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Regret of spring: The child according to Feng Zikai

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REGRET OF SPRING:
THE CHILD ACCORDING TO FENG ZIKAI

MARIE LAUREILLARD

My children, it's your energy that most infatuates me. I discover this anew many times a day! I want you to know it. The pity of it is that by the time you are old enough to understand what I am saying, you will be bereft of the ability to enthral me.¹

Feng Zikai 豐子愷 (1898–1975) tried hard to record childhood, this transient phase of life, through the observation of his own children. This famous Chinese cartoonist and essayist of the Chinese republican period worshipped family life that he celebrated throughout his essays in a way which could be reminiscent of the writer of the Qing dynasty Shen Fu 沈復 (1763–1825). He tirelessly made their portrait in his cartoons as well as in his essays and introduced them from the beginning as one of his favourite themes, earning the nickname of “artist of children”. As soon as in the twenties, his daughter Bao 寶 (Chenbao 陳寶), his adopted niece Ruanruan 軟軟, and his son Zhanzhan 瞻瞻 (Huazhan 華瞻), respectively born in 1920, 1922, and 1924, became the heroes of his cartoons. The cartoons of Feng Zikai were painted with a brush and black ink on a sheet of paper whose size approximatively was 23.7–25 cm x 16.7–17.3 cm. They were designed in order to be reproduced by lithographic printing.

“Four things have recently filled my heart: divinities and stars in the sky, art and children here below”,² he wrote in 1928. He has painted them over and over again and described with many details in numerous texts, among which “To My Children” (“Gei wode haizimen” 給我的孩子們, 1926), “What Children Reveal” (“Cong haizi dedao de qishi” 從孩子得到的啟示, 1927), “The Diary of Huazhan” (“Huazhan de riji” 華瞻的日記, 1927), “My Children” (“Ernü” 兒女, 1928), “The Life of a Father” (“Zuo fuqin” 做父親, 1933), “Children’s Games” (“Er Xi” 兒戲, 1932), and many others. The admiration of Feng Zikai for children has often been emphasized, but what was the conceptual basis of such a fondness, how was it connected with his own aesthetics and with his vision of the world?

It is obvious that Feng Zikai has followed the insistence on a necessary emancipation of children which appeared by the end of the New Culture period (*Xin wenhua yundong* 新文化運動, 1915–1921). A tide of feelings and arguments against filial up-

1 “To My Children” (Feng Zikai 1926).

2 “My Children” (Feng Zikai 1928).

brining and authoritarian education has then swept through China. In 1905, the abolition of the Confucian based examination system already signaled official recognition of the fact that traditional education was no longer able to meet the needs of the modernising state. In 1919–1920, the American educational reformer John Dewey expounded his child-centered educational philosophy in a series of lectures delivered in China. He urged devoting attention to the child instead of the subject matter. In 1920, Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967), in an essay called “Children’s Literature”, wrote that children were formerly not understood, treated as miniature adults to be nurtured by the classics, or ignored as incomplete small people: he stressed the urgency to see them as complete individuals with their own inner and outer life. He and his brother Lu Xun 魯迅 (pen name of Zhou Shuren 周樹人, 1881–1936) insisted that the world of children was completely different from that of adults.³

Zhou Zuoren, but also Bing Xin 冰心 (1900–1999), Ye Shengtao 葉聖陶 (1894–1988), or Wang Tongzhao 王統照 (1897–1957) tried their hand at children’s literature, according to a new trend Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) had noticed as early as in the twenties: “A new trend which recommends to develop the children’s literature has recently arisen: tales, legends, stories.”⁴ Thus, “in the history of China, the child was never such a central figure as on the literary scene as around the *time* of the *May Fourth* Movement. Discussions on this topic were published in journals and collections of articles came out. (...) It was an unprecedented phenomenon.”⁵

