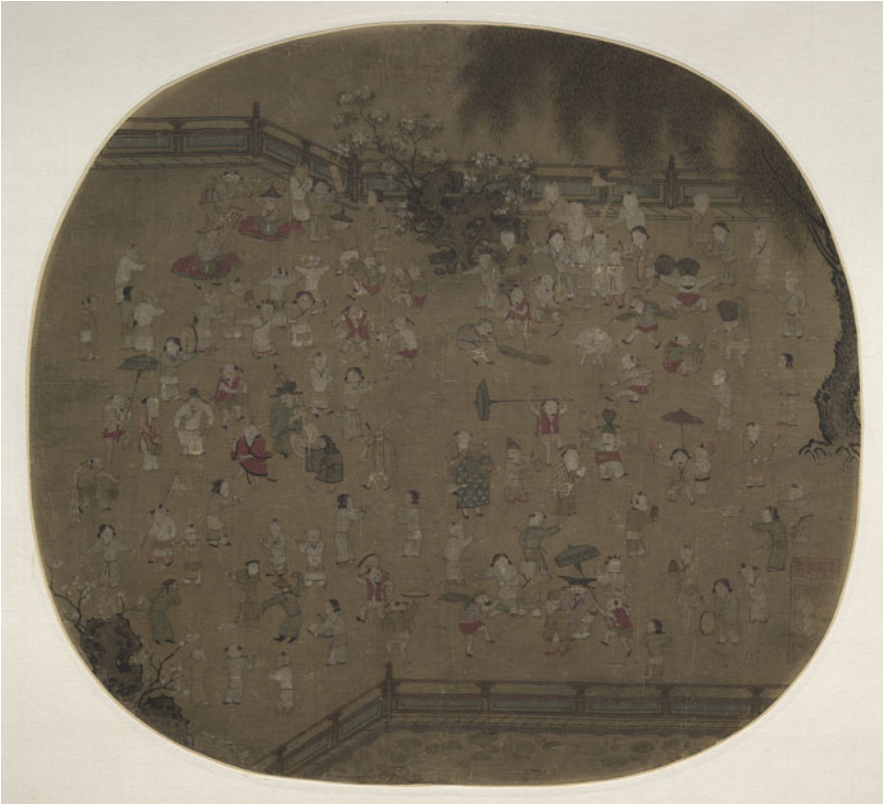


Figure 9. Attributed to Wang Juzheng 王居正 (active twelfth century), *One Hundred Children at Play* 百子圖, 1100–1200, fan painting, ink and colors on silk, 28.8 x 31.3 cm. Accession number: 1961.261. Cleveland Museum of Art, Columbus.

One can imagine the gleeful moment when Wen Tong’s son and daughter saw the duckweeds they had planted grow so rapidly. We can imagine that Wen’s children were gratified by the fruits of their labor.

Plants in the garden also offered children a pleasant sonic environment. Edwin Morris observed that much of the charm of banana leaves and magenta flowers derived from “the sound of rain on their large oar-like leaves and the *hsiao-hsiao* sound they make when the wind passes through them.”³⁷ Garden designers endeavored “to achieve the maximum sensorial delight with the minimum of stimulus; thus, pavilions are often set among these great plantains.”³⁸

The sensorial delight integrated into private gardens and the playful moments of little children sparked poetic thoughts in Song literati. For instance, Yang Wanli 楊萬里 (1127–1206) wrote about a pleasant experience of playing with his son and daughter in their family garden. Couplets from the poem refer to the marvelous

³⁷Edwin T. Morris, *The Gardens of China: History, Art, And Meanings* (New York: Scribner, 1983), 172.

³⁸Morris, *The Gardens of China*, 172.



Figure 10. A detail of *One Hundred Children at Play*, showing girls interacting with boys at play.

sounds and shade while his children ran through the plants grown beside garden paths:

Strolling in the Backyard Garden
I took a walk with ease,
while my sons and daughters kept me company.
The young ran fast and soon disappeared in distance;
I, the older, quickly got tired.

Laughter and voices diffused through leaves, I could hear them as if they were across from me.

At first it seemed that they stood close;

Only when I tried to catch up did I realize how far it was.

Shadows of pines and fir trees dappled the ground;

In a flash, I lost sight of them again!

後圃散策

杖屨頓輕鬆，兒女同行散。

少者前已失，老者後仍倦。

隔林吹笑語，相聞如對面。

明明去人近，眇眇彌步遠。

松杉滿地影，一瞬忽不見。³⁹

Yang Wanli's poem helps us understand why Song artists portrayed the interplay of plants, rocks, and children. The depiction of children playing in gardens readily inspires an analogy between the cultivation of children and the cultivation of gardens. In cultivating plants, a number of Song sources advocated a natural, laissez-faire approach. Excessive human interference was to be avoided. In his preface to a treatise on cultivating the herbaceous peonies of Yangzhou, the scholar Liu Ban 劉攽 (1023–1089) argued that he preferred Yangzhou peonies because they grew from seeds. The Luoyang peonies, in contrast, were grown by grafting. To Liu Ban, grafting meant being manipulated by human effort.⁴⁰ For Liu, the novel varieties of Luoyang peonies created from grafting could not compare with the “natural” beauty of Yangzhou peonies.⁴¹

