

Speaking to My Ancestors: An Ethnographic Study of Lived Childhood Religion in Rural Gansu

Joseph Chadwin

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6279-0349>

Abstract

This article provides an overview of the major existing scholarship pertaining to childhood religion in the People's Republic of China (PRC). More specifically, it examines lived childhood religion in a rural village in Gānsù province. This article challenges the commonly preconceived notion that children in the PRC do not regard religious belief as important and simply mirror the religious practices of their guardians. By utilising ethnographic data, I argue that children in the PRC are capable of constructing their own unique form of lived religion that is informed by, but crucially distinct from, the religious beliefs and practices of adults. The practices and beliefs of this lived religion can be extremely important to children and the evidence from fieldwork suggests that they tend to take both their practice and belief very seriously.

Keywords: childhood, children, China, lived religion, belief



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Introduction

Given the importance of children in the realm of lived religion, it is somewhat surprising to find that little consideration has, until relatively recently, been paid to how children (which this article shall define as those under the age of eighteen) understand and practice religion. Lately, a wave of academic research has studied the place of children in various faith traditions and the lives of the children raised in these traditions. It is now somewhat common knowledge that children are perfectly capable of negotiating their own religious beliefs; indeed, concluding his decade long *Children in Crisis* series in 1990, Coles argued that children think deeply about religion and very much deserve to be taken as seriously as their adult counterparts (Coles 1990). Rarely, however, do scholars acknowledge the contributions of children in the creation of religious worlds (Ridgely 2012). At best, the existing scholarship on childhood lived religion is extremely limited and at worst highly problematic: the overwhelming majority of scholarship focuses upon the Western context, and the religious views of children are commonly gathered by relying upon the highly problematic medium of adult memory. Although an interesting line of inquiry in its own right, it ultimately remains an adult's view of what they think childhood religion *was* as opposed to what a present day child thinks religion *is* (Cram 2001; Greven 1978; Wuthnow 1999).

This article intends to add to the ever growing corpus of academic studies dedicated to examining lived childhood religion. More specifically, I intend to shine light upon the severely under-examined field of lived childhood religion in China. Wàn and Yán (2008: 69) highlight a common problem with academic studies of childhood religion: existing studies often rely predominantly on quantitative research. This is particularly the case with childhood religion in China as many studies seek to examine the number of children who possess religious views. This study is thus purely ethnographic and builds its conclusions upon Miào's (2016) excellent ethnographic study of childhood ritual. While focussed upon patriotic rituals that take place in Chinese kindergartens rather than lived religion, Miào (2016: 163) argues that children often possess a deep understanding of ritual built upon intuitive perception. While Miào seeks to disprove the preconceived notion that children in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have a limited understanding of ritual, I will argue that contrary to previous research, children in the PRC are capable of deeply engaging with and practicing religion. More specifically, I will seek to offer an alternative to the preconceived notion that children in the PRC are mere observers of lived religion by arguing that they are, in fact, perfectly capable of understanding and practicing their own unique form of lived religion. In order to discuss these conclusions, this article will initially provide an overview of the major existing scholarship pertaining to childhood religion in the PRC. The conclusion itself is drawn from ethnographic data obtained from a selection of the childhood population in a small village in Northwest China's Gānsù 甘肅 province.

Chinese Popular Religion

Before delving into the field of lived childhood religion in China, a brief discussion of Chinese popular religion is necessary. China is often identified as the world's most irreligious population; indeed, many recent surveys suggest that the religious population is a mere fourteen per cent of the population (Yang and Huang 2018: 2). Some, however, have argued that the link between ethnic and religious identification is less evident among cultural groups with less dominant formal religious traditions or faiths (Lopez, Huynh, and Fuligni 2018). The ethnic Hàn (*hànrén* 汉人) possess something of a religious dimension to family life. Rituals conducted at weddings, funerals, and festivals give meaning to family members' connections with one another and their ancestors. Its theology, cult, and personnel are so intimately diffused into one or more secular social institutions that they essentially become part of the concept, rituals, and structure of the latter, thus having no significant independent existence (Yang 1961). This religious practice is often referred to by scholars as "Chinese popular religion" (Johnson 1996: 123). Overmyer describes this religion as a "complex aggregate" (Overmyer 1981: 164), while Johnson aptly writes that it is "so widespread, so accepted, and so integrated into social life that it does not need a name; one could say that its existence is assumed" (Johnson 1996: 124). It is diffuse, flexible, eclectic, and exceedingly open, drawing on elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism as well as local traditions.

I believe that this religion is also built upon a number of universal ethical principles and goals which I shall go on to outline. It should be acknowledged that to reduce Chinese popular religion to a short section is somewhat problematic. Nevertheless, I believe that the core elements of the religion can be tentatively categorised into three main components.

Gods, Ancestors, and Ghosts

Máo Zédōng 毛泽东 (1893–1976) observed that both ancestral lineage and the worship of gods were two basic constituents of traditional Chinese society (Máo 1968). Although official statistics suggest otherwise, the practice of ancestor and god commemoration is still a crucial feature of Chinese popular religion today. More specifically, this constitutes a need to fulfil regular obligations to both ancestors and gods in the hope of bringing about a reciprocal response. There are a plethora of gods in Chinese popular religion; indeed, it is not uncommon for a village to house multiple unique gods. They are typically believed to occupy vital points in villages, usually within a shrine or temple that might house a single more widely known high-ranking deity and multiple lesser-known local divine beings. In most temples, gods are represented by images, but they can also be represented by a written tablet, or sometimes by a piece of red paper containing a list of the gods' names (Tam 2011).

Ancestors, in contrast, are not regarded as deities, but are equally worthy of religious obligation. Hsu, who believed that lineages constitute the essential social fabric of China, aptly described religious Chinese life as lived “under the ancestors’ shadow” (Hsu 1948). When one dies, it is expected that one will be taken care of by surviving relatives (particularly any surviving son). In return, this ancestor can bestow various boons from the afterlife.

Ghosts constitute the essential opposite of ancestors. They are believed to be the spirits of those who died but are not venerated as ancestors—those who either died without offspring to venerate them or, in exceptional cases, those who died violently. Although not necessarily malicious, if left unchecked, ghosts can cause great trouble for villages. There are therefore various ways of dissuading ghosts from visiting, persuading them to leave, and subduing them.

Bài

The term *bài* 拜 has a large degree of semantic variety: “to pray,” “to pay respect,” “to worship,” “to visit,” and “to salute.” In Chinese popular religion, it is the very embodiment of religious belief through a bodily action. Encapsulating how Chinese popular religion is actually practiced, Peng defines it as “doing religion that might be filtered out by etic concepts and categories” (Peng 2020: xxii), namely an action that simultaneously engages mind and body as a whole. In literal terms, it can take many forms: giving various forms of offerings, ritual cleaning, evocation, and showing reverence (to name a few). More often than not, *bài* pertaining to ancestors and gods is obligatory and the notion of whether one actually believes is of comparative unimportance.

Bào

The term *bào* 報, like *bài*, also has a large degree of semantic variety: “to report,” “to announce,” “to inform,” “to respond,” “to repay,” “to retaliate,” and “to retribute” (Yang 1957). Most importantly, in the context of Chinese popular religion, it denotes “reciprocity.” The domain of Chinese popular religion is very much hierarchical. *Bào* is the necessary reciprocal obligation within this universe. Indeed, one could argue that Chinese popular religion is essentially built upon the combination of moral modelling and reciprocal obligation within a hierarchical structure (Oxfeld 2015). One of the most obvious manifestations is the concept of filiality (*xiào* 孝): children are essentially eternally indebted to their parents for the gift of birth and being raised. The child must therefore repay this debt by caring for their parents in old age as well as in the afterlife through proper *bài*.