Feng Zikai took part to this new development of the children’s literature as illustrator, and even, much later, as author, when he wrote himself several tales collected in *The Teacher Sees a Ghost* (*Boshi jian gui* 博士見鬼, 1948), which were intended to shape an ideal and to develop the morality of young readers. He illustrated a collection of Ye Shengtao’s fairy tales, *The Statue of an Ancient Hero* (*Gudai yingxiong de shixiang* 古代英雄的石像, 1931), as well as *Miscellaneous Poems about Childhood* (*Ertong zashishi* 兒童雜事詩) of Zhou Zuoren (1950), inspired by Edward Lear’s (1812–1888) *Book of Nonsense* and Chinese or foreign tales like Lewis Carroll’s (1832–1898) *Alice in Wonderland*.⁶

Feng Zikai was undoubtedly influenced by this discovery of childhood, in sharp contrast with traditional literature and art, which emphasised the role of future adults

3 Farquhar 1999, 26–27, 41.

4 Hu Shi, “Ertong wenxue de jiazhi” 兒童文學的價值 (The Value of children’s literature), quoted in Qian Liqun 1991, 147.

5 Qian Liqun 1991, 147–148.

6 The first translation of *Alice in Wonderland* into Chinese was published 1922 by Zhao Yuanren 趙元任 (1892–1982).

of children and their relationship to adult protagonists:⁷ on the contrary, childhood was in his eyes a significant stage of human development. As early as in the 1920s, his cartoons, which earned him the praise of a large readership of the journals or collections where they were published, showed that he considered children as complete individuals. As a witness of the everyday life of his own children, he carefully drew in a few brushstrokes and described in his writings the scenes that deployed themselves before him, looking for a way to translate his feelings as faithfully and spontaneously as possible. He makes no secret of the love and the admiration he feels for his children: “My children, like young swallows, are so dear to me and have such a place in my heart as divinities, stars or art”, he stated in his essay “My Children” (1928). He detects in them unrivalled qualities: “In this world, children have the healthiest spirit. They are the only ones who can make out the true face of things and have a complete vision of them.”

But not all his fellows have the same idealised vision of childhood. The comparison of “My children” with an essay of the same title de Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 (1898–1948) is clarifying. Both published in the same issue published Oct. 10, 1928, of the *Short Story Monthly* (*Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報) by Ye Shengtao, these essays were written by two colleagues, teachers and members of the group of writers of the Baima Lake, each of them being a thirty-year-old father of five children. Both having similar concerns express with sincerity their feelings towards their children, their attachment to them, and their responsibility for their education. A close reading reveals a radical difference in tone and approach. Thus, Zhu Ziqing, in spite of his affection for them, describes the constant hassle and annoyance caused by his children, and the chaotic and noisy atmosphere of whim and quarrel which causes him to despair.

Every day lunch and dinner are like the daily tides. First the kids come snooping around the kitchen and the dining room by turns, urging my wife or me to issue the order to put out the meal! Hurried and chaotic footsteps mixed with laughter and shouting come at us in waves until the order is issued. One after another they go running and yelling to transmit the order to the servants in the kitchen, then immediately return to fight over seats. (...) But then you want a big bowl and he wants a little bowl, you said red chopsticks are best, and he says black. This one wants rice, that one wants porridge, tea here, soup there, fish and meat; I want tofu, I want radishes; you say he's got more to eat, he says you got the choicest morsels. (...) After we finish, they climb off their stools, and the rice grains on the table, the sauces, bones, and dregs, not to mention the crisscrossed chopsticks and slanted spoons, look like a model for a colorful map.⁸

7 Pease 1995, 287.

8 Laughlin 2008, 99.

Feng Zikai also depicts the confusion caused by his young children in the family environment, but unlike Zhu Ziqing, he casts an amused eye on them, whereas the latter confessed he was so bothered that he had suicidal thoughts. Feng Zikai, while mentioning as well turbulent scenes, is not startled at all, far from it. Ashamed of his own intolerance and complaint, struck by remorse and accusing himself of egoism, Zhu Ziqing questions about the best way to bring up children, amazed by the placid, patient and tender attitude of his colleague.

