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### Author

Kauffman, Andrew

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**Imagining the New Socialist Child: The Cultural Afterlife of the Child Martyr  
Wang Erxiao**

Andrew Kauffman, Indiana University

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**Abstract**

Recent scholarship in modern Chinese studies has established the centrality of the figure of the child in modern configurations of nationhood. Yet very few studies have focused on the motif of child martyrdom and its place within Chinese socialist culture. By exploring the cultural afterlife of the socialist martyr Wang Erxiao in mid-twentieth-century China, this article shows how the heroic sacrificial death of the boy both powered and imperiled the Communist-led revolution and the construction of a new, socialist society. The author argues that, on the one hand, the figure of the socialist child martyr embodied the desire for the child to play a more active role in the Communist revolution and in the creation of a socialist utopia. On the other hand, in lionizing the heroic death of the child—the so-called revolutionary successor—stories like Wang Erxiao's also posed an existential threat to the socialist community and brought to the fore tensions intrinsic to politicizing and aestheticizing the death of a child. By examining the relationship between children, violence, and sacrificial death, this article highlights the desires and anxieties embedded within the socialist project to create an image of the "new child."

**Keywords:** child martyrdom, Wang Erxiao, War of Resistance against Japan, socialist literature, Boy Scouts, Alain Badiou

In 2015, a children's play called *Red Tassel* (*Hongying* 紅纓) was performed to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the end of the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945). *Red Tassel* retells the famous and, in all likelihood, apocryphal story of the young martyr Wang Erxiao 王二小, a thirteen-year-old cowherd who sacrificed his life in 1942 to protect his fellow villagers and Communist troops from marauding Japanese soldiers (figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The adaptation of this "red classic" tale into a children's

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years, scholars, journalists, and bloggers have questioned whether Wang Erxiao was an historical figure. Indeed, the lyricist for the famous 1942 folksong "Sing of the Cowherd Boy—Erxiao," Fang Bing 方冰, claimed as early as 1995 that the song was inspired not by the actions of

play was aimed at using the memory of persecution and heroism to instill a sense of patriotic duty in the younger generation who have grown up in the postrevolutionary present. In the words of the play's director, Liao Xiaohong:

Watching *Red Tassel* is a means to traverse time. We will take the children back to seventy years ago, which was a period of terror, and witness how the children of that era used their weak shoulders, youthful blood, and young lives to shoulder the great cause of the War of Resistance, encouraging the present generation of children to cherish their happy lives and to reflect on how they, too, can contribute to a rich, strong, and prosperous nation. (Wang and Huang 2015)

Liao's statement foregrounds the many different roles adults have envisioned for the child in modern China. Whether an active participant in revolution and war or a passive object in need of instruction, the figure of the child has been inexorably linked to the fate of the nation and thus invested with political and ideological significance by intellectuals, artists, and politicians. Furthermore, as the popular story of Wang Erxiao demonstrates, the memory of persecution and sacrificial death has—and continues to have—a profound impact on popular conceptions of children and childhood in modern China. This article explores the creation and development of an ideal image of the Chinese socialist child by focusing on the cultural afterlife of the boy martyr Wang Erxiao,<sup>2</sup> a figure who has yet to receive critical scholarly attention in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and is understudied in the West.<sup>3</sup>

The making of a cultural hero and role model for children out of the figure of a child martyr is a distinctive feature of what Chinese literary scholar Wang Hui calls "China's revolutionary century" (H. Wang 2009, 3).<sup>4</sup> Outside the Chinese cultural context, I can think of only two other cases in which child martyrs became cultural icons, serving as a source of reverence for the nation's citizens: Iran's Mohammad Hossein Fahmideh

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a single individual, but rather by the heroic and selfless actions of an entire generation of revolutionary youth. See Fang (1995) and Sun Z (2011, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> My focus here on the figure of the boy martyr is entirely due to a seeming absence of girl martyrs in cultural productions. The one notable exception is Liu Hulan 劉胡蘭 (1932–1947), who was executed by the Nationalists when she refused to disclose the names of village party members. What is of particular interest about visual (and, to some degree, literary) representations of Liu Hulan is their tendency to erase her status as a not-yet-adult, something that I have yet to encounter in my study of socialist-era boy heroes and martyrs.