I believe an etymological analysis of the modern Chinese term for “religion” (*zōngjiào* 宗教) perfectly encapsulates these three components. 宗 is made up of two

elements: 宀 (*mián*) which means “roof” and 示 (*shì*) which is usually translated as “to show” or “to report.” As a whole, 禱 constitutes the roof of an ancestral shrine while 示 indicates offerings presented to the ancestors while reporting (i.e. praying) to them (Welter 2017). 教 is made up of 孝 (*xiào*), the aforementioned “filiality”,¹ and 文 (*wén*) which has a broad range of meanings (often “literature,” “writing,” and “culture”). 教, however, can further be broken down into 老 (*lǎo*) and 子 (*zǐ*). The former translates as “elder” and the latter as “son” or “child.” Therefore, taken as a whole, 教 denotes the passing down of cultural values and tradition from elders to children.

Children in Chinese Popular Religion

This article now turns to an examination of the existing scholarship pertaining to lived childhood religion in China. Although this remains a relatively new and notably understudied field, it is already clear that a number of themes and assumptions have arisen within this corpus of scholarship. Aside from offering what I believe to be a valuable window into lived childhood religion in rural China, this article also intends to test and, in a number of cases, provide an alternative to these themes and assumptions. It should be acknowledged from the outset that I by no means intend to disprove any previously made statements. I am acutely aware that this study is built upon a relatively small sample of children in a very small village in a single Chinese province: to claim that such a study is representative of lived childhood religion in China as a whole would be nothing short of foolish. What this article does intend to do, however, is offer much needed data on lived childhood religion in China and, in some cases, offer alternatives to theories in the hope of igniting a discussion. With this said, this section shall briefly outline what I believe to be the most important conclusions about lived childhood religion in China granted from existing scholarship.

Children are Irreligious

Chinese scholarship frequently concludes that children are irreligious. It is rather unsurprising to find that statistically speaking, the vast majority of children in China are irreligious according to official data (Yang and Huang 2018). Fāng (2013: 69) con-

¹ It should be noted that I have purposely chosen not to employ the more common translation “filial piety.” I believe the term “piety” is far too laden with Christian moral connotations. Moreover, although I believe the term “filial obedience” (Stafford 1995) is a better translation than “filial piety,” I also believe that it can be somewhat misleading. To be truly filial in Chinese popular religion does not mean to blindly obey one’s parents. On the contrary, one should “thoughtfully assimilate the lessons they have taught and carry on their legacy in a cosmopolitan world that they may not be able to comprehend” (Madsen 2008: 306).

cludes that while young people in China are perfectly capable of having religious experiences, the number of occurrences is extremely small. Many Chinese academics have undertaken comparative studies between child religiosity in China and in various Western countries (usually the United Kingdom or the United States). Gé (2015), for example, writes that the very core of a child's moral education in the USA is religion (*zōngjiào* 宗教) whereas in contrast, a child's moral education in China is built upon the non-religious "moral ethics" (*lúnǐ dàodé* 伦理道德) of filiality. Yáng even makes the rather problematic assertion that, unlike the wholly irreligious children of China, children in Western countries are dependent on religion for the cultivation of moral values due to the "fact" that the vast majority of family homes possess a Bible (Yáng 2014: 38). Similarly, Zhèng (2013: 23) argues that due to the impact of Christianity on Western culture, children in the West are far more likely to abide by rules and obey regulations due to fear of punishment from God.

Filiality is Central to a Child's Morality

Both Chinese and Western scholars conclude that filiality is central to a child's morality. However, Chinese scholars tend to remove all religious connotations of filiality and, like Gé (2015), argue that the term is a non-religious value. Liáng encapsulates this view by stating that "Chinese culture is a culture of filiality"² (*zhōngguó wénhuà shì 'xiào' de wénhuà* 中国文化是'孝'的文化) (Liáng 1987: 307). Chén and Gān (2008) argue that filiality is the single most important thing that a child should learn. They argue that there are three manifestations of children in China today: "little slaves" (*xiǎo núlì* 小奴隶) who are blindly authoritarian and obedient in the traditional sense of filiality; "little emperors" (*xiǎo huángdì* 小皇帝) who are spoiled by their parents and are categorically unfilial; and those who embody true filiality (thoughtfully obedient but never unquestioningly so). Sòng (2017: 99) argues that modern Chinese children embody (or at least should embody) filiality in two ways: caring for one's body (both physically and morally) which is not privately owned by the child but is instead intertwined with the parents to whom the child has a moral obligation, and to be mindful of and cultivate one's reputation. To this end, Sòng asserts that children believe that filiality constitutes providing material support to their parents later in life while maintaining constant respect.

Many studies place particular emphasis on the moral debt of children, stating that this is their reason for filiality. Oxfeld (2015), for example, writes of how parents have a particular obligation to care for and teach their children who, in return, are "indebted to their parents forever" (Oxfeld 2015). Similarly, Goossaert, Kiely, and Lagerwey (2015: 24) even go as far as to state that the very "core notion governing rural family life was that of the moral debt of children—above all sons—to parents."

² This and all other translations from the Chinese are mine.

It should be noted that academic examinations of filiality tend to draw conclusions either from classical texts on filiality or from the opinions of adults. Indeed, there is a plethora of texts about what filiality actually is, how it should be taught to children, or how adults perceive it to be important—particularly from the academic field of education. Yàn (2006) argues that the core of traditional filiality is “love” (*ài* 爱) which in turn is defined by the act of “devotion” (*fèngxiàn* 奉献). Yàn, wishing to create a lasting culture of filiality, argues that the concept should serve as the moral core of all contemporary education. Yú (2007) examines the historic notion of filiality and argues that it should still possess contemporary value in education. Xiào (2009) writes that filiality is an integral part of the traditional culture of China. He argues that it cultivates a sense of morality and responsibility in children that enables them to “cherish life” (*zhēn ài shēngmìng* 珍爱生命). He concludes that modern Chinese education should embrace this traditional culture of filiality. Yáng (2009) laments the decline of the culture of filiality in Chinese education and urges schools to introduce activities that will restore the original culture. Zhōu, Jiǎng, and Chén (2012) argue that filiality is extremely positive for mental health and the psychological development of children. Hú Zéyǒng (2016) argues that filiality equates to “equality” (*píngděng* 平等) and should thus be liberally utilised by Chinese schools in order to cultivate socialist values in children. Sòng (2017) describes the historic background of filiality and then calls for schools and parents to instil filiality in children. Yú and Yú (2018) argue that children should be taught filiality in order to reflect and show respect to the Chinese government. Zhāng (2019) documents government calls for towns and villages to adopt a culture of filiality in local schools.

The studies summarised above provide valuable insight into what filiality is, how it should be taught to children, lamentations about how children are taught filiality poorly, and examinations of how parents implement it. That said, each examination stems from the academic field of education. Moreover, not a single one examines filiality from the point of view of children.

Children are Shown Religion Rather than Taught about It, and the Issue of Belief is Unimportant

From a very young age, adults instruct children to imitate them in *bài* to both gods and ancestors. In what remains the most thorough study of childhood religion in China to date, Stafford writes that children are never directly taught about religion but are certainly made to participate, “sometimes literally put through the motions of rituals” (Stafford 1995: 49).³ He notes the extent to which children imitate their parents, initially not understanding the actions but imitating them nevertheless, and then slowly

³ Much of this article draws from Stafford’s (1995) study as well as Johnson’s (1996) excellent study of children in China.

starting to comprehend why and how as they get older. Peng similarly argues that the instructions children receive place the emphasis on bodily action and imitation and, without spoken tuition, instil underlying beliefs into children:

what is ingrained in body and mind from an early age can develop to no more than showing respect to one's direct forbears, required in funerals and festival sacrifices [... or] can grow into a pious veneration of deities in fully engaged body and mind (Peng 2020: xxiv).

