

LITTLE FRIENDS AT WAR:  
CHILDHOOD IN THE CHINESE  
ANTI-JAPANESE WAR PROPAGANDA MAGAZINE  
*KANGZHAN ERTONG* 抗战儿童 (*THE RESISTANCE CHILD*)

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The war of resistance against Japan (1937–1945) was a dramatic turning point in the history of twentieth-century China. Its human cost was huge: Almost twenty million Chinese soldiers and civilians were killed, dozens of cities were destroyed by air shelling and military operations, several hundred million fled their homes and villages, becoming refugees and displaced people.<sup>1</sup> The war reshaped Chinese society by disrupting community and family ties, widening the generational gap, and reversing family fortunes.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it created desperate shortages, especially in the area of welfare, and put tremendous pressure on the Chinese state to mobilize material and human resources in support of the resistance.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in the eyes of nationalist élites, resistance and “national reconstruction” (*jianguo* 建国) – the goal envisioned by the father of the nation Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 (1868–1925) – had to go hand in hand. Ultimately, the survival of free China necessarily meant the birth of a new and stronger China.

As the war against Japan was conceived as a matter of life and death for the Chinese nation in both biological and political terms, children were symbolically portrayed as being on the frontlines. The innocent victims of Japanese violence, as orphans or war casualties, they epitomized China’s national tragedy. By the same token, they were also called on to embody its capacity to resist and to undergo a rebirth as a modern state and society.

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- 1 New scholarly research on China’s resistance against the Japanese invasion has grown considerably in recent years, serving to place the event at the center of our understanding of twentieth-century Chinese history. Among the most recent works, see Mitter 2013 and the essays in Mitter and Moore 2011; for a detailed military history, see the essays in Pettie, Drea and van de Ven 2011. Older texts that are still worth consulting can be found in Hsiung and Levine 1992.
  - 2 For a study of the impact of the war on Chinese society, see Lary 2010; on specific aspects, see Howard 2004, Li 2009, and Gatu 2008. For the important topic of refugees, see Schoppa 2011.
  - 3 Many aspects of this have been analyzed in the essays collected in Mitter and Schneider 2012.

Not surprisingly, from 1937, Chinese children became a specific target of war propaganda activities. The call to fight Japan could not leave out any part of the Chinese population, and the young were no exception. Several magazines were published in order to inform children about the new and dramatic international context that had embroiled the Chinese people and, above all, to incite their support for the national cause. Propaganda efforts were based on the contemporary notion that children were consumers of modern knowledge and future members of the national community. This view had been developed in Chinese political discourse from the early 1900s and had become central to the thinking of many progressive intellectuals and writers in the decades that followed.<sup>4</sup> As human beings still unburdened by the oppressive values of traditional society, children represented hope for the progress of the Chinese nation, and it was moreover the responsibility of modern intellectuals and educators to help them remain free from the cultural and social backwardness of the past.

Nevertheless, the war of resistance instilled this notion with new and urgent meaning: It entailed the promotion of young people's mass engagement against the enemy and opening the way toward a militarization of children life which would mark Chinese childhood for a long time. The "exceptional circumstances" (*feichang shiqi* 非常时期) of the war created new priorities, and the domain of childhood was increasingly conceived as an important resource that should be immediately exploited in the psychological and physical resistance against the occupiers. As Colette Plum has argued, it was during the war that a new discourse on the child-citizen worker clearly emerged in the educational field in China and whose main tenets were put into practice at children's homes in the education of orphans.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, at the core of all wartime propaganda efforts aimed at children was a reshaping of the modern discourse on childhood and education in order to make it serve the immediate political and military interests of the nation-state. In this period, propagandists and activists contributed to establishing and popularizing a prescriptive model of childhood in which the youngest were considered to be better citizens and warriors than adults. This model was still rooted in a romanticized notion of childhood as a state of innocence whose emotional and spiritual qualities needed to be enhanced and preserved for individual happiness as well as a national rebirth.

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4 This new discourse on children and their role in Chinese progress was especially developed in literature. For more on this, see Farquhar 1999, Foster 2013, and Jones 2002.

5 See Plum 2012.

In this article, the example will be studied that is presented in a wartime children magazine named *Kangzhan ertong* 抗战儿童 (*The Resistance Child*), published first in Wuhan and later in Chongqing. *The Resistance Child* aimed to persuade its audience of the value and the need to have all young people engaged in the war. It presented participation in the resistance not only as a duty for the sake of the nation, but also an opportunity for children's social empowerment and individual self-fulfillment. From this perspective, the article argues that in wartime propaganda childhood was imagined as a discursive space that could tentatively reconcile the inherent tension between the perceived psychological and emotional dimensions of the individual's existence with the authoritative claims placed upon him by the emerging nation-state.

### *Kangzhan ertong* magazine and war propaganda for children

In a pamphlet published in 1938 entitled *Zhanshi de ertong gongzuo* 战时的儿童工作 (*Child Work during the War*), the progressivist educator Zhang Zonglin 张宗麟 (1899–1976) discussed the contribution that children should make to the resistance and how activists and educators could help children respond to the war.<sup>6</sup> His practical suggestions were that children could do a variety significant wartime chores suited to their age, such as propaganda, collecting funds, helping war relief work, taking care of wounded soldiers and refugees, and doing espionage work. In his views, children had all the necessary qualities and strengths to participate in the resistance<sup>7</sup>.