<sup>3</sup> One notable exception is China scholar Steven L. Riep's article, which briefly examines the Wang Erxiao story and its influence (2008, 159–161).

<sup>4</sup> For Wang Hui, "China's revolutionary century" refers to "the era stretching from the Xinhai Revolution of 1911...to around 1976" (H. Wang 2009, 3).

(1967–1980), who sacrificed himself in the Iran-Iraq war,<sup>5</sup> and the Soviet Union’s Pavlik Morozov (1918–1932), who was killed by his relatives after denouncing his father to the authorities.<sup>6</sup> What, then, are we to make of the Wang Erxiao story and the phenomenon of child martyrdom in mid-twentieth-century China? More specifically, for the purposes of this article and its focus on Chinese socialist culture, how were stories of child heroism and martyrdom like Wang Erxiao’s inserted into narratives of socialist revolution? And how do the authors of these texts address the inherent tension in using the death of a child, a tragic and lamentable event, for political and ideological purposes?



Figure 1. Poster of “The Little Hero of the War of Resistance—Wang Erxiao.” Date unknown. Source: “Kangri xiao yingxiong Wang Erxiao jianbihua” 抗日小英雄王二小簡筆畫 (Sketch of the little hero of the War of Resistance—Wang Erxiao), <http://j.17qq.com/article/cckdglv.html>.

<sup>5</sup> For more on Fahmideh, see Davis (2003, 45–66) and Mitchell (2012, 47–73). For a study on the construction of martyrdom in Persian children’s literature during the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, see Rezaee et al. (2016).

<sup>6</sup> For more on the creation of the Pavlik Morozov legend, see Kelly (2005).

Recent scholarship in the field of modern Chinese studies has established the centrality of the figure of the child in modern configurations of nationhood. Scholars of modern Chinese literature and culture have investigated the development of children's literature and its import to the construction of a modern Chinese citizenry and state (Hung 1985, 107–134; Pease 1995; Farquhar 1999; Volland 2017), demonstrated how social Darwinist discourses positioned the child as “the emblem of the nation and its developmental hopes” (Jones 2011, 23), and examined the role of childhood education (Culp 2007; Tillman 2018) and textbooks (Zarrow 2015; Kubler 2018) in transforming children into national subjects. Very little scholarship, however, has focused on the trope of child martyrdom and its embeddedness within Chinese socialist culture.<sup>7</sup> This article therefore adds a new dimension to childhood studies by exploring the motif of child martyrdom and its place within socialist articulations of identity and community in mid-twentieth-century China. Through a case study analysis of the cultural afterlife of the child martyr Wang Erxiao, I argue that, on the one hand, the figure of the socialist child martyr embodied the desire for the child to play an active part in the Communist-led revolution and the construction of a new, socialist society, but, on the other hand, in lionizing the heroic death of the new child, the so-called revolutionary successor (*geming de jiebanren* 革命的接班人), narratives of child martyrdom also posed an existential threat to the socialist community and brought to the fore tensions intrinsic to politicizing and aestheticizing the death of a child. The anxiety that narratives of child martyrdom provoke guides my critical analysis of the Wang Erxiao myth and the utopian project to mold the new socialist child.<sup>8</sup>

My investigation of the cultural phenomenon of child martyrdom in pre- and post-1949 China draws on French philosopher Alain Badiou's theory of the “passion for the real.” In his inquiry into the revolutionary spirit of the “Soviet century” (1914–1991), Badiou argues that key players in the realms of art, politics, and science were driven by a “passion for the real”—that is, an impatient yearning to “make [the new] man, here and now” (Badiou 2007, 32). As the philosophy scholar Steven Corcoran aptly summarized Badiou's work, “Key to this passion was the theme of New Man—if the idea of the nineteenth century was to entrust oneself to the movement of history in the bringing about of a new humanity, then the twentieth sought to confront it, ‘to master it politically’” (2015, 51). And perhaps no segment of the population was more ideally suited to the project of forging a new citizenry than children, who, after all, “have no

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<sup>7</sup> Two China-focused studies that touch upon the trope of child wartime heroism in children's literature are Farquhar (1999, 166–189) and Volland (2017, 124–152). For scholarship on the subject of child heroism and sacrifice outside of the Chinese cultural context, see Kamenetsky (1984, 178–184, 187–192), Zur (2010); Knuth (2012, 31–70); and Dar (2018, 91–102).