Feng Zikai again and again expresses the idea that children are pure and innocent beings. He is sorry to see children growing, gradually losing their spontaneity et becoming victims of a social corrupt order. Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) whom he may have read, he deplors the unavoidable loss of their essential nature in contact with society.⁹ Rousseau himself advocated an education based on a thorough knowledge of the child's nature. In his preface to the *Émile* (1762), he already wrote about the educators of his time: “They are *always looking* for the *man* in the *child* without considering what he is before he becomes a *man*”. In 19th-century Europe and America, where the profound social disruptions prompted a significant increase in the conscience of childhood, the children were seen by romantic and realist writers as the victims of society. Childhood got an enorm popularity in British or French literature: for Charles Dickens, children were a model of virtuous conduct.¹⁰ Lu Xun, who argued for the emancipation of children, translated between 1919 and 1927 some fairytales, whose central theme was the innocent child as one with nature, according to European romantic notions. He contrasted the prison of Chinese orthodoxy with a natural world of childhood delight.¹¹

Western literature strongly inspired Chinese writers like Bing Xin, who emphasised children's unaffected innocence in her literary works with her “philosophy of love” of Christian inspiration. She celebrated childhood as a holy symbol, a great muse: “Tens of thousands of angels / Are startling to extol a child / A child! / A tiny body / Holds a huge soul”.¹² In her *Letters to Young Readers* (*Ji xiao duzhe* 寄小讀者), a collection of letters Bing Xin wrote between 1923 and 1926 while studying in the United States to her child readers as “little friends”, she contrasts innocent children with corrupt adults. Her lyrical prose focuses on life's trivialities, and creates a happy and innocent world far from the harsh reality in China.¹³

9 *Émile* had been translated into Chinese in 1901.

10 Pease 1995, 286.

11 Farquhar 1999, 41.

12 Bi and Fang 2013, 59.

13 Xu 2013, 72.

The same celebration of the purity and innocence of children can be found in the essay “To My Children” (1926) of Feng Zikai, which is a hymn to childhood. His three children, Bao, Ruanruan, and Zhanzhan, grab his attention by every detail of their deeds and actions: Zhanzhan, the youngest, is described like someone “who is focused on the task at hand, investing all his energy in it”. The artist has a special regard for him, because of his sincere, natural, and enthusiastic attitude. He enjoys the fanciful wishes of his son, who would like to stop a train or to catch the moon. Zhanzhan seems to believe that the constraints of reality are set by his parents. Feng Zikai has also fun imagining the feelings of his two other children when they are disturbed in their games for reasons beyond their control.

Several of his cartoons can be compared with the essay “To My Children”. One of them matches a scene of the essay, when a terracotta figurine breaks on the ground. On this picture, entitled “Broken Heart” (1927), including a caption in English, the figurine fractured into several pieces can be seen at the bottom (Fig. 1).

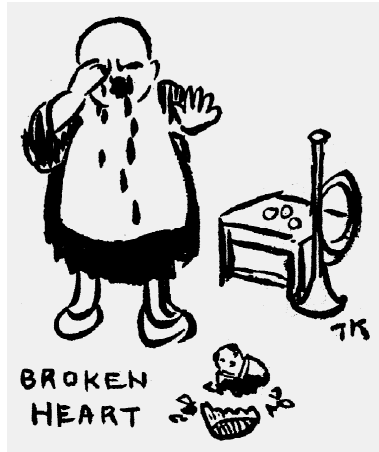


Fig. 1. “Broken Heart” (1927, in *Zikai manhua*, 1927)

In the middle, the standing child seems to be lost in despair. Floods of tears flow on his robe. A hand covers one eye, the other one extends forward, with the fingers spread wide, and seems to express his indignation. On the right of the picture, we can notice a few objects: a stool, a trumpet, peanuts. The cartoon effectively expresses the despair of the child who has lost the object he likes. The thick stroke featuring the big tears spread on his overall gives a special strength to the feeling of helplessness of the little boy.

In the essay “Huazhan’s Diary” (1927), Feng Zikai even goes so far as to take on the point of view and the language of a child in order to describe the friendship of his child with a small neighbour and recreate his overflowing imagination. This text which is written like a diary in two parts is not only a child-centered narrative, but adopts the perspective of the child himself.