Nevertheless, Zhang was also persuaded that engaging children in war service was problematic because of the more or less explicit opposition of adults, and especially parents who were not willing to consider their children as active and autonomous people. One chapter of Zhang's booklet was expressly dedicated to "warning parents and teachers" (*Jingao fumu yu jiaoshi* 警告父母与教师). Based on the assumption that children were usually part of a family and attended regular school, the author argued that special attention had to be paid to parents and teachers. Apart from parents who

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6 In the 1920s, Zhang Zonglin was a member of the communist party. In the 1930s, however, he worked together with the Nationalist Party and progressive intellectuals like Tao Xingzhi and Chen Heqin 陈鹤琴 (1892–1982), before moving to Yan'an in 1943. For his radical educational approach, see Thøgersen 2002, 104–107. Zhang was active as a teacher in the county of Zouping. Despite his short stay there, he was remembered because of his methodology, which was based on practice and the pupils' direct involvement in class discussions.

7 On Zhang's and other educators' ideas about childhood and children's contribution to the war, see Plum 2012, 243–249.

were so poor that they were compelled to abandon their children, Zhang distinguished two categories of parents:

[...] parents who are very tender with their children, love them more than themselves, and are only able to pamper them by satisfying all their desires, and parents who love their children, but at the same time pay the greatest attention to their education and pour all their resources into family education and into the best school.<sup>8</sup>

Despite their different attitudes, parents from both categories were against their own children's engagement in the resistance war because they were too protective. Most of them prohibited their children from working in war service or participating in collective activities and did not permit them to leave the family environment. According to Zhang, even highly educated parents such as intellectuals, Western educated scholars, university professors, and modern businessmen, refused to allow their children to take part in these activities, because they thought that children could not fend for themselves. "They read their children *Robinson Crusoe*, but they do not let them spend even one day alone", Zhang wrote.<sup>9</sup> He further contends that even though the modern educational approach adopted by these parents, which was based on children biology and psychology, was supposed to promote children's autonomy, self-confidence, and well-being, it actually hindered their sons' and daughters' correct development. In order to be psychologically and physically healthy, children should not be confined to their family context but rather engaged in civic service activities together with other children and adults.

Zhang Zonglin explicitly connects children's "liberation" (*jiefang* 解放) to their participation in war mobilization and he was persuaded that legal norms and the shaping of public opinion were key factors toward this end.

In order to remedy this problem, we have to promote a public opinion that is favorable to the idea that children should work on behalf of national salvation, and publish news in newspapers about children doing national salvation work. At the same time, we must invite progressive educators and scientists to explain that children must do work for national salvation and live in children's collectives, and that from a biological, psychological, and social perspective, it is necessary to make children leave their parents' protective hands and work together with other adults.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Zhang Zonglin 1938, 29–30.

9 Ibid, 31.

10 Ibid, 31.

The necessary degree of consent regarding children's mass mobilization in support for the war against Japanese occupation was to be obtained through a strong propaganda effort. This was fundamental to changing the idea that young people were vulnerable and needed their parents' protection. For China's future and for their own future, children had to understand the meaning of the war and recognize that the nation expected their active resistance, notwithstanding their young age.

In wartime, the theater and press were the main media used to address young audiences. They were part of the enormous effort by many Chinese intellectuals at this time to educate and convince the public of the need to actively resist the Japanese invasion and to support the nationalist government.<sup>11</sup> In the previous decades, the children's press had developed in China's major cities, especially in Shanghai in the wake of the May Fourth Movement, although some magazines had been already published by Western missionaries since the late nineteenth century. In the republican era, the most famous children magazines were *Xiao pengyou* 小朋友 (*Little Friend*), published by the *Zhonghua shuju* from 1922 and *Ertong shijie* 儿童世界 (*Children's World*) published by Commercial Press from 1923. In Shanghai, thanks to Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), Ye Shengtao 叶圣陶 (1894–1988), and Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), modern Chinese children's literature inspired by Western models began to be written and published from the late 1920s.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the war's outbreak forced many publishers and writers to move to the hinterland. After the fall of Shanghai in Autumn 1937, several children magazines ceased to exist in the metropolis, while new editorial enterprises specifically addressed to the Chinese young readership were published in free China. They embodied the Chinese patriotic intellectuals' view that children's engagement in the resistance effort needed to become a priority in educational work.

Until its occupation by the Japanese army in late 1938, Wuhan became the main center of resistance propaganda activities.<sup>13</sup> Several children magazines began to circulate, one of which was *Xiao zhanshi* 小战士 (*Little Warrior*), edited by Zhou Su 周苏 and published by the progressive Qunli shudian 群力书店. *Little Warrior's* first issue's cover portrayed a child-soldier on the back of a dove with the words "We fight for peace!" (*Women wei heping er zhan!* 我们为和平而战!). The magazine published

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11 For a general overview of Chinese war propaganda, see Hung 1994. For recent studies on specific topics, see Edwards 2013 and Coble 2011.

12 On the history of the Chinese children press in Shanghai, see Jian Ping 2010.

13 On Wuhan, see MacKinnon and Capa 2008.

songs, political articles, and stories about child heroes. Moreover, while they were in Wuhan, left-wing writers such as Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896–1981), Ye Shengtao and Song Yubin 宋云彬 (1897–1979) published for a short period the monthly *Shaonian xianfeng* 少年先锋 (*The Young Pioneer*). The magazine was intended mainly for young adults, rather than children.<sup>14</sup>

Among the propaganda magazines aimed at children and published in Wuhan, there was also *Kangzhan ertong*, edited by a eponymous society. The history of the magazine is unclear. When the first issue was published on April 25, 1938, the magazine introduced itself to readers as it follows:

The magazine *Kangzhan ertong* was born during the war of resistance and it will grow up during the war. Its goal is to help children to acquire the knowledge and abilities for dealing with the war of resistance.