<sup>8</sup> My use of the phrase “new child” is borrowed from Nicolai Volland, who used it to describe “an ideologically informed ideal type” that was introduced to China via Soviet children's literature (2017, 127). Whereas Volland focuses on the translation and dissemination of “the phenotype of the Soviet ‘ideal child’” in the early PRC (2017, 125), this article highlights the formative role Chinese authors played in creating an image of the ideal Chinese socialist child.

previous cultural habits” (Dar 2018, 1), thus representing a tabula rasa on which the values and ideology of the “new man” might be easily inscribed. Indeed, the crucial importance of children to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) war effort and national aspirations is saliently illustrated in an oft-cited headline Mao Zedong wrote in a children’s journal during the War of Resistance: “RISE UP, CHILDREN, and learn to be free, independent citizens of China, learn how to wrest this freedom from the yoke of Japanese imperialism and transform yourselves into the masters of a new era” (quoted in Farquhar 1999, 175). In Badiou’s analysis, however, the twentieth century’s “passion for the real”—its erstwhile desire to create the “new man”—was also “the source of both horror and enthusiasm, simultaneously lethal and creative...characterized by a steadfast indifference to its cost; this indifference legitim[ized] the most violent means” (Badiou 2007, 32–33). Socialist child martyr narratives were driven by a “passion for the real”; they were both a celebration of the heroic achievements of the new socialist child and a revelation of the precarious position of the child within the utopian project to forge a new humanity. Stories of child heroism and martyrdom, like Wang Erxiao’s, thus offer new insights into Chinese socialist political culture and what its fascination for “destruction and foundation” meant to the nation’s youngest members (Badiou 2007, 39). To better understand the cultural roots of the Wang Erxiao story, it is necessary to look at how militarism became an integral part of children’s culture in the early to mid-1930s.

### **Militarizing Childhood during the War of Resistance**

The elevation of the child in the popular imagination to the status of heroic martyr was a byproduct of the national cataclysm of the War of Resistance. The exigencies of war coupled with a foreboding sense of national demise mobilized the entire population to resist the Japanese invasion and occupation. In this particular historical context, what German historian Stig Förster might refer to as “total war” (2000, 2),<sup>9</sup> popular conceptions of the child’s role in violent struggle transformed. Politicians, educators, and artists across the political spectrum pinned their hopes on the figure of the child, seeing the child as much more than just the “future master of the nation”; in short, the child became a key agent of national salvation. No longer regarded as merely a passive object of pedagogical attention or an indispensable consumer of Shanghai’s burgeoning culture industry (Jones 2011, 104), the child was called upon during this time of national crisis to play an active part in the nation’s defense. This role naturally entailed the potential loss of life.

At the forefront in sanctioning the militarization of childhood were the Boy Scouts,<sup>10</sup> which by the early 1930s had become “a disciplinary tool of the [Nationalist]

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<sup>9</sup> The idea of “total war” suggests a complete breakdown of “the borders between soldiers and civilians in defense as well as in attack” due to the “mobilization of all forms of public, if not private, life toward victory on the battlefield” (Förster 2000, 2, 8).

<sup>10</sup> For more on the Girl Scouts movement in Republican-era China, see Tillman (2014).

state” (Hwang 2006, 191). Introduced through the mediation of Western missionaries and foreign-educated Chinese in the wake of the 1911 revolution,<sup>11</sup> scouting represented a modern pedagogical way to mobilize, educate, and discipline China’s youth. The appeal of scouting to China’s educators and politicians was largely consistent with the original intent of Robert Baden-Powell (1857–1941), who founded the Boy Scouts in 1907 in order to combat what he perceived as a “decline of the manly British character” that threatened to erode Britain’s reputation in the world (Rosenthal 1986, 3). Chinese scouting was thus part of a larger global youth movement to transform children into obedient, patriotic, and military-ready citizens. With the onset of hostilities between China and Japan in the 1930s, the Nationalist government actively promoted the Boy Scout movement, viewing it as not only a useful ideological tool for cultivating obedience and loyalty in the next generation of citizens but also—in the words of sociologist Jinlin Hwang—“an important step in creating fresh troops for revolution” (2006, 191).