In a similar vein, some Song parents might have preferred a more hands-off parenting approach. In *Women and Children by a Lotus Pond* (荷亭嬰戲圖, Figure 11), the mother sits in the pavilion at a distance from the children playing in the garden. Across from the pavilion, a group of boys and girls are playing make-believe. To the far right an older boy seems to have put his younger brother into a headlock. The mother in the pavilion looks out in this direction with one arm gently stretched out. Her facial expression is poised but authoritative. We may guess she is cautioning the older boy not to bully his brother.⁴² The artist, in other words, took it for granted that the supervision of children's play was appropriate only when things went awry. The paintings were informed by a philosophy of child-rearing that parents should allow children freedom to play and to work out their own relationships and challenges. Such an approach was generally present in Song period writings. For example, Lü Benzhong 呂本中 (1084–1145) argued that great learning requires a long-term accumulation that would naturally lead to achievements. He warned that people who forced things

³⁹Yang Wanli 楊萬里 (1127–1206), “Houpu sance” 後圃散策 [Strolling in the Backyard Garden], in Yang Wanli, *Yang Wanliji jianjiao* 楊萬里集箋校 [Collected Works of Yang Wanli] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 1303.

⁴⁰Details of Liu Ban's 劉攽 (1023–1089) treatise on peonies as well as the critique by his contemporary Wang Guan of the human intervention in planting peonies are discussed in Ronald Egan, *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 121–23.

⁴¹Egan, *The Problem of Beauty*, 123.

⁴²Liu Bo, “Physical Beauty and Inner Virtue: ‘Shinü tu’ in the Song Dynasty,” *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 45 (2015), 28.



Figure 11. Wang Qihan 王齊翰 (tenth century), attr., *Women and Children by a Lotus Pond* (荷亭嬰戏图), twelfth–thirteenth century, fan painting mounted as album leaf. Ink and color on silk. 23.9 × 25.8 cm. Accession number: 28.842a. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

would not attain any goals in the end.⁴³ To convey this point, Lü borrowed a phrase from Mencius: *yamiao zhuzhang* 揠苗助長 (to help seedlings grow faster by pulling them up). The implication is that one should not hamper the natural course of development by the application of excessive force.⁴⁴

Mischievousness was acknowledged as a desirable part of childhood. As Lara Blanchard has observed, the little girl wearing a red brocade garment in *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk* (Figure 12) was “playing peek-a-boo beneath the stretched cloth.”⁴⁵ Instead of depicting the little girl helping mother and other ladies prepare silk, the artist chose to portray her creativity. Her vivacious manner reveals her imagination

⁴³Lü Benzong 呂本中 (1084–1145), “Ziwei zashuo,” 紫薇雜說 [Miscellaneous Essays of Lü Benzong], in *Zhongguo lidai jiaxun daguan*, edited by Zhou Xiucui et al. (Dalian: Dalian, 1997), 140.

⁴⁴This is consistent with Lü’s views on composing poetry. He noted the importance of being flexible with styles and not restrained by the rules, although one should not abandon the rules. Lü Benzong 呂本中 (1084–1145), *Zhongguo wenxue da cidian* 中國文學大辭典, edited by Qian Zhonglian 錢仲聯 et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu, 1997), 1767.

⁴⁵Blanchard, *Figures of Longing and Desire*, 161.



Figure 12. Zhao Ji 趙佶 (1082–1135), A section of *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk* (搗練圖), twelfth century, Handscroll, ink and color on silk. 37.1 × 145 cm. Accession number: 12.886. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

and intelligence. She is the only figure in the painting who makes eye contact with viewers. Her innocent and effervescent facial expression and posture evoke humanistic sentiment. The depiction of her good humor takes for granted a young girl's capacity to make personal choices, even when these fall outside the conventional moral code.

Girls With Talent and Aptitude

The fact that girls were portrayed with behavioral characteristics so much at variance with our modern stereotypes, to the extent that their intelligence was applauded, is consistent with research tracing expanded female agency in Song times. Daughters' rights to dowry were protected by law in the Song dynasty.⁴⁶ Song women played a significant role in managing family finances as landowners in many land contracts.⁴⁷ Brides maintained "relatively independent economic status" and the system gave Song women legal support to remarry.⁴⁸ While remarriage for women might incur skepticism in rhetoric, it was nevertheless "commonly accepted and practiced in elite as well as in ordinary households."⁴⁹ In addition, Song women "entered varieties of public domains and functioned as significant agents whom men could not ignore in the construction of local society."⁵⁰

⁴⁶If a woman's father died before she got married, normally her property could not be retained by the family's male heirs. The Song legal code further presumed that a husband must consult his wife for the use of the dowry. See Ebrey, "Shifts in Marriage Finance," 102–8.

⁴⁷Bettine Birge, *Women, Property, and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yuan China (960–1368)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32–33.

⁴⁸Bianting Lü, "Bridal Dowry Land and the Economic Status of Women from Wealthy Families in the Song Dynasty," *Frontiers of History in China* 5 (2010), 106–24.

⁴⁹Cong Zhang, "The Many Lives of the Woman of Huaiyin in the Song (960–1279): Text, Genre, and Female Morality," *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 51, (2021), 199–249, especially 218.

⁵⁰Man Xu, *Crossing the Gate: Everyday Lives of Women in Song Fujian (960–1279)* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016), 128.