Writing and painting seem to be for him an antidote to the fleetingness of childhood. A cartoon showing a cobweb scattered with flower petals resonates with the conclusion of the essay “To My Children”, I would like to capture for ever on these pages this golden age which is yours, at least to keep a few memories of spring, like a “cobweb where some flower petals fell down”.¹⁴ He refers to a poem *ci* (to the tune of the fortune-teller “Busuanzi” 卜算子) of Gao Guanguo 高觀國 of the Song dynasty. Two verses have inspired him in his cartoon: “Some flowers fell on the cobweb outside / It can also capture the spring” (*Yan wai zhu siwang luo hua, ye yao liu chun zhu* 檐外蛛絲網落花, 也要留春住). The drawing uses the geometrical pattern of a cobweb, which occupies the whole surface of the composition, surrounded by a thick line trait in which two characters are inscribed: “Liu chun” 留春, “Capturing the Spring” (1926) (Fig. 2).

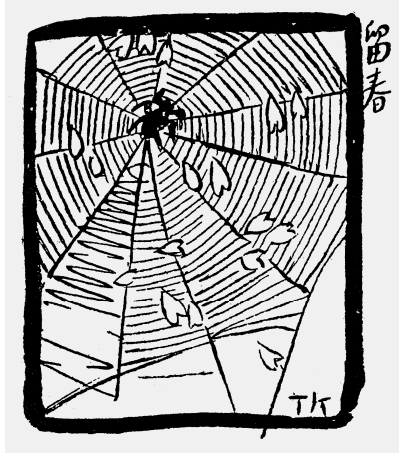


Fig. 2. “Capturing the Spring” (1926, in *Zikai manhua*, 1927)

Some white spots — the flower petals — break the regularity of this purely graphic design, which the signature of the artist (“TK”) seems to be an extension of. He also meditates about the inexorable passage of time in his essay “Regret of Spring” (“Xi chun” 惜春, 1935), which describes the daily life of a schoolchild. At the start of the essay, he explains that he regrets lost time when he sees the weeping willows with their wind-blown catkins. In this context, spring is, of course, a metaphor of childhood. These attempts to preserve childhood have to be understood as attempts to preserve purity and innocence in society.

Like Bing Xin or Lu Xun, Feng Zikai distincts, indeed, the purity or naivety of children and hypocrisy or darkness of the adult world. In “Children’s games” (1932), while he is reading newspapers, glimpsing children fighting, he regrets that conflicts between men

14 Cf. footnote n°1.

in society or between countries on the international arena are not as harmless as these “children’s games”.

The topic of playing children is not new in Chinese painting. In which way is the perspective of Feng Zikai different and innovative? At least since the Song dynasty, playing children were a recognized category of figure painting, which was launched by the court painter Su Hanchen 蘇漢臣 in the 12th century: many activities can be identified, like kicking balls, rattling drum, pumping swings, flying kites, etc. This theme was called “hundred-boys” or *baizi* 百子, expressing first of all the wish for male progeny.¹⁵

However, it is clear that the ideas incorporated in the cartoons of Feng Zikai are not the same. Their relaxed brush and the freedom and fancy they express make certainly be more relevant a comparison with the famous painting called “Boy flying a kite” of Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593) (album leaf, 27 x 35 cm, Museum of the Forbidden City). According to Ann Barrott Wicks, this depiction of a child as an idyllic, spontaneous and carefree state is to be connected with the cult of the “child’s heart” (*tongxin* 童心) advocated by the Neo-Confucianist writer Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), who claimed in his essay “On the Infant’s Heart” (“*Tongxin shuo*” 童心說, 1590): “The heart of the child is never false, but pure and true... If you lose your child’s heart, you will lose your true heart.”¹⁶ This notion was favoured again in the 1920s and 1930s, especially by essayists like Zhou Zuoren or Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976), looking for a different model from the English one and it is very likely that Feng Zikai was influenced by that trend.¹⁷ According to this view, knowledge will be advantageous if it is acquired without overshadowing the ingenuousness of the child and if it leaves his creative impetus unaffected.¹⁸