The actual participation of Boy Scouts in the war effort and their heroic acts of self-sacrifice were subjects that circulated widely in scout publications and popular journals. Perhaps no story of Boy Scout heroism captured the public imagination more than the four Shanghai scouts who were killed when they were providing first aid to injured civilians and soldiers during the Shanghai Incident of 1932.<sup>12</sup> The images, songs, essays, and newspaper reports that were disseminated to the public via China’s treaty-port press depicted the deaths of the four martyred scouts in a manner that foregrounded the barbarity of the Japanese invaders and exhorted the nation’s youth to follow in their footsteps. One newspaper account extolled the scouts’ sacrificial act by referring to it as “a glorious page in the history of the Chinese Scouts” (Ye et al. 1932, 7). Another writer claimed that their martyrdom was testament that “the aim of the Chinese Boy Scouts was finally accomplished in the storm of shots and shells” (quoted in Choi 2008, 88). Nationalist propaganda used martyred youth to arouse support for the war among the nation’s youngest members. Indeed, it was not uncommon for writers and officials to remark that the actions of the four martyrs was “the only ideal model for China’s youth [to follow],” even going so far as to call on “all of the nation’s youth” to emulate the four scouts and “face death unflinchingly” (Ye et al. 1932, 7). Ultimately, the deaths of the four scouts were commemorated in a manner that both inscribed their sacrificial acts with national meaning and obfuscated the distinction between children and adult soldiers. After all, the act of applying the appellation of “martyr” (*lieshi* 烈士) to the death of these four young boys was in and of itself testament to the pervasive wartime blurring of the generational boundary between youth and adult, which—among other things—created a new role for the nation’s youngest members: that of martyr.

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<sup>11</sup> The origin of scouting in China is a contested story. For more on the various versions of the founding of the first Chinese Boy Scout troop, see Choi (2008, 13–16) and Culp (2007, 178–180).

<sup>12</sup> The four scouts were Bao Zhenwu 鮑振武, Mao Zhengxiang 毛徵祥, Luo Yunxiang 羅雲祥, and Ying Wenda 應文達.

Chinese propagandists also played an important part in militarizing childhood during the War of Resistance. The figure of the child was central to the wartime propagandistic efforts of Chinese cartoonists, in which “patriotism, nationalism, and heroism formed the basis of the visual representations of children” (Pozzi 2014, 123). Portrayals of children as heroes and military-ready citizens in propaganda cartoons contributed to militarizing children’s culture. The transformation of the nation’s youth from “incomplete” and “miniaturized” beings—to borrow from the writer Zhou Zuoren (1920, 2)—to active participants in war is captured in a wartime cartoon published in a 1937 issue of *National Salvation Cartoons* (*Jiuwang manhua* 救亡漫畫) (figure 2). The cartoon depicts row upon row of Boy Scouts standing neatly at attention, offering a ritual salute to the sacrifices made by the country’s martyred heroes. The caption suggestively points the way forward for the scouts and, by extension, the nation’s youth in the ongoing struggle against Japanese imperialism: “We march along the path of martyrs, doing our utmost to catch up to them” (“*Women tazhe lieshi de lu, ganshang lai le*” 我們踏著烈士的路，趕上來了) (Huang 1937).