*Kangzhan ertong* was born during the war of resistance and it will grow up in the war. It will be food for nourishing children's spirits, because only if the spirit is satiated, can it undertake difficult work and accomplish great things. Now, the magazine is only a newborn baby and needs the concrete help of its little friends' fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, and all adults.<sup>15</sup>

*Kangzhan ertong* was published fortnightly. Its target readership was children and teenagers from ten to fifteen years of age and educators and activists who were engaged in children's work on the home front. Its editorial philosophy reflected the ideas of some of the patriotic and progressive intellectuals involved in the modernization of education. For example, a poem from Tao Xingzhi 陶行知 (1891–1946), the famous westernized educator close to the nationalist party, founder of the Life Education Society, and, at the time, living in the United States, was published in one of the first issues.<sup>16</sup>

The magazine was published for several months in Wuhan, ceasing publication after the city fell into Japanese hands. However, beginning April 4, 1940, a monthly magazine with the same name began to be published in Chongqing. The date was not accidental, as April 4th had been chosen in 1931 as the Children's Day in nationalist China. The magazine's first issue was dedicated to describing Children's Day activities in free and occupied China.<sup>17</sup> Edited again by a so-called *Kangzhan ertong* society, the

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14 On youth war mobilization in Wuhan, see MacKinnon and Capa 2008, 83-97.

15 *Kangzhan ertong* (Wuhan), 1.1 (1938), 1.

16 Yao 2002.

17 On Children's Day in nationalist China, see Sun Xia 2011.

Chongqing magazine had a well-known sponsor, Guo Moruo, whose calligraphy was also reproduced on the cover. The new *Kangzhan ertong* was apparently connected to one of the earliest and most renowned war-propaganda children drama corps, the Haizi jutuan, which had been established in Shanghai as early as in 1937 and later moved to the hinterland. The theater's members were young activists whose ages ranged from eight to fifteen, and an important role was played by the communist writer and intellectual Chen Mo 陈模 (\*1923). Notwithstanding some features suggesting a closer affiliation to the communist party, the new *Kangzhan ertong* was in fact very similar to the Wuhan edition. It dedicated a great deal of attention to propaganda theater and frequently reported on the activities of several children theater groups.

The sponsorship of Guo Moruo was politically and culturally significant. In 1938, he was in charge of the Third Bureau of the Ministry of Political Affairs and a member of the Political Consultative Conference. Later in Chongqing, however, his relationship with the nationalist government became more strained as his bias towards the Communists became more evident. When the government closed the Third Bureau, he was assigned to direct the Cultural Activities Commission and worked in cooperation with Chinese communist leaders like Zhou Enlai.

Engaged at the time in modern patriotic drama and a representative of Chinese revolutionary romanticism, Guo Moruo contributed to the magazine with a special essay for the third anniversary of the Marco Polo bridge incident. Guo's essay was entitled "Great Personalities and Little Friends" ("Da renwu yu xiao pengyou" 大人物与小朋友). It reflected the author's romantic ideal of childhood, but also the new emphasis on children's self-discipline and heroism connected to war propaganda:

Nourish a spirit of independence and mutual assistance. Nourish the habits of a good life. Be friendly, modest, and honest towards the others. Be hard, strict, and stoic towards yourself. Be smart, thoughtful, and courageous when you have to manage something. Train collectively, adhere to science, cooperate with concerted efforts. Have progressive thinking and firm convictions; be indomitable all your life long. Know that life is precious, but that you cannot just live on. Know that death is not scary, but do not talk about death lightly. To live, you should have the spirit to live; to die you should have the courage to die. Always learn from the leadership of the great personalities, but always preserve the 'heart and feelings of a little friend' (*xiao pengyou de xinqing* 小朋友的心情)<sup>18</sup>.

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18 *Kangzhan ertong* (Chongqing), 1.1 (1940), 10.

Reminding his readers of the importance of preserving a child's attitude towards life, Guo reaffirmed the view that children and youth are the best embodiments of human vitality, spontaneity, altruism, and imagination. This was the core principle of many May Fourth intellectuals, for whom childhood was the foundation of both national progress and individual happiness.

The support of the political leadership and the significance attributed to children's war propaganda was also demonstrated by contributions of General Feng Yuxiang 馮玉祥 (1882–1948). In a short letter entitled “Who Says that You are ‘Little’?” (“Shei shuo nimen ‘xiao’” 谁说你们“小”), he celebrated the important role of children for the victory against Japan, suggesting that they should be considered exemplary citizens and patriots.

Who says that you are “little”? Your heart cannot be greater. You know how to love the nation and the people, you know how with all your strength to make the Japanese devils run away very very soon!<sup>19</sup>

*Kangzhan ertong*'s circulation is not known. It could, however, be bought in selected bookshops or through subscriptions. As early as 1938, the Wuhan editorial board claimed that the number of subscribers had reached two thousand, which is not insignificant. Nonetheless, it is hard to judge if this claim is true. Moreover, the publication was not published regularly. The editorial board often apologized to their readership for delays. Later, the Chongqing edition supposedly reached a circulation of two thousand five hundred.