Scholars also have observed that enhanced education for many Song women expanded their impact on the wellbeing of their families. As Ronald Egan has noted, more Song women were active readers and writers than previously imagined.⁵¹ In educated families of the period, young girls' intellectual curiosity was often praised by their fathers. When the girls grew up, their learning became a desirable resource for guiding the next generation. Beverly Bossler has shown that virtue and learning were prized qualities for Song women.⁵² It is common that Song dynasty male authors celebrated female talents in painting, calligraphy, and poetry.⁵³

The normative attitudes towards young girls as recorded in Song dynasty art and literature offer more than a few surprises. The term personal aptitude (*cai* 才 or *neng* 能), for instance, referred to individual talent and ability. Terms for learning and competence were commonly applied to talented girls and women, as seen in poetry, family precepts, and epitaphs, among other sources.⁵⁴ Egan has explained the hurdles that Song women authors faced in the reception and circulation of their works. Nevertheless, examples of male authors recording and promoting women's writings were significant.⁵⁵ Recent studies show that poems written by Song women circulated in social spaces such as restaurants and inns, and later were collated and prefaced by male authors.⁵⁶

Girls often provided guidance and instructions to their younger brothers. For example, Zhu Mu 祝穆 (d. 1255) in his literary encyclopedia, *Shiwen leiju* 事文類聚, cited stories about sisters (*zimei* 姊妹) and siblings under the chapter on family relationships (*renlun* 人倫). One story was about the sister of the Han dynasty scholar Jia Kui 賈逵 (174–228), who carried her five-year-old brother to join their neighbors when they were reading books. With her help, Jia Kui had become proficient in reciting the six classics when he was only ten years old.⁵⁷ The statesman Chen Zhu 陳著 (1214–1297) wrote a poem on the birthday of his son: "You need to listen to instructions from your older brother and older and younger sisters; all of your siblings are well-educated" (兄姊妹言兒記取, 同胞皆是讀書身).⁵⁸ Chen assumed that older sons and daughters naturally served as role models for their younger siblings. He was proud that all of them were fond of learning.

It is notable that Chen Zhu paired the older sister (*zi* 姊) with the older brother (*xiong* 兄), affirming that both could provide proper instruction for younger siblings. Chen could have simply mentioned the older brother, as the artists of *Children*

⁵¹Ronald Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), 9.

⁵²Beverly Bossler, "Funerary Writings by Chen Liang," in *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, edited by Susan Mann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 169.

⁵³Liu, "Physical Beauty and Inner Virtue," 43–57.

⁵⁴As Anne Behnke Kinney has shown, since the first half of the Former Han period education for girls had been expanded. Anne Behnke Kinney, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 132–5.

⁵⁵Egan, *The Burden of Female Talent*, 9–43.

⁵⁶Edwin Van Bibber-Orr, "Bodies of Work: Song Dynasty Prefaces to Women's Poetry as Gender Discourse," *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 5.3 (2018), 197–212.

⁵⁷姊抱聽讀：賈逵年五歲，其姊聞隣家讀書，每抱逵就籬下聽之，十歲便能暗誦六經，不至遺失。 Zhu Mu 祝穆 (d. 1255), *Shiwen leiju* 事文類聚 [Compendium of Literary Matters; 1246], in Aisheng Classical Chinese Database, 898.

⁵⁸Chen Zhu 陳著 (1214–1297), "Chaogui shengri nü huang youshi yin ciyun," in Chen Zhu, *Bentangji* 本堂集 [Collected Works from the Hall of Origin] (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1971), 5.9.

Playing in an Autumn Garden and *Winter Play* (Figures 1–3) could have just painted brothers supervising play. However, they chose to include girls. The inclusion of older sisters in the picture is consistent with the growing importance of women in the Song family ideal.⁵⁹

The education of the children can be implied by the presence of a mother portrayed as a literary lady. The mother looking after her crawling baby in *Women and Children by a Lotus Pond* (Figure 11) owned a *qin* zither, a stack of books, some antiques, and scrolls of calligraphy or painting. As Hui-shu Lee suggests, these items displaying cultural taste demonstrates that “when the woman has a moment to spare from her formidable maternal duties, she spends it productively pursuing literary activities.”⁶⁰

A close examination of the group of children playing reveals a parallel between the mother’s gesture and the gestures of other boys and girls. The girl to the left side of the group of children, who holds a reed in her left hand, is likely to be an older sister.⁶¹ She comes toward the group and gently stretches both arms forward, as if trying to break up the fray. Her left hand is raised in a gesture similar to that of her mother and her facial expression is equally gentle. The older boy wearing a painted mask and holding a banner also seems to have stopped playing and turns his head towards the bully beside him. In this painting, it is telling that a mother of fine education and amiable personality is portrayed as a good role model for her children. Viewers at the time would expect that such a woman’s sons and daughters would acquire a sense of fairness and good judgment, just like their mother.

Another fan painting, *Playing with a Ball in the Shade of Plantains* (蕉蔭擊球圖, Figure 13), likewise suggests that the daughter of a woman with elegant taste would be expected to grow into a lady like her mother. Facial expressions and physical gestures were important tactics Song artists deployed to convey emotions.⁶² In the foreground, we see two boys playing a ball game;⁶³ their mother is leaning on the table tenderly watching them play. Standing next to her is her daughter, who smiles affectionately at her brothers. The daughter has a slender figure and hair style similar to that of her mother. The boy on the right is dressed in a scholar’s robe, suggesting his goal of becoming a statesman in the future like his father. Similarly, the daughter is depicted as having the makings of a literary lady much like her mother. It does not follow that all daughters really were that way in the Song dynasty. Nevertheless, there was a market niche for paintings of girls and women who displayed these qualities of refinement.