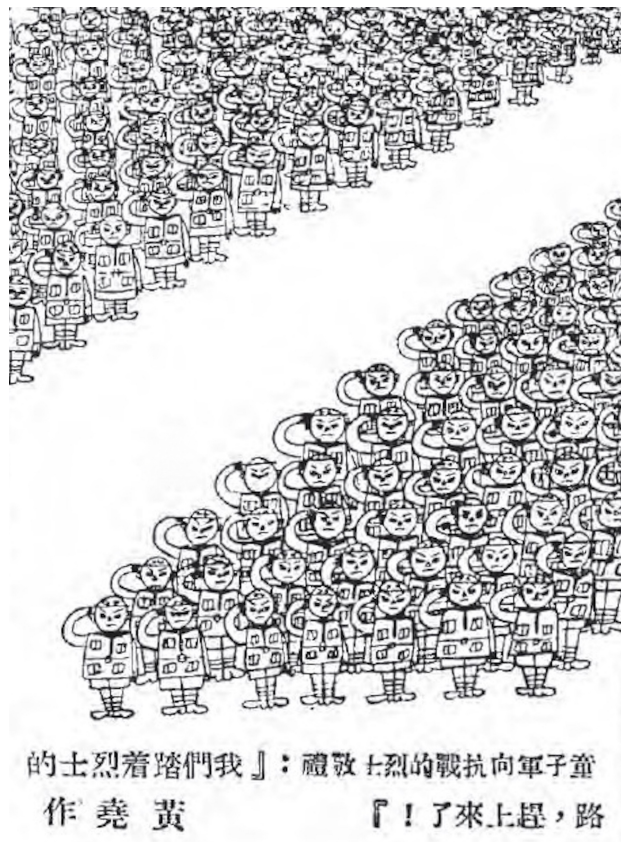


Figure 2. Cartoon showing Chinese Boy Scouts offering a ritual salute to the martyrs of the War of Resistance. *Source*: Huang (1937).



Children's literature was also profoundly affected by the war, especially along ideological and political lines. Left-wing writers championed "a colloquial revolutionary literature" that "would be accessible to illiterate and semi-literate peasants and their children" (Farquhar 1999, 167) and serve as a vehicle for inculcating in children nationalistic, militaristic, and socialist values. The shift away from an urban emphasis and audience in children's literature was due not only to the relocation of urban intellectuals and artists to the countryside, but also to Mao Zedong's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," which mandated that literature and art serve the political aims of the CCP and be directed toward "workers, peasants, soldiers, and revolutionary cadres" (Mao 1967, 71). This meant that Boy Scouts and other children from the petty bourgeoisie were no longer featured as the main heroes in leftist children's literature, replaced instead by the "brave patriot" and "militant hero" who "represented the peasantry and not the proletariat" (Farquhar 1999, 168). The creation of the socialist child martyr Wang Erxiao, a peasant cowherd, in the early 1940s is part and parcel of these shifting cultural and political attitudes toward the child triggered by the exigencies of war and the growing influence of Maoist ideology.

Both the CCP and Nationalist Party viewed the child as a key player in resisting Japanese aggression. However, there was an important ideological difference between the two parties over the child's place within society, with an impact on discourses about child martyrdom. Nationalist educators and politicians identified children as "future masters of the nation" who required physical and civic training (like scouting) to prepare them for their future roles as adult citizens (Culp 2007, 178–208). Communist perceptions of children, by contrast, were not solely premised on their future potential as adults; instead, children were regarded as political actors in their own right, agents of revolutionary change. This distinct place of the child in Communist ideology led to the creation of a pantheon of socialist child hero-martyrs, perhaps none more famous than Wang Erxiao.

### **"Sing of the Cowherd Boy—Erxiao" and the Creation of the Socialist Child Martyr**

Wang Erxiao became an exemplar of the new socialist child because of the immense popularity of a 1942 folksong (*geyao* 歌謠) entitled "Sing of the Cowherd Boy—Erxiao" ("Gechang Erxiao fang niulang" 歌唱二小放牛郎).<sup>13</sup> The lyrics were written by Fang Bing 方冰 (1914–1997), a poet who was serving as a Communist propaganda worker in the Jin-Cha-Ji border region. The melody was composed by Li Jiefu 李劫夫 (1913–1976), a songwriter who also worked in the CCP's Propaganda Department and later became one of the foremost composers of revolutionary songs in post-1949 China (Sun Z 2011). Inspired by Mao's "Talks," the folksong was a narrative composition that featured a member of the masses as its protagonist, a thirteen-year-old cowherd who heroically

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<sup>13</sup> For more on the widespread popularity of this folksong in pre- and post-1949 China, see Fang (1995), Sun Z (2011, 46), and Sun N (2015, 68).

sacrifices his life in order to protect his fellow villagers and nearby Communist troops from enemy soldiers.