Thus, we can see that the idea that the child’s naive view contains more truth than the adult’s perspective is not only derived from the romantic and realist European concepts: it also echoes some Chinese perceptions. For example, in literature, children are already brought to the center of the stage in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢, circa 1750).¹⁹ In art, under the brush of Ren Bonian 任伯年 (1840–1896), some paintings focused on children themselves in the 19th century rather than giving them the role of preservers of the patriline, already showing an increased interest for childhood.²⁰

15 Wicks 2002, 16.

16 Wicks 2002, 23.

17 Vallette-Hémery 1982, 100 sq.

18 As Zhang Yinde said, this theory, which largely influenced the school of Gong’an, is marked by Chan Buddhist intuitionism Chan and the primacy of the spirit advocated by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529). Cf. Zhang 2004, p. 47, and Billeter 1979.

19 Pease 1995, 286.

20 Wicks 2002, 23.

Michael Nylan argues that in traditional China, children did not only spend long hours in intensive learning in the goal of becoming “truly human” (*cheng ren* 成人), at least not during the two first stages of childhood (in the womb and until the age of seven). There was a space for play and fantasy, which were even encouraged for little children, in order to let them build a sturdy mind and body. It was during the third phase, until the age of 15, that the child was instructed to an awareness of self and society and prepared in mental, moral, and physical terms to adult life.²¹ This was especially against this Confucian education and ritualised subordination that Chinese intellectuals of the new Republic rebelled. Two humoristic cartoon of Feng Zikai undoubtedly express this criticism: the first one, called “A Teacher” (“Mou zhong jiaoshi” 某種教師), shows a teacher during his class, but the head has been replaced by a gramophone, in order to denounce the repetitive side of his teaching. In another cartoon entitled “Education, n°2” (“Jiaoyu (2)” 教育(二), 1932), a child desperately tries to free himself from a mold where a huge hand wants to insert him by force (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. “Education n°2” (in *Ertong manhua*, 1932)

In Republican China, the imagination of modern childhood was intrinsically entangled with the imagination of a modern nation, as suggested by Xu Xu.²² Lu Xun established the child as political symbol of China’s future. “To save the children”, the famous cry at the end of his short story *A Madman’s Diary* (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日記, 1918), meant in reality “to save China”. Children, seen as innocent and pure during the New Culture Movement, held the adult’s hope for a new bright future: they emerged as models

21 Nylan 2003, 138–139.

22 Xu 2013, 69.

of an ideal social order characterized by peace and happiness. The creativity of children, their inventions or unexpected ideas as well as their wild imagination are especially praised by Feng Zikai, as an evidence of their great potential. This shows that this fashionable and positive vision of childhood has rubbed off on him. For example, a cartoon called “The Bike of Zhanzhan” (“Zhanzhan diche (2), Jiaotache” 瞻瞻底車 (二) 腳踏車, 1927) stages Zhanzhan riding an imaginary bicycle made with two fans of banana leaves of which he holds the handles (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. “Education n°2” (in *Zikai huaji*, 1927)

The regular veins of the leaves meet in a point. Although they are way out of the center, they remind of the spokes of a wheel. The child is located in the middle and the rest of the picture is empty, without any contextual element. The picture attracts the eye with the poetry which comes from this dreamy child, very absorbed in the game he is imagining. The rounded outline of the small figure gives lightness to this infant child who rides the banana leaves, which provide a very decorative ribbed pattern, contrasting with the simplicity of his white clothing.

Another cartoon, which is related to an eponymous essay, is worthy of being mentioned because it reflects the social concern of Feng Zikai, which is one of the main aspects of his art: although it would be wrong to consider him as a militant or progressive artist, since he always wanted to preserve his political independence, he always worried about the fate of the poor and deprived.²³ This cartoon, which is called “The Swing of Poor Children” (“Qiong xiaohai de qiaoqiaoban” 窮小孩的跷跷板, 1934), shows two children playing with two crossed benches (Fig. 5).