Johnson (1996) also notes that from an early age, children take part in religious rituals and are shown how to conduct the rites properly by watching and by being helped to perform them. However, she takes the assertion somewhat further. Whereas Stafford and Peng assert that young children do not really fathom the reasoning behind rituals, Johnson, building upon the conclusion of Hsu (1948), argues that children usually do not take ritual seriously. Similarly, Stafford (1995) also notes how the teenagers he observed actively seemed unhappy about being made to perform *bài* and especially objected to the more respectful forms of commemoration such as kneeling and prostrating. Scholars tend to agree that the issue of whether or not children actually believe in what they are doing is unimportant. Peng encapsulates this view by stating that:

Bai that relates to ancestors is obligatory, and there is no room left for personal free choice. The issue of whether one believes or not does not seriously concern people in their early experiences of performing *bai* (Peng 2020: xxiii).

Scholars such as Yú, Yú, and Sū (2019: 30) who examine specific religious beliefs argue that one can simply utilise parents' beliefs to accurately predict those of the child as the beliefs are mirrored. Similarly, Hú Bólín (2016: 26) neglects to examine the minutiae of the religious beliefs of children in favour of outlining how some children gain superstitious religious beliefs from their families—a trend that Hú Bólín believes is both problematic and in need of addressing.

Finally, it is a rather common observation among scholars that Chinese children are taught how to *bài* from their mothers. For example, Overmyer (1987: 293) argues that children are taught religious practices by their mothers. Similarly, Johnson (1996: 126) argues that the majority of Chinese popular religion practice takes place in the context of the family. In that setting, children learn from their mothers, the main practitioners of religious rituals at the family level, how to conduct the rituals properly.

Only Boys are Considered Full Beings

Traditionally, only sons are able to take care of their parents in the afterlife. It is thus unsurprising that scholars have often found that families in China place far more importance on their sons than daughters. Johnson (1996: 134), for example, argues that

sons (rather than daughters) are much more likely to participate in the commemoration of ancestors above and outwith the level of the household (i.e. during festivals in which ancestors require *bài*). However, while many scholars have noted that boys are very much favoured over girls, it is particularly significant that some scholars have argued that girls are not even perceived to be full people. This assertion was first noted by Watson who stated that girls “do not, indeed cannot, attain full personhood” due to the fact that only sons are given their names during the “full month” ceremony,⁴ whereas daughters remain nameless (Watson 1986: 619). Ahern (1975: 210) similarly argues that due to the fact that girls are essentially born only to move into another family upon marriage, they are perpetually regarded as outsiders. Finally, Stafford (1995: 184) arrives at a similar conclusion, stating that girls are seen as lesser when compared to boys, but also acknowledges that all children are seen as “useful” regardless of gender.

Children are Unstable

In the pre-imperial period, Mencius (*Mèngzǐ* 孟子) (ca. 372–289 BCE) and Xúnzǐ 荀子 (ca. 310–230 BCE) —the two great Confucian masters—adopted different views of human nature (*xìng* 性) which had significant implications for attitudes toward children. Mencius considered the innate goodness of human beings as something to be nurtured and nourished by the environment and education, and saw in the newborn infant a symbol of moral perfection. In stark contrast, Xúnzǐ regarded human nature as innately bad and in need of constant and rigorous moulding and correction. The human infant was thus viewed as an inherently bad being (Zhou 2009). Although this debate is not perceived to be a concern for children or their parents today, scholars still very much note the ramifications. Stafford (1995: 18) notes how it is traditionally believed that the souls (*líng hún* 灵魂)⁵ of children are not very firmly attached to their bodies. Symonds (2004: 22) notes that it is very common for the souls of children to be frightened away by something minor; a loud noise may cause fearfulness, or it may be the result of something more extreme. When a child’s soul is frightened away, ritual measures have to be taken to bring it back. Moreover, compared to adults, children are far more susceptible to the influence of ghosts. Schipper (1982: 103) explains that adults are more stable and thus far less vulnerable to such “pernicious influences.”

⁴ Some males go on to accumulate several names.

⁵ It should be noted that the term “soul” in this context can be potentially misleading. The Chinese term *líng hún* 灵魂 holds a set of meanings that overlaps with, but does not completely coincide with, the typical Western understanding of “soul”: a crucial element of the concept is that it makes a person a real person which has led some to employ the term “personality” (Harrell 1979: 520-527). Although *líng hún* is very much separate from the body, the active separation of the two does not mean death. A *líng hún* of a person either alive or dead, gives one individuality. Therefore a body without a *líng hún* is alive but lacking in humanity.

Johnson (1996: 135) notes how children frequently wear amulets, clothing that gives them supernatural protection, and protective charms to repel evil influences or to lock in their loosely attached souls. It should be noted that scholars do not regard children losing their souls or the process of retrieving them as a major problem. Schipper (1982: 103) and Stafford (1995: 19), for example, both argue that a child suffering a soul fright is a minor problem that requires only a common ritual response.

Funerals are a Point of Academic Contention

Scholars agree on the nature of children's funerals: in popular Chinese religion, it is forbidden to hold funerals for children. The death of sons is considered to be especially tragic and even unfilial on the part of the deceased since he cannot fulfil his filial obligations. Families might grieve privately for their departed children but no official funerary rites are administered. However, whether or not children are permitted to attend funerals is a point of academic contention. On one side of the argument, Watson (1982: 169) argues that children younger than fourteen are wholly excluded from funerals without exception (unless direct descendants of the deceased). In marked contrast to Watson, Peng (2020: 108) argues that child mourners and bystanders, whether immediate family or not, are very common funeral attendees. Peng asserts that children are even encouraged to attend funerals, particularly in the case of good deaths, as "they bring into play much fuller ideas of reproduction and ancestors' protection." They offer an excellent opportunity for children to learn further about the intricacies of *bài* and *bào* (Peng 2020: 109).

Methodology

Conducting ethnographic research in China, especially pertaining to fields that are deemed controversial such as religion, can be sensitive; Jones (2010: 16), for example writes how some scholars have been hindered by local police while conducting field research. Thankfully, I did not face any such obstacles. I once again found myself utterly indebted to the friends I made while I conducting research in Běijīng (北京). It was only because I happened to receive a very kind invitation from a university friend that I was able to gain access to my fieldwork site. My research, however, did change in nature; my original intent was not to study lived childhood religion specifically but instead undertake a far broader investigation into lived religion in rural family life. The nature of my research changed once I started the fieldwork itself: the data I gathered warranted, in my opinion, a change of research area.

The research took place over a period of forty days in January and February 2017. The fieldwork was based in a small rural village located north of *Lánzhōu* 兰州 in

Northwest China's *Gānsù* Province. The village has a population (at the time of research) of 3,839 with a very low under-eighteen population of approximately 200. The population is ethnic *Hàn* and the village predominantly relies on agriculture with rice and oranges constituting the main crops (although a few wealthier farmers also breed pigs). The village has two main religious sites: a single village temple built and maintained by the head of the wealthiest family in the village, and a large expanse of ancestral burial mounds (*fén 坟*) located in the hills on the outskirts of the village. The aforementioned temple is Daoist and an accurate reflection of the beliefs of the village according to its benefactor. The temple purportedly houses several deities and is, by my observation, a classic Chinese popular religion temple that incorporates elements of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and local beliefs.

In terms of conducting the research, I adopted Harvey's concept of "guesthood" (Harvey 2005: 227–228; 2013: 94) as an ethnographic research method, namely establishing relationships with my interviewees built upon mutual respect whereby meetings are "less like formal interviews with one-way exchange of information and more like mutually constituted relationships where knowledge is exchanged and discussed" (Arthur 2019: 16). My intention therein was to undertake a far more intimate and focused study than, for example, Johnson (1996) who conducted a far wider exploration into children in popular Chinese religion across the entirety of the PRC. Although this means that I cannot, and indeed will not, offer anything other than a small window into lived childhood religion in a very small Chinese village, I believe that this in of itself will grant a far deeper insight than more wide-ranging studies that can only remain at surface level by nature of scale.