In keeping with the CCP's desire to "create an alternate mass culture" that originated with the masses and was tailored to their political needs (Hung 1994, 256), Li Jiefu adopted several features of Hebei folksongs and used them in his composition of the musical score. The song's narrative was inspired by well-known folktales that circulated orally in areas affected by the Japanese invasion (Sun N 2015, 67–68). The final version of the song—which, according to Fang Bing's recollection, took less than two hours to write—was immediately performed by a young art troupe under Li's direction. Shortly thereafter, the Communist *Jin-Cha-Ji Daily* (*Jin Cha Ji ribao* 晉察冀日報) decided to publish the song, leading to its widespread circulation in Communist-controlled areas and beyond (Fang 1995). A close look at the lyrics show that the figure of the socialist child martyr was not just a reflection of the increasing militarization of childhood but a representation of the ideal image of the new socialist child: an active agent of revolutionary change, selflessly devoted to the Communist community and cause. By using the character of the child martyr as the supreme manifestation of the new child, however, the song also brings into relief inherent tensions embedded in the act of ascribing political meaning into the death of a child.

"Sing of the Cowherd Boy—Erxiao" consists of seven verses. The opening verse sets the stage by portraying a pastoral setting in which cattle are grazing on the mountain slopes and the protagonist, a young cowherd referred to as Wang Erxiao, emerges on the scene.<sup>14</sup> The second verse foregrounds the grave danger facing Erxiao and his fellow villagers due to the arrival of enemy troops. What is most striking about this verse is, first, the specificity with regard to the date and time of the enemy's arrival ("the morning of the 16th of September") and, second, the lack of specificity with regard to the identity of the enemy soldiers (Fang and Li 1949). The former feature has the effect of lending the account historical authenticity, whereas the latter affords the song political flexibility, because it could be referring to any of the CCP's enemies. In the third verse, we learn that the enemy troops have lost their way and resort to capturing Erxiao to serve as their guide. In the fourth verse, the young cowherd proceeds to courageously lead them into an ambush, upon which the enemy quickly realizes that they have been duped by the youth. The final three verses of the song provide a vivid and graphic account of Erxiao's martyrdom, before concluding with a reassurance that the memory of Erxiao's heroic sacrifice has not been forgotten.

The fifth and sixth verses depict the sacrificial death of the young protagonist. While shedding light on how the death of a child is fashioned into a redemptive and meaningful narrative, they remain sensitive to the ethical problematic inherent in the act of lionizing child martyrdom. Here are the two verses that describe Erxiao's blood sacrifice:

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<sup>14</sup> My close reading of the song is based on its publication in a 1949 issue of *Sounds of the People's Singing* (*Renmin gesheng* 人民歌聲; Fang and Li 1949).

The enemy thrust a bayonet into Erxiao,  
Flinging his corpse next to a large boulder.  
Our thirteen-year-old Erxiao,  
Pitifully [*kelian* 可憐] died this tragic [*can* 慘] way.  
The cadres and fellow villagers were safe,  
But he lay resting among the cold mountains.  
With a smile [*weixiao* 微笑] imprinted on his face,  
His blood dyed red the deep blue skies. (Fang and Li 1949)

The portrayal of the young protagonist's death in both tragic and heroic terms highlights the complex feelings that portrayals of martyrdom engender. As scholar of religion Elizabeth Castelli cogently states in her study of early Christian martyrologies, "To participate in the preservation of the memory of martyrdom is to enter into a discourse that lionizes suffering in its most extreme forms" (2004, 197). The narrator who aims to use Erxiao's story as a clarion call for action and solidarity at the same time feels compelled to temper veneration of the child's selfless act of heroism by occasionally interjecting a melancholic tone into the text. This latent ambivalence regarding the use of the child martyr as a paragon of the new child manifests itself in a dialectical manner wherein the narrative veers between the heroic and the tragic, the laudable and the lamentable. After all, the death of a child is not just a solemn and mournful event but also poses an existential threat to the very survival of the community, especially because the CCP viewed children as "revolutionary successors."