Judging from the texts, most of the contributors of *Kangzhan ertong* seem to have been educators directly involved in propaganda work with children. Contributions from the reading public were apparently also welcome and solicited. The editorial board specified that any writings submitted for publication had to pay special attention to language and style, since the magazine was read by children of around eleven and twelve years of age.<sup>20</sup> The magazine was exclusively focused on the war, but its format was that of an educational journal. It included special sections on geography, history, natural science, mathematics, and international politics. One section entitled “News Broadcasting” (*shishi boyin* 时事播音) usually consisted in essays and dialogues on current affairs that probably came from wireless broadcasting transcripts. In fact, most of the content was likely conceived to be a resource for the propaganda activities other children's media. The preference for genres such as children first-person reports, folktales, and short

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19 *Kangzhan ertong* (Chongqing), 1.2 (1940), 6.

20 *Kangzhan ertong* (Wuhan), 1.1 (1938), 27.

dramas also suggests that the editors emphasized that the war should be narrated and explained from the perspective of the young. A large portion of the magazine was dedicated to songs, rhymes, and cartoons. In order to guarantee the interest of the readership even riddles about the wartime events were occasionally published, with prizes being promised to little readers who sent in the right answers to the editorial board.

Moreover, *Kangzhan ertong's* editors expressed an interest in building a more direct relationship to the magazine's "little friends". Letter exchanges between the editors and the readers were regularly published that provided advice, commentary, or reports on certain activities. Young readers were also invited to submit their creative writings, which were published in a special section. Most of these texts consisted in short plays and poems about the war. Creativity was taken for granted as an aspect of childhood that should be encouraged, whereby the editors sometimes complained when the contributions they received were just copies of the works of others. They reminded the "little friends" to not seek to imitate others, but to strive to express their own creative potential.<sup>21</sup>

It is hard to judge whether these readers' contributions, such as letters or literary compositions, were fabricated or the actual work of the reading public. Nevertheless, they supported the idea that children constituted a community that was both interested and involved in the war and that there was a patriotic young "public opinion" that had to be taken seriously. Moreover, it was also possible in this way to create a normative model of modern childhood that was at least putatively inspired by the real lives of good and progressive children. As propaganda, the magazine depicted less how the youngest actually lived through the tragedy of the conflict than how they were expected to experience the war according to their age and capabilities. The main goal was to educate children, and their families, about the significance and the implications of the war by offering them examples and suggestions about how to fully participate in the national resistance.

#### Learn to be a resistance child: rethinking education in wartime

As emphasized by the editorial published in the first issue, *Kangzhan ertong* was first and foremost an educational enterprise aimed at "nourishing the spirit" of wartime children and teaching them how to deal with the war. Education was the primary concern of the magazine's editors, who considered it to be a basic right of all children. Nevertheless, they were also convinced that the dramatic context of the armed conflict had created new necessities and opportunities, and that the goal and the content of children's education needed to be reconsidered in order to meet the war's demands.

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<sup>21</sup> *Kangzhan ertong* (Wuhan), 1.5 (1938), 27.

Generally speaking, the emergence of new war-related needs, but also of opportunities in the field of education was also recognized by the nationalist government. In April 1938, during the extraordinary National Congress of the Nationalist Party dedicated to the resistance war and national reconstruction, the Minister of Education Chen Lifu 陳立夫 (1900–2001) presented an concise proposal about education during the war. Listing nine principles, he stressed, among other things, the importance of combining civil and military education, increasing training in the natural sciences, placing emphasis on the social sciences as a foundation for promoting patriotism, and linking family and school education.<sup>22</sup> As a matter of fact, during the conflict and following a trend which had already emerged after the establishment of the Nanjing government, the state's control of educational activities increased.<sup>23</sup> In addition, extraordinary resources were mobilized to build and develop educational institutions in the inner provinces, where great numbers of young student refugees had to be relocated into schools.

The nationalist state concentrated its attention on higher education, working to expand the number of students enrolling in college and professional education, both of which were thought to be fundamental for war training.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, since basic education remained the responsibility of local governments, less progress was made in expanding the number of children attending regular primary school. Despite several national regulations and plans, economic and administrative difficulties at the local level made primary education one of the less developed areas during the war.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, the outbreak of the war gave more urgency to the debates on modern education that had already been carried out in professional and political circles for decades. Widely debated issues such as the importance of the national character of education or the necessity of updating the traditional approach to learning acquired newfound relevance.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, since the aim to mobilize children in the service of war – a key goal for many educators and activists – was perceived by many families and parents to be harmful to their children's educational development, it was essential to persuade the public that the war did not hinder, but rather required and even promoted

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22 Chang and Myers 1994, 150.

23 For education in the republican era, see Culp 2007. On universities in the republican era, see Yeh 1995.

24 See Israel 1998; for the nationalist party's policies towards displaced students, see Liu 2013.

25 Chang and Myers 1994, 152

26 There literature on educational reforms and their implementation in republican China is quite abundant; for recent works, see Curran 2005, Cong 2007, and Vandervan 2012.

a modern and scientific education – the very kind of education that was critical to a child’s personal progress and the salvation of the Chinese nation.

The primary concern of *Kangzhan ertong* was to connect modern learning with the actual experience of the war and with practical knowledge that was useful in the resistance.

One section of the *Kangzhan ertong* was explicitly a “guide for the resistance-war life of children” (“Ertong kangzhan shenghuo zhidao” 儿童抗战生活指导). In the first issue, it consisted in an essay that described a debate between adult educators about children’s contribution to the war.

The core of the discussion concerned the kind of education best suited to children, who had to be properly trained and educated in wartime in order to become the “masters of the future” (*jianglai de zhuren* 将来的主人). In principle, all the participants in the dialogue agreed that children’s education could not be neglected because of the war. The child’s first duty was to study. The problem was that learning merely for the sake of learning or, even worse, traditional rote learning, were not practical: On the contrary, it was necessary to connect schoolwork with real life, and make learning consistent with the actual needs of the war.