As my fieldwork involved working with children, I adopted Ridgely's method of "allowing children to shape the research" (Ridgely 2011b: 82). Orsi (2005), among others, has famously questioned whether scholars and indeed adults can ever truly hope to access or comprehend children's thoughts about religion due to the intricate ways in which their voices are influenced by those around them. Indeed, studying children and the views that they hold, rather than the idea of "the child," raises questions that researchers often unwittingly overlook (Ridgely 2011a). However, Ridgely (2011b: 82) argues that by cultivating a relationship with children that is not built on the foundation of their need for protection or instruction from the researcher, it is possible to achieve untainted results. This is only achievable if the researcher is able to establish an understanding with the children that they know more about religion than the researcher. Thus, by relinquishing control of my fieldwork to the children I worked with, I was able to establish a fruitful environment in which I could learn from them.

All of the interviews I conducted and my participant observation practices took place on the terms of my interviewees. Like Clark (2010), I endeavoured to have my interviewees explain their feelings and understandings to me in their own language. Therein, my status as a "foreigner" (*wàiguó rén* 外国人) proved to be of enormous

help; the children wanted to teach me about their views and assumed that I had absolutely no prior knowledge as a foreigner. I was, by default, seen as different to the adults of the village—an outsider who knew games that they had not played before (which helped me to establish quick rapport in many cases) and wanted to learn about local customs. Moreover, I endeavoured to analyse what the children told me using their own terms and standards, rather than measuring their perceptions against my own pre-conceived adult norms (Ridgely 2005). Thus, by combining Harvey's concept of "guesthood" and Ridgely's method of "allowing children to shape the research," I was able to develop relationships with the children and establish an environment built upon mutual respect in which they were comfortable talking with me. Over the course of forty days in the village, I conducted both semi-structured interviews (giving my interviewees a great deal of autonomy in what we spoke about), as well as participant observation.

For this research project, I adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child's definition of "child," namely "a human being below the age of eighteen years" (U.N. General Assembly 1989). My sample size consisted of twenty-six children, specifically thirteen males and thirteen females divided into three groups: 1) nine children aged under eight years-old; 2) nine children aged eight to thirteen; and 3) eight children aged fourteen to eighteen.

In order to ensure that the project's methodology and resultant data were "ethically acceptable" (BERA 2011: 5), my fieldwork strictly adhered to the ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). In my capacity as researcher, I did everything in my power to ensure that the participants who took part were protected from any manner of harm at every stage of planning and execution of the project. To this end, the names of all interviewees who participated in my study are anonymised. In line with BERA guidelines, pseudonyms that reflect both gender and ethnic background have been assigned to each participating interviewee. Each participant and their respective guardians were thoroughly briefed about my project and I ensured they were aware of my aims. I also provided my interviewees and their parents with the ongoing option to opt out of the study. Moreover, I ensured that each participant gave their informed consent before conducting any manner of research. It should be noted that this informed consent manifested as oral consent as it, combined with the use of pseudonyms, ensures the anonymity of each participant. Finally, given the small size of the child population in my field area, I have omitted naming the village in order to ensure the identities of my participants remain anonymous, in turn conforming to the guidelines of BERA.

Discussion of Fieldwork Findings

This section outlines the findings of my fieldwork. I have structured it thematically and sequentially based on the six aforementioned conclusions drawn from previous scholarship. When referring to an individual, I always list their age. During the fieldwork, I utilised my given Chinese name Chái Wénfū 柴文夫 and each child referred to me as “Brother Chái” (Chái gēgē 柴哥哥).

Children are Irreligious

Rather unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the twenty-six children I spoke to told me that they were completely irreligious. Wáng Fāng (aged six) explained to me in simple terms that “Nobody in China is religious.”⁶ Only three children did not explicitly say that they were irreligious but this was not because they told me to the contrary; instead, these three children, all aged four, were not aware of the term *zōngjiào*. In one of the cases, another child, Wáng Xiùyīng (six), intervened and told me that her “little friend” (*xiǎo péngyǒu* 小朋友) was not religious. She then explained to the boy what “religion” is by happily using me as an example: “Religion is when you believe in God. Brother Chái is from the UK so that means that he believes in God.”⁷ When I asked her whether everyone from the UK is religious, she replied: “Everyone in the UK is Christian. If you are a Christian that means that you are religious.”⁸ Another child who was unaware of the term *zōngjiào* very politely asked me to wait. I watched as he ran over to his mother and asked her whether or not he is “religious.” His mother found this extremely funny and told him that he is certainly not religious. He then returned and solemnly told me: “No I am not religious.”⁹

One finds that my fieldwork data is totally in line with the typical conclusion reached in Chinese scholarship: Chinese children, like adults, are predominantly irreligious. However, rather than taking this at face value, I am far more inclined to argue that it is a matter of semantics, especially given the subsequent sections of this article. I very much found that the children I spoke to perceived religion as belonging to the realm of “the other.” Wáng Xiùyīng was certainly not alone in telling me that religion is what takes place in foreign countries but not China. There was therefore a disconnect between their own practices and beliefs and the seemingly different practices and beliefs that come with religion. The younger children were quite happy to regard this as a statement of fact. Indeed, when I attempted to get them to explain the difference

⁶Zài zhōngguó, méiyǒu rén xìnyǎng zōngjiào 在中国，没有人信仰宗教。

⁷Zōngjiào jiùshì xìnyǎng shàngdì. Chái gēgē láizì yīngguó, nà zhè yìwèizhe tā xìnyǎng shàngdì 宗教就是信仰上帝。柴哥哥来自英国，那这意味着他信仰上帝。

⁸Měi gè zài yīngguó de rén dōu shì jīdūjiào túdì, rúguó nǐ shì jīdūjiào, zhè yìwèizhe nǐ xìnyǎng zōngjiào 每个在英国的人都是基督教徒弟，如果你是基督教，这意味着你信仰宗教

⁹Bù, wǒ bù xìnyǎng zōngjiào 不，我不信仰宗教。

between what they believed and practiced and what, for example, a Christian might believe and practice, I received very simple explanations. Lǐ Nà (seven) told me: “When we offer to our ancestors, this is not religion. It is simply an offering.”¹⁰ Zhāng Wěi (nine), on the other hand, provided me with an extremely thoughtful personal explanation: “I think the difference is because in religion you need to have faith. A Christian does not know that God is there so they need faith. When we offer to our ancestors, faith is not important.”¹¹

I believe a crucial difference perceived by the younger children can be identified: the term *fèng* 奉 sits at the core of their understanding of what Chinese popular religion is. This term was used liberally by children when explaining their beliefs and practices to me. *Fèng* has several meanings: “to offer,” “to present,” “to esteem,” “to revere,” “to believe,” and “to accept orders.” Usually, children used it in the context of “giving offerings.” Similarly, *jì bài* 祭拜 was often employed. Like *fèng*, *jì bài* means to offer (to one’s ancestors). In contrast, when talking about *zōngjiào*, the term “faith” (*xìnyǎng* 信仰) was commonly used—both “religious faith” (*zōngjiào xōnyǎng* 宗教信仰) and “faith in God” (*xìnyǎng shàngdì* 信仰上帝). I also found that the younger children had learned these views entirely from school and not from home. Liú Yáng (eight), for example, told me that her teacher had explained to her that people in the UK are Christians and believe in God. Herein, one finds a reflection of Fāng’s (2016: i) assertion that in Western societies, the term “faith” is usually only employed in the context of “religious faith,” whereas in Chinese society, “religious faith” is unimportant and people possess only belief in ethics and morals.