Little girls accompanying fathers to literati gatherings were portrayed in Song paintings such as *Composing Poetry on a Spring Outing* (春遊賦詩圖, Figure 14). The painting shows an elegant gathering in springtime when plum trees bloom and willow branches gently sway. Men and women attended the gathering, along with monks, as well as little boys and girls. At the end of the handscroll, three servants are preparing tea or wine. The young girl standing by her father’s lap was likely there so that she

⁵⁹Deng Xiaonan noted that the portrayal of women in funerary arts shifted from beautiful ladies in Tang dynasty tombs to women in daily life activities performing family roles such as wives and mothers in Song dynasty tombs; Deng Xiaonan 鄧小南, “Cong Chutu Cailiao Kan Tangsong Nüxing Shenghuo” 從出土材料看唐宋女性生活 [Women in Tang and Song Dynasties Observed from Archeological Materials], *Wenshi zhishi* 3 (2011), 82–90n87.

⁶⁰Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency*, 107.

⁶¹Lee, *Empresses, Art, and Agency*, 106.

⁶²Blanchard, *Figures of Longing and Desire*, 54–70.

⁶³Balls used in such games have been discovered in archeological findings; Ge, “Beisong dongjingcheng xinzhengmen,” 24–25.



Figure 13. Artist unknown, *Playing with a Ball in the Shade of Plantains* (蕉蔭擊球圖), twelfth century, fan painting, ink and colors on silk, 22 × 24 cm. Beijing Palace Museum, Beijing.

would learn how to interact with others well versed in poetry, painting, and calligraphy.⁶⁴ This physical intimacy between the girl and father manifests an emotional bonding between the two. The father may have viewed taking his daughter to a literary gathering with a learned group to be part of her training. The practice was not uncommon for girls born in educated families in the Song dynasty. Li Qingzhao recalled that, when she was young, her father Li Gefei 李格非 (ca. 1045–ca. 1105) had regularly taken her to literary parties with leading scholars of the day.⁶⁵ Parents, grandparents, or relatives in educated families in the Song dynasty often taught girls in the family to read

⁶⁴Martin Powers argues that the placement of the young girl here suggests that she was being groomed to become a female literatus just like the older women depicted in the painting. Martin Powers, “Artistic Status and Social Agency,” in *A Companion to Chinese Art*, edited by Martin Powers and Katherine Tsiang (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 366.

⁶⁵Liu, “Physical Beauty and Inner Virtue,” 41–42.



Figure 14. A section from *Composing Poetry in a Spring Outing* 春遊賦詩圖, attributed to Ma Yuan 馬遠 (1160–1225), twelfth to thirteenth century, Handscroll, ink and light color on silk, 29.5 × 302.3 cm. Accession number: 63–19. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas.

and write. Some homes even sent their daughters to schools run by their friends' families.⁶⁶

The practice of literary gatherings with girls and boys present would not have been possible if girls were always educated separately from boys. As Yang Guo has observed, a number of Song anecdotal collections describe family schools where daughters and sons were taught together.⁶⁷ Xiong Bingzhen noted that Song sources such as *Children's Primer* (*Tong meng xun* 童蒙訓) and numerous formulae for manners and social etiquette offered almost no particulars that can be identified as specifically designed for boys.⁶⁸ Moreover, daughters were educated by learned male relatives, such as uncles, on both the maternal and paternal sides.⁶⁹ As daughters and sons could receive family schooling together during Song times, it's possible that when they grew up they could continue to communicate with one another intellectually. Bearing this in mind, one should not be surprised to read an epitaph for Ms. Fan written by Yuan Xie 袁燮 (1144–1224) where he declares: "assisting her husband and sons, she exchanges opinions with them as among friends."⁷⁰

The civil service examination and flourishing print culture led to increased accessibility to cultural products, making it easier for women to hone their talents. An important and more utilitarian motivation for young girls to acquire education was the social value of assisting husbands or sons seeking a career in government after they got

⁶⁶Cheng Minsheng 程民生, "Songdai nüzi de wenhua shuiping" 宋代女子的文化水平 [The Education Level of Song dynasty Women], *Shixue yuekan* 6 (2019), 34–49, especially 36–37.

⁶⁷Yang Guo 楊果 and Liao Ying 廖瑩, "Songdai cainü xianxiang chutan" 宋代才女現象初探, in *Songshi yanjiu lunwenji* 宋史研究論文集, edited by Qi Xia 漆俠 (Baoding: Hebeidaxue, 2002), 618.

⁶⁸Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage*, 190.

⁶⁹Yang and Liao, "Songdai cainü," 618.