First of all, what children had to learn – from history to science – needed to be relevant to the resistance war, aimed at nourishing children’s love for their motherland, and help foster a national consciousness. In this way, it was possible to prevent young people from becoming “little collaborators” (*xiao hanjian* 小汉奸) instead of “little warriors” (*xiao zhanshi* 小战士). Education was to raise children’s awareness about the tragic circumstances of the Japanese attack upon their nation, and to guide them to actively participate in the resistance efforts. Otherwise, education had the potential to cultivate indifference, which could be easily seen as accommodating the Japanese invasion.

Moreover, according to this dialogue, wartime education could not be based only on individual study in class or at home. Children had to be organized in collective teams and extra-curricular activities were also crucial. Learning could occur in the direct experience of war service, such as in caring for wounded soldiers, assisting during bombing raids, and in supporting propaganda efforts in cities and villages.

Finally, in order to fully develop physical and psychological strength, it is argued that considerable attention should be paid to training (*xunlian* 训练). In short, one of the participants remarks that “in order to be a little warrior, a child should be able to give speeches, sing, write, and also to act” (*neng gan* 能干).<sup>27</sup> This list of skills that should be

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27 *Kangzhan ertong* (Wuhan), 1.1 (1938), 21.

acquired through education consists above all in social competencies and practical techniques that would help to make children active members, if not “little leaders”, of their community.

In the interest of promoting this educational goal, the magazine presented specific texts and resources.

The first issue of *Kangzhan ertong*, for example, published a long fictional dialogue involving three twelve-year old children, two boys and one girl. They carefully describe and comment on the victory of the Chinese nationalists at Tai'erzhuang, the conditions of the Chinese army, and the international context of the war. In the following pages, there is further educational material relating to the war that deals with specific subjects like Chinese politics, geography, history, hygiene, and mathematics. Thus, a story of a father and son going by train to Tai'erzhuang is used to illustrate the topography of central China; a dialogue among children describes historical events connected to Japanese imperialism in China; an introduction to the biological sciences is provided, in which the fear of the bacteriological weapons used by the “Japanese devils” stimulates a discussion about “small devils”, bacteria; and, finally, the Japanese casualties of Tai'erzhuang battle are summed up in a series of mathematical exercises.<sup>28</sup> The magazine's educational content was mainly focused on modern disciplines with strong a nationalistic emphasis. As the war against Japan was a totalizing experience, learning could not be neutral. Therefore, even science education needed to promote patriotic values.

Patriotism and active resistance were to be learned and displayed even during playtime, however. Not only songs and rhymes, but also suggestions for games and toys were inspired by the war. For example, children were instructed on how to build a small airplane or ambulance car using matchboxes or on how to pretend to be in battle as a mounted soldier with friends.<sup>29</sup>

Wartime education not only reflected a nationalistic and patriotic approach to modern learning or playtime. The war also offered the chance to pursue practical lessons that engaged children in civic service and could therefore help them to become loyal and modern citizens. Participation in collective extracurricular activities had to be put at the center of a child's educational experience. Education, in this case, was identified with the practice of self-discipline and self-restraint, which could be inculcated in wartime service. It was thought that the war could accelerate the elimination of cultural obstacles that, up to until then, had hindered children's active participation in public life.

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28 Ibid, 3–8.

29 *Kangzhan ertong* (Wuhan), 1.3 (1938), 22.

The attention paid to these activities reflected the increasing militarization of education and children's school environment. At any rate, this did not mean that children had to receive military training in order to participate in armed resistance. Even if the magazine's visual depiction of child resistance was dominated by martial children holding guns or knives and interacting amiably with soldiers, children's use of physical and armed violence against the enemy was still a taboo that was only indirectly and rarely suggested. The main tasks of younger children were rather organized propaganda and providing assistance to refugees and wounded soldiers.

*Kangzhan ertong* provided many examples of collective tasks suited to children in wartime. They were mostly presented in the form of news reports referring to real events and actual facts.

To give just one example, the issue from May 25, 1938 published a report of a meeting of a group of children, who had decided to visit and take care of wounded soldiers in the local hospital. While the text touched upon issues relating to hygiene (it was remarked on how the warm weather and the poor conditions of the wounded soldiers in the hospitals favored the spread of infection), it was mainly dedicated to describing how the group planned its activity. These exemplary children were described as having immediately recognized their duties, which included cleaning the hospital, singing patriotic songs, writing letters on behalf of soldiers, and giving the soldiers food and soap that the children had bought with their own savings. They enthusiastically debated about the best way to organize this work, and at the end, they also discussed how to properly behave during their visits. The children concluded that it would also be necessary to organize a meeting afterwards in order to analyze any deficiencies in their approach and to reflect on areas for further self-improvement. The emphasis here was placed on the capacity of children to mobilize in order to achieve their goals, as well as to reflect and act in a rational and organized way. In short, they were little, but modern and disciplined citizens of a nation at war, who were similar to or indeed even better than adults. Moreover, in contrast to older citizens, children were portrayed as doing everything with enthusiasm and generosity.