Although the older children shared the same irreligious conviction—similarly making the same distinction between *fèng* and faith—they also explained to me that in order to be religious, one has to belong to a “religious order” (*zōngjiào tuán* 宗教团). Wàng Shū (seventeen) summarised this view by explaining:

In order to be religious, you have to dedicate yourself to a religious order. A Christian dedicates himself to a church and a Buddhist dedicates himself to a Buddhist temple. As far as I know, only one person in this whole village is religious. My aunt became a Buddhist when her son died. Everyone else does not belong to a religious order.¹²

¹⁰*Jì bài zǔxiān bùshì zōngjiào xíngwéi, zhìshì fèng éryi* 祭拜祖先不是宗教行为，只是奉而已。

¹¹*Wǒ rènwéi qūbié zàiyú, xìnyǎng zōngjiào xūyào xìnyǎng, jīdū jiàotú bù zhīdào shàngdì shìfǒu cúnzài, suǒyǐ tāmen xūyào xìnyǎng, ér jì bài zǔxiān shì fǒu yǒu xìnyǎng bìng bù chóng yào* 我认为区别在于，信仰宗教需要信仰，基督教徒不知道上帝是否存在，所以他们需要信仰，而祭拜祖先是否有信仰并不重要。

¹²*Xìnyǎng zōngjiào, nǐ bìxū yào zūnxún yīdìng de zōngjiào jiàoguī. Jīdū jiàotú yào qù jiàotáng, fōjiào tú yào qù fōjiào sìmiào. Jiù wǒ suǒ zhī, zhège cūnzi zhīyǒu yīgè rén xìnyǎng zōngjiào. Wǒ āyí zài tā èrzi qùshì hòu xìnyǎng le zōngjiào, qítā rén dōu méiyǒu zūnxún mǒu gè zōngjiào jiàoguī.* 信仰宗教，你必须遵守一定的宗教教规。基督教徒要去教堂，佛教徒要去佛教寺庙。就我所

Filiality is Central to a Child's Morality

The centrality of filiality to a child's morality was, by far, the most difficult strand to research. Regardless of age, each child I spoke to was very keen to explain what they had been taught about filiality but it took me a very long time to ascertain the actual views of children. Instead, what I initially received were textbook responses. All of the twenty-six children, even the youngest, were quick to tell me how important filiality is, how they intend to do well at school to make their guardians happy, and eventually get a good job so that they can care for their guardians in old age. However, it was rather obvious from the outset that I was simply being told what they themselves had been told to believe. I should quickly acknowledge that this does not necessarily mean that the children did not truly believe what they told me. On the contrary, I do not deny for a second that each child truly wished to be a good filial son or daughter. However, I herewith encountered a major problem that often gets overlooked when conducting ethnographic research with children: "social desirability." Children might only give responses that they think the researcher wants to hear or think they should say as opposed to what they truly think (McLeod 2008). Indeed, when I spoke to the children, I commonly received typical responses about what they believe about filiality. Fēng Mián (ten), for example, told me:

I love my parents and I want to make them happy. Many children in China today have become 'little emperors' so I must be diligent and always strive to make my parents happy and proud.¹³

Fēng Mián's statement echoes the vast majority of responses I initially received. It is interesting in its own right that the topic of filiality, far more than any other, yielded a number of responses that almost sounded rehearsed. Needless to say, filiality, as existing academic studies would suggest, is of central importance to both children and adults; indeed, these were the only responses I ever received from younger children.

The most significant moment came when I was speaking to a group of young children (aged four to nine) about filiality. Playing ignorant, I attempted to have them explain it to me. At first, I received a flurry of instant responses to the tune of filiality is all about respecting one's guardians. However, I was very struck by Zhāng Wěi (nine), who offered me a story that he thought would explain it perfectly to me:

There was once a blind mother and a son. They were totally dependent on one another. They were poor and forced to beg. One day, when they were both very hungry, the child stole some

知，这个村子只有一个人信仰宗教。我阿姨在她儿子去世后信仰了宗教，其他人没有遵循某个宗教教规。

¹³*Wǒ ài wǒ de fùmǔ, wǒ xiǎng ràng tāmen gāoxìng. Xiànzài zhōngguó hěnduō háizi dōu shì "xiǎo huángdì", suǒyǐ wǒ bìxū qínfèn nǚlì, zōng shì ràng fùmǔ gāndào gāoxìng hé zìhào.* 我爱我的父母，我想让他们高兴。现在中国很多孩子都是“小皇帝”，所以我必须勤奋努力，总是让父母感到高兴和自豪。

food and gave it to his mother. His mother was so pleased but she did not ask where the food had come from. The child kept stealing to feed his mother. Every day he would bring her food and she would always be happy with him. However, one day, the son was caught by the police. He was taken before a judge. The boy asked if he could see his mother. When the mother was told what was going on, she instantly knew her own mistake and killed herself. The son was then beheaded.¹⁴

As Zhāng Wěi was telling this story, it quickly became apparent that the entire room had fallen silent and even the adults present were listening intently to him. There was a great commotion once he had finished—his parents were especially delighted. Apparently this was not a story that they had told him; indeed, it was not a story anyone in the village was aware of. He told me that he had read the story in a book from his school library. I believe that this instance is particularly noteworthy for two reasons. First, it is a clear example of a child demonstrating an excellent understanding of filiality—he was aware, and even told me, that filiality is not a one way relationship. Children have to show their guardians thoughtful obedience while the adults have an obligation to care for and teach the child. Therefore, one could argue that filiality is not simply something children are taught and expected to adhere to, but rather something that they truly *understand*. Second, and more interestingly, I believe that here one finds an example of a child who is actively seeking out religious understanding, personally grappling with concepts and coming to well thought out conclusions. Whereas aforementioned scholarship is quick to enumerate how children should be taught filiality, what strikes me in this instance is that Zhāng Wěi clearly had his own personal desire to understand it himself as opposed to simply being taught and shown how to practice (as previous scholarship suggests). Granted, this is only one child, and it should be acknowledged that Zhāng Wěi struck me as a particularly gifted student. I would not, therefore, draw any sweeping conclusion from this observation. However, it is certainly significant that such an example exists in the first place.

This search for understanding amongst the younger children was not limited to Zhāng Wěi. Another group of young children (aged four to eight) similarly explained to me what filiality is. During this conversation, I noticed that they accidentally made a connection to filiality that had never been pointed out to them before. This happened

¹⁴Cóngqián yǒu gè máng rén mùqīn hé tā de érzi. Tāmen xiāngyīwéimìng. Tāmen fēicháng pínqióng, zhǐ néng qǐtāo wéi shēng. Yǒu yītiān tāmen dōu tài èle, érzi tōule yīxiē shíwù gěi mùqīn, mùqīn hěn gāoxìng, dàn méiyǒu wèn shíwù de lái yóu. Érzi biàn yīzhí tōu lái shíwù gěi mùqīn chōngjī. Měitiān tā dūhuì dài lái shíwù, mùqīn wèi cǐ hěn gāoxìng. Zhīdào yǒu yītiān, érzi bèi jǐngchá zhuā zhùle, tā bèi dài dào fǎguān miànqián, tā wèn shìfǒu kěyǐ jiàn mùqīn yīmiàn. Dāng mùqīn zhīdào fāshēng de yīqiè hòu, tā lǐmǎ yìshí dào le zìjǐ de cuòwù bìng zìshāle. Érzi yě bèi zhǎnshǒule. 从前有个盲人母亲和她的儿子。他们相依为命。他们非常贫穷，只能乞讨维生。有一天他们都太饿了，儿子偷了一些食物给母亲，母亲很高兴，但没有问食物的来由。儿子便一直偷来食物给母亲充饥。每天他都会带来食物，母亲为此很高兴。直到有一天，儿子被警察抓住了，他被带到法官面前，他问是否可以见母亲一面。当母亲知道发生的一切后，她立马意识到了自己的错误并自杀了。儿子也被斩首了。

when they were telling me that their guardians do so much for them. Zhǐ Ruò (four) told me that her parents “look after me, buy things for me, make me food, keep me safe, teach me things, talk to me...”¹⁵ The children then began excitedly talking about all of the things that their guardians have given them in the past. One child then told me that it was nearly Spring Festival (*chūnjié* 春节) which means that all of the children would soon receive Red Packages (*hóngbāo* 红包). When I asked them to tell me what a Red Package is, one girl solemnly told me that “our parents love us so much that they give us Red Package money every Spring Festival.”¹⁶ Although none of them spoke of the sense of thrift that Red Packages are supposed to instil (Péng 2019), I was impressed that they were able to forge a clear connection between filiality and the practice of giving and receiving Red Packages.