⁷⁰This epitaph is cited and discussed in Tie Aihua 鐵愛花, *Songdai shiren jieceng nüxing yanjiu* 宋代士人階層女性研究 [A Study on Song Dynasty Literary Women] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2011), 167.

married.⁷¹ Since education was an important requirement for social mobility, educated women were expected to give sons an early start in education. The value of an education for Song people is reflected in an anecdote about Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) in a collection by Yuan Wen 袁文 (1119–1190). When Su Shi was exiled to Huangzhou, a talented lady made a habit of tarrying by Su’s window every day, listening to Su reciting poetry and prose. When her parents began seeking a suitable match for her, she told them that they must pick a man as knowledgeable as Su Shi.⁷²

Although the credibility of the anecdote is debatable, what is striking is that it took for granted that an educated woman could reside in even a remote part of China. The story also expected the readers to know that women understood the pragmatic importance of education. It further suggests that, just as a woman might regard a good education as a criterion in choosing an ideal husband, so men might regard education as a criterion in choosing an ideal wife. As Benjamin Elman has argued, though women did not participate in civil service examinations, they pursued education to compete for spouses and to educate their sons.⁷³

Parental Affection for Girls

In Song paintings, families were portrayed with children of both genders, even when it had to be fabricated. For instance, the fourth-century recluse poet Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca. 365–427) had five sons but no daughter.⁷⁴ However, Song dynasty illustrations of Tao’s essay *Returning to Seclusion* pictured Tao with both son and daughter. In *Tao Yuanming Returning to Seclusion* (Figure 15) one scene depicts Tao enjoying wine and refreshment with his family, illustrating the line “Holding my children I enter the house, where the pitcher is brimming with wine” (攜幼入室, 有酒盈樽). The character “you” 幼 only meant young children. The artist portrayed a young girl in a pink robe sitting across from her brothers and in front of her father. The girl faces in the direction that meets with her mother’s gentle gaze. The boy who is tasting a fruit looks at his sister.⁷⁵ The artist could have depicted only sons but chose to include the daughter as well. How the artist envisioned a family corresponded to the expectation of period viewers of an educated family.

The integration of daughters into an image of family scenes was by no means unique to this work. Li Gonglin’s 李公麟 (1049–1106) *Classics of Filial Piety* (孝經圖, Figure 16) also depicts little girls sitting side by side with boys in front of their parents and grandparents, when entertainers and dancers put on a show to amuse the family.

⁷¹Yang and Liao, “Songdai cainü,” 612–18.

⁷²Yuan Wen 袁文, “Wengyou xianping” 甕牖閒評 [Casual Remarks Under Window], in *Songdai cixue ziliao huibian* 宋代詞學資料彙編 [Primary Sources of Song Dynasty Lyrics], edited by Zhang Huimin 張惠民 (Shantou: Shantou daxue chubanshe, 1993), 101.

⁷³Benjamin Elman, “Civil Service Examinations,” in *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China: Modern and Historic Views of the World’s Newest and Oldest Global Power*, edited by Linsun Cheng (Great Barrington: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2009), 405.

⁷⁴Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca. 365–427), “Zezi” 責子 [A Letter to My Sons], *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu* 陶淵明集箋註 [Annotated Collected Works of Tao Yuanming] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), 304.

⁷⁵Martin Powers has noted that although Tao Yuanming did not mention his wife at all throughout the verse, the Song painter depicted touching moments between Tao and Tao’s wife. Powers shows that the affection between husband and wife was an important element of what Song artists and poets imagined as a happy family. Martin Powers, “Love and Marriage in Song China: Tao Yuanming Comes Home,” *Ars Orientalis* 28 (1998), 54–57.



Figure 15. A detail of the third section of Anonymous, *Tao Yuanming Returning to Seclusion*, twelfth century, Handscroll, ink and light colors on silk. 37 x 521.5cm. National Museum of Asian Art, Washington DC.

One little girl on the left side “holds tightly to the hand of her bare-bottomed baby brother and leans intently toward the drummer.”⁷⁶ The other girl, seated to the right, holds a puppet joyfully. The passage that this scene illustrates, however, did not mention daughters at all. It is a section from the *Classic of Filial Piety* (孝經), a standard Confucian text, stating: “The service which a son renders to his parents are as follows. In his general conduct toward them he manifests the utmost reverence. In his nourishing of them, his endeavor is to give them the utmost pleasure.”⁷⁷ Although the text mentions only the son, Li’s painting captured the vivid and playful image of young girls. The girls’ active motions suggest that they were equally a center of familial love.

Illustrations of “Seventh Month” from the Odes of Bin (Figure 17), in the style of the Southern Song painter Ma Hezhi 馬和之 (active mid to late twelfth century),⁷⁸ also strikes viewers with a scene depicting a family of four (Figure 18). While throughout the text of the “Seventh Month” only a wife and son make an appearance, the painting shows a father holding the hand of his toddler daughter. The gentle and peaceful way the father holds his daughter’s hand is brimming with tender love. The little girl leans forward, taking steps more quickly than her father. Her hair style echoes her mother’s. And the father’s loving hand gesture is in parallel with the mother’s reposeful demeanor towards the little boy. At an adorable age, the little girl’s waddling gait and chubby cheek instantly melts one’s heart. Intriguingly, like *Court Ladies Preparing Newly*

⁷⁶Richard Barnhart, “The Classic of Filial Piety in Chinese Art History,” in Richard M Barnhart, Robert E. Harrist, and Huiliang Zhu, *Li Kung-Lin’s Classic of Filial Piety* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), 118.

⁷⁷Barnhart’s translation. See Barnhart, “The Classic of Filial Piety,” 118.