Even on their own, children could educate themselves and learn how to be loyal citizens and active patriots. Several examples were given to show how children should become "little teachers" (*xiao xiansheng* 小先生) by educating illiterate and poor adults in the countryside and essentially leading their fellow countrymen according to a proposal originally devised by Tao Xisheng.<sup>30</sup>

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30 On the idea of making young students "little teachers", proposed by Tao Xisheng and sup-

In the report of his experience, the pupil Chen Dexiang 陈德香 narrated how in his primary school – close to Nanjing – the teacher told students that they had to become “little teachers”. When he returned to his village, he decided to teach his reluctant illiterate uncle using war-propaganda material and simple texts found in the local library. Since little Chen was compelled to leave Nanjing because of the Japanese occupation, he wrote his letter to incite his fellow children to engage themselves in similar instructional tasks.<sup>31</sup>

The magazine’s insistence on the educational importance of children’s collective or individual engagement in war and civic service and, more generally, on the need to strengthen the connection between education and resistance work did not diminish over time. On the contrary, as the war went on, the editors were clearly persuaded that activists and intellectuals – who appear to have been disappointed by the lack of progress – needed to make more educational efforts in this regard.

In the May 1940 issue, which was dedicated to the third anniversary of the outbreak of the war, an article offered an assessment of the first three years of children’s wartime work. The authors expressed their dissatisfaction with what was perceived as the still scarce involvement of Chinese children in collectives and with the lack of adequate textbooks for wartime children’s education.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, some complained that the persistent emphasis on formal and traditional education in schools could weaken the much-needed participation of children in the resistance and undermine the opportunity that the war represented for shaping a new national community. One commentator, Li Fan 李凡, wrote a short essay titled: “Do Not Just Pursue A Bookish Knowledge” (“Bu yao du si shu” 不要读死书):

Today there still are many people who think that the best activity for children is to study at school. Actually at this age, society is a greater school. At work, you can learn more practical things. Still, there are many people today who think the children are not capable of doing many tasks. There are in fact many things that children cannot do. But, in reality, children can do other great tasks. I am not opposed to children studying books. I am simply opposed to them only acquiring a bookish knowledge. I do not say that children have the capacity to do everything, but we have to develop and nourish

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ported by Zhang Zonglin, see Plum 2011.

31 Chen Dexiang, “Zuo xiaosheng de jingyan tan” 做小先生的经验谈, *Kangzhan ertong* (Wuhan), 1.5 (1938), 18.

32 “Sannian lai ertong gongzuo de yantao” 三年来儿童工作的研讨, *Kangzhan ertong* (Chongqing), 1.3 (1940), 6–7.

the capacities they have. To sum up my view in one phrase: I really hope that children will be able to become awakened to themselves. Adults and little citizens alike have all the duty and the right (*quanli*) to participate in the resistance war<sup>33</sup>.

In the same vein, another author, He Gongchao 何公超, discussed how it was necessary to make more practical training a feature of modern education for children:

In the past, children only knew to study, they did not know to act. In textbooks, there are some lessons about “training for air defense”. Children read them, but that’s all – they never participate in any training for air-raid defense. Sometimes, they [the textbooks] talk about guns and cannons, but as to what a gun or a cannon looks like, children have no clue. Learning everything from books is simply generic and abstract.

Today is the age of practice (*shigan de shidai* 实干的时代). You are not permitted to just study books. When the enemy is dropping bombs, is it useful to have just read the lesson on “training for air defense”? But if you just act and do not study, it is also not a good thing. Just acting without studying can mean acting badly, or acting in the wrong way, or making efforts without any success or only partial success! In North China, there is a little warrior. On the one hand, he is a partisan warrior; on the other, he studies books about guerrilla warfare. This means [he] combines study and work. And this is not an individual undertaking. It is collective study and collective work<sup>34</sup>.

This approach to education was evidently not to be considered a betrayal of the modern and progressive ideal that the goal of modern education was to help children to develop their intellectual potential and to realize their individual talents. Rather, education that was not immediately useful for national progress and salvation was not only deemed unsuited to the exceptional and turbulent times, but even a lost opportunity for nurturing a child’s potential to make an individual contribution as a citizen and a member of the national community.

According to the *Kangzhan ertong* editors, it was not only important to persuade readers that the war required a change of attitude, but also that doing so did not hinder personal progress. After all, the premise of wartime education was based on the acknowledgement of children’s value and its ultimate goal was the empowerment of children in society. In short, war propaganda foreshadowed a shift in roles and hierarchy: The debate about the country’s new educational needs and the efforts to offer

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33 Li Fan, “Bu yao du si shu”, *Kangzhan ertong* (Chongqing), 1.3 (1940), 8.

34 He Gongchao, “Yi mian xue, yi mian zuo” 一面學, 一面做, *Kangzhan ertong* (Chongqing), 1.3 (1940), 9.

positive examples for children and educators signaled a change that derived from the assumption that children, more than adults, could fully express not only their intellectual capacities, but above all the moral competencies that were best suited to modern citizens and patriotic warriors.

#### Childhood as a weapon for resistance

Propaganda magazines such as *Kangzhan ertong* depicted the world as a physical and social landscape that was marked by disruption. Hospitals, refugee camps, air-raid shelters, occupied cities and villages, towns under bomb shelling; adults who were mainly mother-widows, displaced relatives and strangers, wounded soldiers: In this world, children were often forced to emancipate themselves from the traditional hierarchies of age and knowledge. And thanks to their spirit and moral qualities, they succeeded.