The older children also eventually provided some fascinating insights into filiality. Initially, like the younger children, they gave me only textbook explanations. However, I eventually had a number of very interesting conversations. Of particular note was that three individual children, one aged sixteen and two aged seventeen, drew parallels between filiality and the concept of “face” (*miànzi* 面子) on different occasions. To my knowledge, these children had not spoken to one another about this correlation, suggesting this was a thought process that all three experienced individually. The concept of “face” is a crucial component of Chinese society. It essentially constitutes the ability to “feel the hurt that comes from public humiliation, and the desire to protect oneself [and by extension one’s family] from public humiliation” (Schoenhals 2015: 67). The eldest of the three told me that “face is basically the most important thing in this whole country. As sons and daughters, we need to be filial because this is the best and easiest way of keeping face.”¹⁷ Here, one finds another example of children successfully grappling with their own private beliefs: contrary to the research that holds that filiality is of utmost importance to children and they should simply be taught it, these children have gone a step further and placed the concept of filiality within their own personal belief systems. Crucially, I believe that by associating filiality with *miànzi*, one herein finds evidence of teenagers perceiving filiality in a far more nuanced manner than simply regarding it as respecting parents. Scholars have made this association before—Zhang (2016), for example, argues that filiality and *miànzi* are separate values that are intrinsically linked—but children are typically not believed to ponder such matters.

¹⁵Zhàogù wǒ, gěi wǒ mǎi dōngxī, gěi wǒ zuò fàn, bǎohù wǒ, jiàoyù wǒ, hé wǒ shuōhuà. 照顾我，给我买东西，给我做饭，保护我，教育我，和我说话。

¹⁶Wǒmen de fùmǔ tèbié ài wǒmen, tāmen měinián chūnjié dūhuì gěi wǒmen hóngbāo. 我们的父母特别爱我们，他们每年春节都会给我们红包。

¹⁷Miànzi, zài zhège guójiā shì zuì zhòngyào de shì. Suǒ wéi èrnǚ, wǒmen yào xiàoshùn, yīnwèi zhè shì zuì hǎo yěshì zuì jiǎndān de wéichí miànzi de fāngshì. 面子，在这个国家是最重要的事。所为儿女，我们要孝顺，因为这是最好也是最简单的维持面子的方式。

Children are Shown Religion Rather than Taught about It, and the Issue of Belief is Unimportant

My fieldwork findings demonstrate that children are shown religion rather than taught about it. I very much found it to be the case that children are not formally or informally taught about the beliefs and practices that they and their families engage in. Instead they are shown how to practice. I saw several occasions of parents carefully showing their children how to *bài*, sometimes even arranging the child's body in the proper positions by, for example, making him or her prostrate. I did not, however, find evidence that children do not take the practice seriously. Naturally, I did witness a number of occasions of young children getting restless during a longer *bài* session at the local temple, as well as the odd occasion of a teenager rolling his or her eyes at the prospect of prostrating again. However, for the most part, it seemed as though children take the various *bài* practices seriously.

More often than not, the younger children would explain *bài* practices to me in an extremely solemn manner. The most telling example came during Spring Festival. Despite being obviously excited, I was surprised at the extent to which children seriously engaged with their various *bài* obligations. The ritual cleaning of homes was done with surprising vigour and the money offerings to ancestors were treated with marked respect. However, the most revealing moment occurred after the ancestral offerings when everyone was enjoying food. In four separate households, I witnessed the same phenomenon: once the adults became inebriated or fell asleep, it was the children, regardless of age, who became the new hosts. Not only did their entire manner towards me change (going from very friendly to serious, constantly asking, for example, if I had enough food), but they also even made sure that the *bài* obligations were sufficiently taken care of. Children would go into the ancestor room (the main room of the household that held the main ancestor shrine, usually a photo of deceased grandparents) to make sure that their ancestors had enough food. Although the adults had made sure that the ancestors did indeed have enough food prior to the meal, what I found especially striking was that once the children felt as though they were in charge, they all felt the need to check on their ancestors. One herein finds an example of children taking their practice extremely seriously, in stark contrast to the academic assumption that they do not.

In contrast to the aforementioned conclusion from existing scholarship that belief is unimportant, my fieldwork findings suggest that belief is—certainly in some cases—very important. However, I believe that I witnessed something of a divide: belief is of enormous importance to some young children, but once a child becomes a teenager they adopt the more classical view of *bài* in which belief is unimportant. I found that belief in ancestors is of particular importance to young children. Twelve children aged four to ten had all established personal relationships with their ancestors which manifested in two very different ways. The first was completely encouraged by

their guardians. Each of the twelve children told me that they were always afraid whenever they visited the burial mounds of their ancestors or their ancestors were invited into their homes. Yǔ Yān (eight) told me:

I am always afraid when I know that my ancestors are watching. I make sure that I am very good and do not do anything cheeky. I really do not want my ancestors to see this because they will surely punish me!¹⁸

The belief that one has to be on one's best behaviour whenever an ancestor is present was extremely prevalent among the young children. Some, especially the very young, clearly believed that they were constantly being watched by their ancestors; boys, worried that they would unwittingly splash an unseen ancestor or god, even giving warnings before they urinated. The guardians tended to delight in this and actively encouraged this belief. Herein, the issue of belief is very important to the children: they actively believed that they needed to be on their best behaviour if they felt themselves to be under the watchful eyes of their ancestors. To them, this belief was very important and manifested in their explanations to me but also, more importantly, in the noticeable change in their manner. Moreover, this example provides a contrast to Zhèng's (2013: 23) argument that Western children are more likely to behave out of fear of punishment from God. Although children fear punishment from ancestors in this case, one still finds a clear example of children opting to be on their best behaviour because of the belief that misbehaving will result in punishment from a higher power.

To my knowledge, the second approach was not encouraged by guardians. Indeed, in most cases, the guardians were unaware that their children were acting thus. The twelve younger children all informed me that they speak to their ancestors on different occasions. This dialogue would take many forms. For instance, a child would sometimes simply tell an ancestor what they had done that day, such as what they had done in school. The children might also go to their ancestors for help. During my stay, one child aged five lost her favourite pink ribbon. She therefore secretly asked her ancestors for help. Regardless of reason, I found that these young children all actively and frequently engaged in the unique practice of talking to their ancestors. Moreover, this was something that they would occasionally discuss amongst themselves. Indeed, it was from the suggestion of another child that the girl who lost her ribbon sought out the help of her ancestors. When guardians were aware of this practice,¹⁹ they neither encouraged nor discouraged the children. When I pressed a mother and father about this, the mother laughed and told me "I think it is cute. I doubt she will be doing it

¹⁸*Měi cì wǒ xiǎngdào wǒ de zǔxiān zài kànzhe wǒ, wǒ dōu hěn hàipà. Wǒ yào quèbǎo wǒ hěn yōuxiù, biùyào tiáopí. Wǒ zhēn de hěn bùxiǎng ràng wǒ zǔxiān kàn dào zhège, yīnwèi tāmen yīdìng huì chéngfǎ wǒ de.* 每次我想到我的祖先在看着我，我都很害怕。我要确保我很优秀，不要调皮。我真的很不想让我祖先看到这个，因为他们一定会惩罚我的。

¹⁹ To my knowledge, four guardians were aware that their children did this.

when she is older but for now, as long as she is doing well in school, I do not see a problem with her pretending to talk to her ancestors.”²⁰