⁷⁸For interpretations of Ma Hezhi’s *Illustrations to the Book of Odes*, see Julia K. Murray, *Ma Hezhi and the Illustration of the Book of Odes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).



Figure 16. A section of Li Gonglin (ca. 1049–1106), *Classics of Filial Piety*, twelfth century, Handscroll, ink and light colors on silk. 37 x 521.5cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Woven Silk, the girl in this painting gazes straight into the eyes of viewers, while her father and mother's gazes remain within the picture frame. Her younger brother, still at the crawling age, turns away from the spectators. He appears to be more curious at the repairs going on at their house.

Other Song paintings that portrayed girls interacting with parents demonstrate that parents respond to daughters with care and indulgence. For instance, a scene in the urban-scape painting *Spring Festival Along the River* (清明上河圖), shows a woman (possibly an attendant) holding a toddler girl. They are about to purchase some flowers (Figure 19). The girl reaches her right hand toward the flowers, making a request to buy what she favors. Her mother, who stands next to the peddler, leans toward the little girl intently. Her facial expression suggests that she has understood her daughter's request and is about to talk to the peddler. The little girl's father, standing behind the mother, looks at the flower stall with a smile. He carries his baby boy on the shoulder and securely holds his legs. Their physical gestures and facial expressions demonstrate deep affection between the family members. Purchasing flowers for little daughters to wear in their hair frequently appears in Song poems expressing paternal love. For instance, Zhao Gengfu 趙庚夫 (1173–1219) wrote a poem on New Year's Eve: "The



Figure 17. A section of *Illustrations of "Seventh Month" from the Odes of Bin* 邶风·七月, formerly attributed to Ma Hezhi 馬和之 (active mid- to late twelfth century), mid-thirteenth to mid-fourteenth century, Handscroll, Ink on paper, 28.8 x 436.2 cm. Accession number: F1919.172. National Museum of Asian Art, Washington DC.



Figure 18. A detail of *Illustrations of "Seventh Month" from the Odes of Bin*, showing the father holding the little girl's hand.



Figure 19. A detail of Zhang Zeduan 張擇端 (ca. 1085–1145), *Spring Festival Along the River* (清明上河圖), showing a family purchasing flowers, twelfth century, Handscroll, ink and light colors on silk. 24.8 x 528.7cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

previous night I sewed new clothing; This morning I milled rice. I bought flowers for my young daughter to wear as hairpins; I sent some rice to my poor neighbors” (連夜縫紉辦，今朝杵白頻。買花簪稚女，送米贈窮鄰).⁷⁹ The adoring tone Zhao had for his little daughter manifests through the word *zhi* 稚, which not only means a young age but captures the vulnerability, innocence, and cuteness of young children. It is remarkable that it was the father who sewed clothes and bought flowers to dress up his little daughter for the New Year.

Another scene in the painting shows a mother bringing her child to Dr. Zhao’s clinic (Figure 20). Although the gender of the child is not clear due to damage to the silk, the engaging look on the lady’s face vividly communicates her care for the child. According to *Dongjing menghua lu* 東京夢華錄 (A Dream of Splendor from the Eastern Capital), specialized pediatric clinics could be found in Kaifeng where a cluster of pharmacies and clinics of different owners were in business.⁸⁰ Song pediatric manuals used general terms for children and infants. They treated illnesses in children of both genders

⁷⁹Zhao Gengfu 趙庚夫 (1173–1219), “Suichu jishi” 歲除即事 [On New Year’s Eve], in Li E 厲鶚 (1692–1752), *Songshi jishi* 宋詩紀事 [Documents of Events in Selected Song Poetry] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji, 2019), 3046.

⁸⁰“柏郎中家，醫小兒。” Meng Yuanlao, *Dongjing menghua lu* 東京夢華錄 [A Dream of Splendor from the Eastern Capital] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 82.



Figure 20. A detail of *Spring Festival Along the River*, showing a pediatric clinic.

without suggesting any preference for one gender over the other. For instance, pediatricians Qian Yi's *Prescriptions for Young Children*, Zhu Duanzhang's 朱端章 (1174–1189)'s *Weisheng jiabao xiaoerfang* 衛生家寶小兒方 (Heirloom Prescriptions for Young Children), and even specialists Wenren Gui's 聞人規 (active 1232) *Wenrenshi douzhen lun* 聞人氏痘疹論 (Mr. Wenren's Essays on Curing Eczema) and Chen Wenzhong's 陳文中 (d. 1236) *Chenshi xiaoer douzhen fanglun* 陳氏小兒痘疹方論 (Mr. Chen's Prescriptions for Eczema in Young Children) were all influential publications reprinted numerous times in later dynasties.⁸¹ They proposed variations in the prescriptions for the same ailments in boys and girls to accommodate their physiological differences. For instance, in *Xiaoer weisheng zongwei lunfang* 小兒衛生總微論方 (The Compendium of Detailed Prescriptions for Young Children), the entry to treat “swollenness in face, hand, mouth and feet” (治小兒頭面手腳虛腫) instructed that children should use different liquids to wash down the pills. “Seven to eight-year-old children should take ten pills. Boys should use old rice broth, and girls should use mugwort broth to wash down the pills” (男孩兒煎陳米湯下, 女孩兒煎艾葉湯下, 七八歲者十丸).⁸²

⁸¹Chen Yunru has observed that private publishers played an important role in the circulation of medicinal knowledge in the Song dynasty. See Chen Yunru 陳韻如, *Songdai shidafu canyu defang yishu kanyin xintan* 宋代士大夫參與地方醫書刊印新探, *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 92.3 (2011), 437–507.