Such a description partially reflected the reality of the war: Along with the impact of the conflict against Japan on Chinese society and families, the increasing generational gap was certainly a sign of the acceleration of a social change that had already begun during the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> The significance attributed to the war as an engine of social and cultural change, especially with regard to the family, was evident in the relevance given to orphans in the public discourse during these years. As Colette Plum has shown, during the conflict against Japan, war orphans came to epitomize childhood.<sup>36</sup> The traditional perception of orphans as lost children changed drastically, as they soon became the main target of welfare policies and society's care. They were consequently living evidence of the capacity of the Chinese people to collectively look after their own nation. At the same time, the public attention paid to orphans revealed the ambiguous stance towards family which characterized the nationalist era. On the one hand, the family was considered an obstacle to modernization and nation-building, since parents could be seen as hindering the participation of children in the national community and in fully realizing their duties as citizens, as evidenced by Zhang Zonglin's words quoted above. On the other hand, family values were viewed as the basis for creating stronger bonds among the Chinese people as a national collective,

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35 For more on this, see Lary 2010.

36 The meaning attributed to war orphans in Chinese political and public discourse on the nation and wartime China, which accompanied nationalist welfare policy towards orphans, has been explored in Plum 2006.

since the nation could be conceived as a greater family where mutual aid, respect, and affection were the basis of social relationships.<sup>37</sup>

*Kangzhan ertong's* representation of the child's position in the family showed the same ambiguity. On the one hand, the editors stressed the importance of being affectionate and obedient to parents and respectful of family values. On the other hand, they emphasized children's autonomy and capacity for initiative in order to weaken the idea that they required their parents' protection.

In the letters and fictional texts published in the magazine, it was actually inside the family that children learned of their duty to avenge (*baochou* 报仇) and hate, and where they first recognized their own will to fight against the Japanese devils. The relationship between children and their parents and relatives was depicted as being highly emotional and full of mutual affection. The parents' suffering is what in fact motivated children's aspiration to seek revenge and to participate in the resistance.

Exemplary stories of this kind were abundant, such as the story of a son who visits his wounded father in the hospital with this mother. Though child's father lost both his legs because of a Japanese bomb on the front, he is still full of spirit and resolve. He tells his child how he killed eight enemies at one time before the bomb took away his two limbs. From now on, however, he will be forced to walk with crutches, he will be a "four-legged father". Be that as it may, his only regret is that he will not be able to kill more Japanese soldiers. "My little dear", the father asks, "will you avenge me?" In an emotional outburst, the son replies: "I promise to amputate the legs of ten enemies and give them to you."<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, many *Kangzhan ertong's* propaganda tales, dramas, poems, and cartoons presented stories of children whose fathers, or sometimes mothers, are either fighting at the front, missing, or dead. The depicted children usually live with grandparents or brothers and sisters, and they are often refugees. These unfortunate circumstances compel them to take the initiative by assuming the leadership role in the family, joining the guerrilla army for the sake of family's revenge, and becoming "children of the war of resistance". As innocent souls, children were only thought to be capable of developing feelings of hatred as a consequence of the suffering inflicted by the Japanese to themselves or their dearest relations. At the same time, in all these exemplary tales children are portrayed as recognizing that their suffering is simply part of the national tragedy and, furthermore, that their own salvation could be realized in collective and patriotic

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37 For a discussion, see Plum 2011.

38 Li Ni 狸尼, "Sitiao tui de baba" 四条腿的爸爸, *Kangzhan ertong* (Wuhan), 1.4 (1938), 13.

action. In the end, by taking part in the resistance they are finally able to give new meaning to their own plight and to find their place in society as loyal, responsible, and courageous little fighters. Recognizing their place in the national community, they gain a deep sense of empowerment.

Nevertheless, children's capacity to overcome their weaknesses and to develop a higher sense of loyalty to the national community (in response to the sufferings inflicted on their family) was rooted in the intrinsic and pristine quality of childhood. As young and still untainted human beings, children are able to nourish genuine emotions and feelings which are quashed in the world of adults by social conventions or vile egoism. At the center of war propaganda was the notion of childhood as a universal human condition in which mankind's emotional strength and pure morality were most fully realized. This idea had also been at the core of the New Culture's romantic discovery of childhood.

This notion is further suggested within the pages of *Kangzhan ertong* pages from a variety of different perspectives.

First, the strength of children in their resistance against the enemy seems to derive from their great freedom from the egoism, parochialism, and hypocrisy of adults. Not yet beholden to the rules and conventions of society, children are able to see and do things in a way that is no longer possible for adults. This capacity, moreover, was also thought to have practical value for the resistance.

For example, their natural curiosity towards the world had an important value for detecting Japanese collaborators, an important task assigned to children. The magazine is full of stories of children who, without fearing any retaliation and sometimes despite the indifference of adults, were always the first to recognize the "traitors".<sup>39</sup> To cite one example, in a cartoon, a child becomes curious about a man who, instead of searching for an air shelter during a bombing raid, prefers to remain out in open space and make strange movements with his hat. The child immediately understands that the man is signaling the position of civilians to Japanese airplanes and he publicly denounces him as a collaborator.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, children's capacity to overcome social conventions and to sacrifice themselves in the name of ideals was appreciated, even if it resulted in a stubborn revolt

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39 Collaborationism was a major and sensitive topic in Chinese war propaganda and the risks were also strongly emphasized in the children's press. On political collaborationism during the war of resistance, see Brook 2005, Barrett and Shyu 2001.