Any agreement amongst adults as to whether the children are actually conversing with their ancestors is, I believe, besides the point. What is significant is that here one finds an example of children creating their own lived religion—a religion that finds its origins in Chinese popular religion but takes on a new, uniquely child-oriented form. Indeed, I believe that this finding reflects that of Míáo (2016: 102) who concluded that children create their own world when conducting patriotic rituals that reflects but is separate from the world of adults and is suitable for their own growth. The most potent example is Liú Yáng (eight) who had gone as far as to create her own little ancestral shrine in her bedroom. Her father had given her a picture of her late great grandmother and great grandfather. These photos were placed in her room and she would bring them some of her food every day as well as present the photos with the work she had done at school. I noticed that a handful of school assignments were displayed beside the photos. When I asked her about this, she told me “these are the pieces of work that I have done that my ancestors are especially proud of.”²¹ Similarly, Fēi Hóng (9) shared a practice that he did every day in secret. A year ago, his older brother had tragically passed away. When he confided in me, he was obviously extremely distressed about the “fact” (*shìshì* 事实) that his brother could never become an ancestor but had instead become a ghost (*guǐ* 鬼). He was also extremely conscious about the taboo nature of what he was telling me—he constantly implored me not to tell his parents. He would sneak some of his dinner every day and then secretly leave it outside for his brother.

Once again, one finds an example of a child taking the building blocks of popular Chinese religion and constructing his own personal belief and practice. Needless to say, belief was extremely important to these children in contrast to the assertions of previous scholarship. Moreover, these findings certainly reflect Yú, Yú, and Sū’s (2019: 31) argument that a child’s parents shape their perception of death and belief in an afterlife. However, I believe that the true significance lies in the difference. Yú, Yú, and Sū (2019: 31) state that children differ from adults in their understanding of the afterlife. In contrast to adults, children tend to think that emotions, desires, and cognitive functions still exist after death—a conclusion that I do not seek to dispute. I believe, however, that my findings suggest an even greater difference: children use what they have learned from adults to construct a lived religion that is wholly separate and unique.

²⁰*Wǒ juéde zhè hěn kě'ài. Wǒ bù quèdìng tā zhǎng dà hòu hái huì bù huì zhèyàng zuò, dàn zhìshǎo xiànzài, zhīyào tā zài xuéxiào biāoxiàn bùcuò, wǒ bù juéde tā jiǎzhuāng hé zǔxiān shuōhuà yǒu shé me wèntí.* 我觉得这很可爱。我不确定她长大后还会不会这样做，但至少现在，只要她在学校表现不错，我不觉得她假装和祖先说话有什么问题。

²¹*Zhèxiē shì wǒ ràng wǒ de zǔxiān tèbié zìhào de zuòpǐn.* 这些是我让我的祖先特别自豪的作品。

Interestingly, this child-oriented lived religion seemed to fade during the teenage years. The older children seemed to adopt the more classical view of lived Chinese popular religion. Teenagers would still very much go through the motions, conducting *bài* where necessary, but whenever I asked them about belief, they passed it off. Whereas the younger children would excitedly tell me that Jiùtiān Shèngmǔ 九天圣母—the main goddess of the local temple—had made her vessel (*niǎn* 攀) levitate in the air for everyone to see, the older children would look at the occasion with a good degree of scepticism. That is not to say that they did not believe in Jiùtiān Shèngmǔ—many told me that they were very happy to offer to her in the hopes of achieving success at school—but the belief was secondary and even unimportant. Like Peng (2020: xxiii) argues, the older children viewed *bài* as simply something one does.

Finally, while many of the children learned to *bài* from their mothers (fourteen out of twenty-six), the claim that all children learn solely from their mothers or even that they predominantly learn from their mothers is too great a claim. I found that children were taught to *bài* from their primary caregiver—whether the mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle, or even, in one case, a sibling.

Only Boys are Considered Full Beings

I was extremely careful when researching the conclusion that only boys are considered full beings. I chose never to touch directly upon the subject (except for one occasion) as I believe that there was too much potential to cause harm to my interviewees. The data I shall now draw upon stems from observations as well as a handful of conversations where the subject happened to be brought up by my interviewees.

It was exceedingly apparent that sons were greatly favoured in the village—to the extent that a large room in the local temple was dedicated to a large statue of Guānyīn 观音 surrounded by multiple naked baby boys. Hopeful parents would frequent this room and *bài* in the hopes of conceiving a son, sometimes even in the company of their daughters. However, I saw no evidence that girls were not considered full beings. Moreover, I certainly saw no evidence of girls being treated as outsiders. As young children, both sons and daughters were equally involved in all manifestations of *bài* and neither seemed to be favoured. This changed, however, once the girls started menstruating. I learned this when a young teenager (fourteen) told me that she was not allowed to *bài* or even enter the temple or ancestral grounds due to the fact that she was menstruating at that time. While this implies an imbalance in religious freedom, it does not suggest that girls are not full beings.

Although this subject was not touched upon with the younger children, I did gain some valuable insights from some of the older children. Niàn Zhēn (sixteen), told me that “men and women have very different roles. Boys have to continue looking after

their parents and girls have to change families. Both are equally important.”²² Similarly, Ying Yuè (seventeen), stated that “China is now a modern country. Filiality is not the same thing anymore. When I am older and I get married, I will still send money to my parents.”²³ Ying Yuè was the only child I spoke to directly about the notion of full personhood. I explained to her that some scholars have argued that girls can never become full people. Ying Yuè found this rather amusing, telling me:

If it were impossible for me to become a full person then why do my parents care so much about my grades in school? Boys are certainly different. I know they have a different role in life. But as people, we are all equal.²⁴

While I have limited data compared to the previous conclusions, I nevertheless believe that it does not fit with the assumption that it is impossible for girls to achieve full personhood. On the contrary, what I observed was a village in which boys were favoured but both genders were regarded as equal (albeit with different roles in life).

Children are Unstable

During my time in the village, I saw plenty of evidence to support the conclusion that children are unstable. On my second day, Zhǐ Ruò (four) told me that she had experienced a really bad morning because she was scared by a dog. She then said that her mother had taken her to the temple and everything was now in order. All twenty-six children reported having their soul frightened away at some stage in their lives. However, I believe it is a slight oversimplification to state that losing and calling back one’s soul are minor issues. While the overwhelming majority of occurrences were perceived as minor, one child particularly stood out. Yǔ Yān (eight) had a tendency to run off and play in the local hills which were believed to be home to several local ghosts. Her family were extremely troubled by this; every time she returned, they would take her hurriedly to the temple to call her soul back. When I spoke to her mother about this, she told me:

²²*Nánrén hé nǚrén yǒu bùtóng de juésè. Nánshēng yào jìxù zhàokàn tāmen de fùmǔ, nǚshēng yào zhù jìn líng yīgè jiātíng, liáng zhě dōu tóngyàng zhòngyào.* 男人和女人有不同的角色。男生要继续照看他们的父母，女生要住进另一个家庭，两者都同样重要。

²³*Zhōngguó xiànzài shìgè xiàndài guójiā. Xiào de yìyì yǐjīng bùtóng yǐwǎng. Wǒ zhǎng dà jiéhūn hòu, yījiù kuài gěi jiālǐ jì qián.* 中国现在是个现代国家。孝的意义已经不同以往了。我长大结婚后，依旧会给家里寄钱。

²⁴*Rúguǒ wǒ bù kěnéng chéngwéi yīgè wánzhěng de rén, wǒ de fùmǔ wèishéme hái nàme guānxīn wǒ zài xuéxiào de chéngjī? Nánshēngmen dāngrán bù yīyàng, wǒ zhīdào tāmen zài shēnghuó zhòng yào chéngdān bù yīyàng de rènwù, dàn zuòwéi rén, wǒmen shì píngděng de.* 如果我不可能成为一个完整的人，我的父母为什么还那么关心我在学校的成绩？男生们当然不一样，我知道他们在生活中要承担不一样的任务，但作为人，我们是平等的。

We are extremely worried by her behaviour and there does not seem to be anything we can do to stop her. I am so scared that one day she will be up in the hills and her soul will be lost forever.²⁵

Although this is only one example, one herein finds an argument to suggest that losing one's soul is regarded as minor for the most part, but it becomes more serious if it develops into a recurring problem.