⁸²The book had been published by 1158, according to a Southern Song preface by He Daren 何大任 (ca. first half of thirteenth century), the doctor of Imperial Academy of Medicine. Anonymous (twelfth



Figure 21. Anonymous, *Greeting the Emperor at Wangxian Village* (望賢迎駕圖), 1127–1279, Hanging scroll, Ink and color on silk, 195.1x 109.5cm. Shanghai Museum, Shanghai.

Depictions of girls in Song paintings not only reveal how fragile and adorable they are, but also display that each girl has her own temperament. The Southern Song painting *Greeting the Emperor at Wangxian Village* (Figure 21) depicts a crowd of local villagers welcoming the return of the retired Tang Emperor Xuanzong 唐玄宗 (r. 712–756).⁸³

century), *Xia'er weisheng zongwei lunfang* 小兒衛生總微論方 (Beijing: Renmin weisheng chubanshe, 1990, 386).

⁸³Martin Powers has cogently argued that villagers in the painting are “rendered as individuals” with distinct postures and facial expressions based on their own “individual assessment of the monarch’s worth.” Powers, *China and England*, 62–3.



Figure 22. A detail of *Greeting the Emperor at Wangxian Village* showing women and children.

Emperor Xuanzong is the senior man wearing a white robe, whose age required assistance of two elder officials. Next to him was Emperor Suzong 唐肅宗 (r. 756–762) in the red robe, who exhibits a peaceful manner. Children and women wearing red garments stand out among the crowd (Figure 22).

Remarkably, they are the very few individuals whose shirts' color echoes that of the emperor. One girl standing in the front row bows to the emperor, whereas another girl not only does not bow, but points in the direction of the emperor's entourage. She turns her head to her parents, tugging on her father's robe, and seems to be communicating her opinion (Figure 23). Her parents, looking out in the direction curiously, also do not find themselves obliged to bow to the emperors. At the bottom of the painting, two women, who appear to have just walked out from their home, are about to take their children to join the crowd. Their relaxed gait shows that the event is not something that would make them nervous or intimidated. One woman holds a baby at her shoulder. The baby reaches out excitedly to his/her sibling standing behind the mother. The child cheerfully responds to the baby, raising his/her head and tugging on the mother's skirt. All these lively scenes of familial affection take place in a public setting, even upon the arrival of the emperors. Parents appear to be comfortable with the behavior of their daughters and sons. They do not seem to be enforcing rules for all girls to follow as to which kind of posture they should assume to greet the emperor. It is significant that in a



Figure 23. A detail of *Greeting the Emperor at Wangxian Village* showing a girl pointing to the direction of the emperors.

painting that visualizes the relationship between the state and the people,⁸⁴ girls were depicted as an integral part of the society.⁸⁵

⁸⁴Powers, *China and England*, 62–3.

⁸⁵Another Song painting, *Welcoming the Imperial Carriage* 迎鑾圖, also depicts women and children of both genders among the crowds who greeted the return of the Empress Dowager Wei 韋 (mother of Emperor Gaozong 宋高宗) and the coffins of Emperor Huizong 宋徽宗 after the negotiation with the Jurchen Jin dynasty. See Julia Murray “A Southern Sung Painting Regains Its Memory: ‘Welcoming the Imperial Carriage (Ying-Luan t’u)’ and Its Colophon,” *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies*, no. 22 (1990), 109–24.

In Song poems, daughters were also presented as visible members of the family. For example, Lu You 陸遊 (1125–1209) published a poem about simple joy of country life. The last verse reads: “Who would believe that dwelling in such solitude can inspire much joy? In the evening by the window, I chat with sons and daughters celebrating our family reunion” (誰信幽居多樂事，晚窗兒女話團圓).⁸⁶ Lu You expressed his cheerfulness and satisfaction in spending time with children and family in the countryside, an escape from the toil of officialdom. Lu might have simply mentioned his sons, or he might have used “er” 兒, or “zi” 子 to reference both sons and daughters. Instead, his choice of “ernü” 兒女, “sons and daughters,” highlighted the presence of girls in the family.

Jiang Kui 姜夔 (1151–1221) shared in a poem a heartwarming moment between him and his daughter. They went watching lanterns during the New Year, and his little daughter sat on his shoulder to appreciate the splendid view (白頭居士無呵殿，只有乘肩小女隨).⁸⁷ Here, the intimacy of Jiang holding his daughter on his shoulder reveals the great tenderness he had for her. Mei Yaochen’s 梅堯臣 (1002–1060) *An Excuse for Not Returning the Visit of A Friend* (將赴表臣會呈杜挺之) also expressed a doting father’s affection his daughter:

Do not be offended because
I am slow to go out.
You know me too well for that.
On my lap I hold my little girl,
At my knees stands my handsome little son.
One has just begun to talk,
The other chatters without a stop.
They hang on my clothes and follow my every step.
Though it is not far to get to the door,
I am afraid I will never make it to your house.