40 *Kangzhan ertong* (Chongqing), 1.2 (1940), 20–21.

against their parents' wishes. In one letter, a Shanghai child who had experienced the Japanese occupation of the metropolis shared his experience with his fellow "little friends":

In our school, we schoolmates, in order to vindicate our dead or refugee country fellows and little friends, have formed a team, which unites our limited resources for the sake of the nation. We have worked in Shanghai for many months, but later our army had to retreat from Shanghai, and at that time, in order to rouse all our fellow citizens of the nation, defeat our enemies, and unite all Chinese little friends in the work for national salvation, we decided to go to the hinterland. Some within our group had to speak with their families; some of other's family reluctantly agreed. But my parents said that they were not going to allow me to go to the hinterland. In the end, I decided that I really wanted to go with the others, and I refused to eat for three days. Daddy and mummy bought all sort of delicacies to persuade me, but I did not eat anything, and as a result they had no choice but to let me go.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, children were depicted as being more sensitive and attentive than adults and as having a special capacity for feeling empathy with the others. Such attitudes were considered critical to the emergence of a true national community.

In the first issue, in a long letter to the editors, a group of children ostensibly reported on their experience as a propaganda team and asked the magazine's editors for their opinion:

Dear editors,

We children have organized a resistance team. We often go to parks and public places to inform and incite the people in regard to the resistance war. We do this task after class in order to make known to all children's family members how the Japanese devils are vicious and hateful. On Sundays, we go to the parks and public places to incite the people who are there to have fun. Once we saw some refugees, who sold some cakes in order to make some money, but nobody paid attention to them. So, we decided to sing patriotic songs in order to make people aware of the refugees' situation and buy their cakes. Did we do the right thing? We think that if all children would do the same, we will be able to resist to Japan<sup>42</sup>.

At the same time, in other stories and letters published in the magazine, the protagonists were children refugees, who, in order to be accepted and to affirm the unity of all

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41 *Kangzhan ertong* (Chongqing), 1.2 (1940), 17.

42 *Kangzhan ertong* (Wuhan), 1.1 (1938), 12.

the Chinese people, had to fight against the hostility of local adults caused by their different provincial origins. In the story of Little Zhuang, a young refugee in Sichuan is insulted as a “devil” (*guizi* 鬼子) and a “toddler” (*waer* 娃儿) by the local children because of his origin from the lower Yangzi. He vehemently replies:

“What devils of the lower Yangzi? The Japanese are devils, the Chinese people are not devils. It does not matter if we are from lower or upper Yangzi, we all have to fight, we are all Chinese. How can you insult me as a devil from the lower Yangzi?”

Ultimately, Little Zhuang punches one of the other children in a fit of rage.<sup>43</sup> As a child, he is even scolded by his mother for not having restrained himself. But his spontaneous reaction is precisely the consequence of the natural sense of justice and patriotism that all children have and which made them an effective weapon in the fight against social prejudices and the backward mentality that undermined the resistance effort.

In sum, the defining characteristics of childhood were imagined to be essential to national cohesion. This was because the youngest and the most innocent children supposedly embodied most completely the common humanity shared by all individuals. This, in turn, endowed them with the capacity for love, altruism, and empathy.

This notion was also strengthened by *Kangzhan ertong*, which sought to depict children as representatives of international dialogue. Several issues published the exchanges of letters with children from foreign countries, such as the United States and Canada, as a sign of the natural empathy children have for others’ sufferings and their intrinsic openness. Nevertheless, Chinese children’s replies to such expressions of sympathy and support were mostly dedicated to describing their own efforts to resist the Japanese aggression. As a universal condition, childhood was the key for the strengthening human reciprocal understanding. Yet the value of children could only be fully recognized when their qualities served the collective interests of a nation-state such as embattled China.

## Conclusions

The systematic and wide-spread propaganda effort addressed to children and carried out during the war of resistance against Japan reflected and popularized the modern idea of childhood as a crucial age for the progress of individuals and the national community alike. If the child was already at the center of modern élites’ discourse on national progress in the republican era, it was not until during the war that China’s emancipation from the

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43 *Kangzhan ertong* (Chongqing), 1.5 (1940), 28.

ills of the past was explicitly connected to children's mass engagement for the sake of national salvation.

As a reading of *Kangzhan ertong* magazine shows, in war propaganda children were depicted as important members of their own family and the national community, and they were individually and collectively construed in the nation's public discourse as protagonists of the Chinese resistance and national reconstruction.

This symbolism of childhood during wartime was directly connected with the idea that children naturally embodied all those human values and traits – loyalty, initiative, spontaneity, creativity, curiosity, and empathy – which were supposed to make individuals fully “human”.

These characteristics in the “heart and mind of the little friends” (to quote Guo Moruo) were fully expressed by children as a consequence of their innate propensity as innocent individuals who were unrestrained by societal conventions and parochial interests to act in accordance with human virtues and feelings.

But in the war propagandist's view, the naturally good, spontaneous, and pure child had to be guided to make the most of his/her individual qualities through an educational path aimed at developing a rational and scientific attitude towards the world and at training him/her in self-discipline and the collective values which connected the individual to the national community.

Only through this educational and disciplining process could children's virtues and abilities be fully nourished and preserved, making possible their individual self-fulfillment and transforming childhood into both the essence of a new Chinese nation and a symbolic weapon for the Chinese resistance. The romanticized notion of childhood which had been elaborated on by progressive intellectuals and educators since the May Fourth era gained wider cultural legitimization during the war years as a consequence of its subordination to the military and political needs of the nation-state.

In the end, the wartime appropriation of childhood's value had a cost. While the war opened the way for children to be considered powerful symbols and full and worthy members of the nation, it also constructed a cage for them of society's projections and hopes. Celebrating the virtues of an imagined childhood for national salvation, war propaganda perpetuated the subjugation of Chinese children to the expectations and demands of the world of adults.

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