All of the children I spoke to, including Yǔ Yān, were extremely nonchalant about the subject. None of them regarded it as a major occurrence (even if many reported constant crying before they had their soul returned to them), and they seemed genuinely happy to trust that their guardians would be able to handle the situation if their soul became lost again.

Funerals are a Point of Academic Contention

Due to the scope of this study, I certainly cannot offer anything remotely conclusive as to whether funerals are a point of academic contention. I can, however, report that the issue of children and funerals is rather nuanced. For the most part, I am inclined to agree with Peng (2020: 108). The majority of the children I spoke to told me that they had attended the same funeral a few months ago and said that their guardians seemed to encourage their attendance. However, this was not the case with Yǔ Yān who told me that she had been told very sternly that she was not allowed to attend the particular funeral. She was unable to tell me why this had been the case. It was her father that explained the reason to me: “We are all very worried that [she] would have been in great danger if she had attended.”²⁶ It was thus the case that Yǔ Yān was perceived to be particularly at risk since she constantly lost her soul. Her parents believed that if she had attended the funeral, an event that particularly attracts ghosts, her soul would have been in peril of being spirited away. It therefore seems to be the case that children, for the most part, are encouraged to attend funerals, but will be forbidden in exceptional circumstances.

Although it does not relate to the aforementioned academic debate about funerals, I think that a conversation I had with Rú Shì (fifteen) is worthy of mention. She told me that she had attended the funeral of her grandfather who died when she was six years old. Since she had been doing particularly well at school at the time, she was gifted her grandfather's calligraphy brush during the ceremony. She explained that this was a great honour and the brush would ensure academic success for as long as

²⁵ *Wōmen fēicháng dānxīn tā de xíngwéi, dàn sìhū wōmen méiyǒu bànfǎ qù zǔzhǐ tā. Wǒ hěn hàipà yǒu yītiān, tā huì zài shāndǐng shàng, tā de línghún huì yǒngyuǎn diūle.* 我们非常担心她的行为，但似乎我们没有办法去阻止她。我很害怕有一天，她会在山顶上，她的灵魂会永远丢了。

²⁶ *Wōmen dōu hěn dānxīn, rúguǒ tā chūxié de huà, [tā] huì yù dào hěn dà de wéixiǎn.* 我们都很担心，如果她出席了的话，[她]会遇到很大的危险。

she remains diligent in her studies and *bài*. This serves as an example that reflects similar observations made by both Naquin (1988) and Peng (2020) about the potential to acquire auspicious items during a funeral that would “help children to lead charmed lives” (Peng 2020: 109). Rú Shì certainly placed enormous value on her brush and proudly told me that it was the sole reason she was still at the top of her class at school.

Conclusion

As previously stated, I am acutely aware of the scale of this fieldwork project: the sample was comparatively small and my time in the village was limited. However, the intent of this article was never to offer any broad conclusions about lived childhood religion in the PRC. Instead, this article provides an outline of pertinent scholarship principally from the PRC, and grants an intimate insight into how children in rural China construct and practice their own form of lived religion by means of ethnographic fieldwork. By doing so, I have challenged some existing scholarly assumptions.

This article shows that children, contrary to the conclusions of most scholars, are more than capable of practicing and experiencing their own lived religion. Most importantly, I show that children do not simply mirror their elders; instead, they grapple with religious ideas and practices that culminate in a unique (to children) lived religion. In contrast to Stafford’s (1995) assertion, they do more than simply go through the motions whenever their guardians make them *bài*. Instead, they actively carry out their own *bài*. Most strikingly, this *bài* has obviously been informed by, but is nevertheless different to, the *bài* of adults. Similarly, in contrast to Peng’s (2020) argument that belief is unimportant to children in the PRC, it is extremely important to some children. This study shows that belief can deeply impact a child’s behaviour and emotions. Furthermore, rather than finding evidence for Gé’s (2015) argument that children in the PRC possess non-religious “moral ethics,” this study demonstrates that children are capable of possessing unique lived religious beliefs that manifest in original practice. In short, this article reveals the existence of a unique form of lived childhood religion that includes an often personal relationship—one that lies in contrast to the comparatively distant relationship of adults—with ancestors and dedicated *bài*. Unlike Hsu (1948), Johnson (1996), and Stafford (1995), all of whom assert that children in the PRC do not typically take religious practice seriously, and Peng’s (2020) argument that belief is unimportant, this article demonstrates that children are perfectly capable of taking their own lived religious practice and belief extremely seriously. Moreover, this lived religion seems to be unique to children and fades away during the teenage years.

At the very least, I hope that this article has made clear that childhood lived religion in China deserves a prominent place in the ethnographic study of Chinese religion. I hope that this article will, at least in some small way, add to what will perhaps become an ever growing academic field.

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GLOSSARY

ài	爱	love
bài	拜	to pray, to pay respect, to worship, to visit, to salute

<i>bào</i>	報	to report, to announce, to inform, to respond, to repay, to retaliate, to retribute
Běijīng	北京	the city of Běijīng
Chái gēgē	柴哥哥	Brother Chái (the name each child referred to)
Chái Wénfū	柴文夫	my given Chinese name
<i>chūnjié</i>	春節	Spring Festival
<i>fén</i>	坟	grave, tomb, burial ground
<i>fèng</i>	奉	to offer, to present, to esteem, to revere, to believe, to accept orders
<i>fèngxiàn</i>	奉献	devotion
<i>Gānsù</i>	甘肃	a province located in Northwest China
Guānyīn	观音	a translation from the Sanskrit Avalokiteśvara; a female bodhisattva typically associated with compassion
<i>hànrén</i>	汉人	Hàn people; the largest ethnic group in the People's Republic of China
<i>hóngbāo</i>	红包	"red package;" these small red envelopes are typically filled with money and given to children during festivals
<i>jìbài</i>	祭拜	to offer (to one's ancestors)
<i>jiǔtiān shèngmǔ</i>	九天圣母	the primary goddess of this study's village
Lánzhōu	兰州	the capital of Gānsù province
<i>lǎo</i>	老	elder
<i>línghún</i>	灵魂	soul and spirit
<i>lúnlǐ dàodé</i>	伦理道德	moral ethics
Mèngzǐ	孟子	a Warring States Confucian philosopher who believed in the innate goodness of humans
<i>mián</i>	宀	roof
<i>miànzi</i>	面子	face (as in "losing face"), honour, reputation, self-respect, feelings
<i>niǎn</i>	辇	vessel, carriage
<i>píngděng</i>	平等	equality
<i>shì</i>	示	to show, to reveal, to report
<i>shíshì</i>	实事	fact
<i>wàiguó rén</i>	外国人	foreigner
<i>wén</i>	文	language, culture, writing, formal
<i>xiào</i>	孝	filiality
<i>xiǎo huángdì</i>	小皇帝	"little emperors"; children who are spoiled by their guardians
<i>xiǎo núli</i>	小奴隶	"little slave"; a child who is blindly authoritarian.
<i>xiǎo pingyǒu</i>	小朋友	little friend
<i>xìng</i>	性	human nature
<i>xìnyǎng</i>	信仰	faith
<i>xìnyǎng shàngdì</i>	信仰上帝	faith in God

Xúnzǐ	荀子	a Warring States Confucian scholar who believed that human nature is in- herently bad
<i>zhēn ài shēngmìng</i>	珍爱生命	cherish life
<i>zǐ</i>	子	son, child
<i>zōngjiào</i>	宗教	religion
<i>zōngjiào tuán</i>	宗教团	religious order
<i>zōngjiào xōnyáng</i>	宗教信仰	religious faith