23 Barmé 2002, 230.



Fig. 5. “The Swing of Poor Children” (in *Chexiang shehui*, 1935)

It suggests that even in the worst deprivation, children remain inventive: through their boundless creativity, they embody hope. In a cartoon entitled “Sitting alone” (“Du zuo” 獨坐, 1945), a child immersed in a building game can be seen from the rear, capturing this extreme concentration specific to the playing child. Without the his ingenuity, could utopia or art exist? This is probably the meaning of the drawing of the cartoon entitled “The Origin of Architecture” (“Jianzhu de qiyuan” 建築的起源, 1927), where a child piles up the elements of construction blocks, an attempt of research and exploration in which Feng Zikai sees the premises of architecture and art (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. “The Origin of Architecture” (*Zikai huaji*, 1927)

The numerous theoretical essays of Feng Zikai reflect his admiration for the “childish spirit” (*haizi qi* 孩子氣), a concept introduced for the first time in 1904 by Wang Guowei 王國

維 (1877–1927). Wang Guowei, who had a deep knowledge of traditional Chinese culture, studied Western philosophy, especially the works of Kant, Schiller, and Schopenhauer, in order to re-evaluate under a different point of view his own cultural tradition, leading to a mixture of both cultures. Like Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Wang Guowei broaches the pre-Freudian notions of game and childish ingenuousness and defines the artist as an adult who has preserved his child heart: the child, with his unusual sensitivity, observes the world like a show.²⁴ Schopenhauer finds in the extreme sensitivity of the child as well as in the naivety of his view of the world, which appears to be a performance, the distinctive feature of genius. Following Wang Guowei, the philosopher Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 (1897–1986), in his *Discussions on Beauty* (*Tan mei 談美*) published in 1932, sees the origin of art in the children's games. This theory is in accordance with that of contemporary anthropologists: "When children are engaged in a fictional collective game, their activity is similar to an improvised play."²⁵ This unlimited imagination, where utopia and progress originate, should be a model for the artist.

Feng Zikai endorses the view that the whole world is a game for a child, as well as for the artist, striving to preserve or find again the innocence, the concentration, and the fancy of a playing child. "Those who call themselves artists or inventors because they have produced a few paintings or written works should be ashamed in front of you. Your creativity is actually considerably higher than the one of the adults."²⁶ Feng Zikai, through his celebration of the children absorbed in their games, expresses the idea that they should be taken as models by the artists, but not only: they should be a source of inspiration for a better world.

Feng Zikai has a personal vision of the future of China, embodied by children, but also inherited from his mentor Li Shutong 李叔同 (also known under his Buddhist name: Hong Yi 弘一, 1880–1942): he thinks that a solution to the crisis of the country could be found in Buddhism, which is an important aspect of his aesthetics. This approach of Buddhism reflected here a philosophy of engagement rather than a passive escapism, typical of the patriotic monk Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) and his rhetoric of national renewal.²⁷ Consequently, in a theoretical article on art entitled "Beauty and compassion" ("Mei yu tongqing", 美與同情, 1929), Feng Zikai establishes a connection between the figure of child and his Buddhist beliefs, arguing that the naive and fresh look that a child takes at his environment naturally conforms to the principle of Buddhism bringing to "break of the causal relationships" (*jue yuan 絕緣*), which trigger the process of rebirth. Thus one can

24 Lu Shanqing 1991, 414–416.

25 Schaeffer 2003, 142.

26 "About My Paintings" ("Tan ziji de hua", 談自己的畫, 1935).

27 Barmé 2002, 171.

free oneself from the psychological constructions which cause suffering and detach oneself from world. This perception results from the compassion that the child naturally feels (according to him) for living beings, plants, even his own toys – comparable to the concept of pity advocated by Schopenhauer. The child, like the artist, is the one whose heart resonates with others, adopts their sorrows and joys: those who do not feel any sympathy for the others can not become true artists.

Thus, for Feng Zikai, children appear to be the best defence against the dark sides of society and the best inspiration models to improve it in the future.

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