莫怪去遲遲，
予心君亦知。
膝前嬌小女，
眼底寧馨兒。
學語渠渠問，
牽裳步步隨。
出門雖不遠，
情愛未能移。⁸⁸

As Ronald Egan elucidates, Song poetry excelled in expressing affection among loved ones. The intense sentiment conveyed in poetry is often based on personal experience

⁸⁶The full poem can be found in Lu You 陸遊 (1125–1209), “Shanyuan zayong wushou qi si” 山園雜詠五首 其四 [Miscellaneous Poems from the Mountain Garden], in Lu You, *Lu You ji* 陸遊集 [Collected Works of Lu You], 2 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), 2.838.

⁸⁷Jiang Kui 姜夔 (1151–1221), “Zhegutian zhengyue shiyiri guandeng” 鷓鴣天 正月十一日觀燈 [To the tune of Zhegutian, Light Festival on Eleventh Day of the First Lunar Month], in Shen Zufen 沈祖芬, *Songci shangxi* 宋詞賞析 [Appreciation of Song Lyrics] (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2013), 196.

⁸⁸Translation of this poem follows Kenneth Rexroth, *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* (New York: New Directions, 1956), 37. Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣, “Jiangfu biao chen huicheng dutingzhi” 將赴表臣會呈杜挺之, in *Ou Mei shizhuan* 歐梅詩傳, edited by Li Deshen 李德身 (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 2000), 462.

and genuine intent.⁸⁹ Mei's poem demonstrates a father busy doting on his adorable little girl and boy, so taken with them that he could not get as far as the door. Mei cannot bear to be parted from his children even to fulfill a social obligation. He uses the term *jiao*, meaning delicate or adorable, to describe his daughter, showing his tender love for her.⁹⁰ He holds his daughter on the lap, revealing their mutual affection. Here again, the physical intimacy between Mei and his daughter highlights their affectionate connection. Mei's hyperbole reveals that he does not remain at home only to fulfill his parental responsibility: obviously he *loves* to please his daughter and son.

Familial emotions and everyday life constitute the most important themes of poetry between the ninth and twelfth centuries.⁹¹ In Song writings, "*renqing*" signified all human emotions both positive and negative, such as greed and fear.⁹² According to Lü Zuqian 呂祖謙 (1137–1181), negative human emotions and thoughts were not necessarily bad in themselves; it was only the consequences of those emotions that could lead to good or ill effects. Lü argued that it is neither possible nor necessary to eradicate negative thoughts, such as avarice or parsimony, from people's minds. All emotions are part of human nature.⁹³ Many Song writers understood human feelings as natural and universal and, therefore, shared by both adults and children, regardless of social income, occupation, or status. The public expression of these personal feelings and the ability to share them may have enhanced a person's cultural capital, shaped reputation and established a credible public persona.

Conclusion

The representation of girls and boys playing together in gardens in Song dynasty visual culture did not come about by chance. They must have responded to the social norms at the time.⁹⁴ We should not presume that the social values promoted in these works matched social reality. Nevertheless, it is equally clear that the public expression of such ideals did not bring astonishment or distress. On the contrary, such images resonate with the development of public and private schools, pediatric manuals, children's primers, and a market for poetic descriptions of life's most intimate moments during the Song period.⁹⁵ Depictions of children at play are consistent with the proliferation of toys, illustrating that Song parents considered play time beneficial for child development. It appears to have been normative that children would play on their own without much interference from parents or other adults, suggesting a *laissez-faire* attitude toward childrearing.

Song dynasty visual culture demonstrates that girls could have as much personal agency as boys, if not more. Girls were portrayed as making their own choices in a wide range of roles. Pictorial practices such as these are consistent with a number of

⁸⁹Ronald Egan, "Older and Younger Brothers: Su Shi and Su Zhe," *Journal of Chinese History* 6.2 (2022), 295–313, especially 296–97.

⁹⁰In his analysis of a poem that Mei Yaochen wrote upon the death of her young daughter Chengcheng, Richard Barnhart shows the profound sorrow and love Mei expressed for her little one. Barnhart and Barnhart, "Images of Children," 42–3.

⁹¹Barnhart and Barnhart, "Images of Children," 40.

⁹²Powers, "Humanity and 'Universals,'" 140.

⁹³Lü Zuqian 呂祖謙 (1137–1181), *Donglai boyi* 東萊博議 (Xi'an: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1991), 91.

⁹⁴Julia Murray discussed the role of pictures in "forming and disseminating social norms and political authority." Julia Murray, "What Is 'Chinese Narrative Illustration'?" *The Art Bulletin* 80.4 (1998), 602–15.

⁹⁵Powers, "Humanity and 'Universals,'" 135.

Song textual sources that commended girls and women for their individual aptitude in literature, art, and domestic management. More practically speaking, a girl's education was regarded as instrumental for the success of her future husband and sons. Society expected daughters to take their educated mothers as models, so that they could grow up with a sense of justice and elegant taste. That would further benefit their own family after marriage. Education for girls had therefore become an important source of cultural capital.

Pictorial and poetic portrayals of little girls interacting with their parents demonstrate that girls were perceived as essential members of a harmonious and loving family, as well as a prosperous society. Artistic and literary creations of the period, with the help of a flourishing print culture and urban economy, witnessed a demand for expressions of private emotions. Among these personal feelings, heartwarming tenderness for children constituted a significant element. Song people developed a concept of family based on affection rather than authoritarian control.

Competing interests. The author declares none.