The song, however, absolves itself from seeming to aestheticize and politicize the child's martyrdom by calling attention to the expression on the young cowherd's face: "a smile" that is meant to signify his willful embrace of death. Moreover, by concluding the song with the promise that this "moving story has spread to every village," the song is also able to move beyond the threat posed by the young protagonist's death, suggesting that his martyrdom was not for naught (Fang and Li 1949). What emerges from this text, then, is an image of the child as an active agent of revolutionary change, who is willing to go so far as to sacrifice his life for the Communist cause. The figure of the child as an important participant in the war effort and heroic martyr of the nation, as represented in Fang Bing and Li Jiefu's song, reflects the normalization of a much more pronounced role for the child in Communist activities.

In addition to advancing a larger role for the child in the struggle for national survival under the leadership of the CCP, the song's portrayal of Erxiao's martyrdom, as is the case with most martyr texts, is aimed at generating and solidifying communal ties. Badiou's theory of the "passion for the real" has emphasized how twentieth-century political projects were driven by an impatient yearning to construct a new humanity. Central to the creation of the "new man," as Badiou sees it, was a "fervent desire" for fraternity through the forging of a "we-subject" (2007, 91). Perhaps nowhere is this desire for togetherness more evident than in the song's invocation of a "we-subject" position for both the characters in the narrative and people outside the narrative who

participate in it through the performative act of singing. The use of the pronoun “we” throughout the song functions to negate expressions of individual identity and invoke a sense of community between the characters in the song and its singers. Importantly, the sense of collectivity that the song champions through its use of the pronoun “we” is not only generated through the existence of a shared enemy but also produced through the sacrificial death of one of its members. Significantly, Erxiao’s attainment of the “we-subject” position occurs *after* his self-effacing act of martyrdom. His posthumous integration into the collective “we” is poignantly exhibited in the song when it refers to him as “our thirteen-year-old Erxiao” immediately following his death (Fang and Li 1949). As for the singers, a sense of togetherness is forged through the public act of singing about the death of one of their own. In the end, the song’s representation of Wang Erxiao’s martyrdom serves a dual purpose. First, it advances a larger role for the child in the Communist cause by suggesting that the child is both an integral member of the community and an agent of change. Second, the song promotes solidarity among the living through their collective remembrance of the child’s sacrificial death.

“Sing of the Cowherd Boy—Erxiao” demonstrates how the figure of the child martyr in pre-1949 China served as an important meaning-making site for articulating community and producing new ideas of the child. Fang and Li’s decision to use a thirteen-year-old boy as the song’s hero illustrates the inclusion of the child within the collective “we” and the central role envisioned for the child in the national struggle. Moreover, the circulation of Erxiao’s story through the medium of folksong not only served as a mechanism for heightening the collective consciousness via the public act of singing, but also—and perhaps more importantly—enabled the revolutionary message to reach the rural and illiterate masses, among whom children were by and large its intended audience. Stories like Wang Erxiao’s thus served as emotional and ideological instruments for transforming Chinese youth into politically awakened “we-subjects.” However, as demonstrated by Wang Erxiao’s martyrdom, a tragic byproduct of this political project to mold the new child, was the violent death of one of the community’s youngest members.

### **Mao-Era Refashioning of the Child Martyr Wang Erxiao**

During the late 1940s and early years of the PRC, Wang Erxiao became a household name as the story of his heroic martyrdom circulated across a variety of cultural forms, such as short story, song, poetic drama, and picture book (*lianhuanhua* 連環畫). One should also note that Wang Erxiao was not the only socialist-era child martyr to be immortalized in the popular imagination. Foremost among them were Liu Hulan 劉胡蘭 (1932–1947), Song Zhenzhong 宋振中 (1941–1949), and Liu Wenxue 劉文學 (1945–1959), all of whom became national heroes through the transmission of their stories in

newspaper reports and literary and filmic texts.<sup>15</sup> Particularly arresting about the cultural afterlife of Wang Erxiao's story and others like it is their continued relevance and widespread appeal even after the establishment of New China in 1949, which heralded the "liberation" of the Chinese people. Historian Chang-tai Hung (2008; 2011, 213–234) calls attention to how the development of a "cult of the red martyr" in post-1949 China both legitimized the CCP's authority and promoted the use of the revolutionary dead as models for the living to emulate. The emergence of a pantheon of child martyrs during the early PRC, with children an important part of the CCP's cult of the red martyr, further attests to the centrality of the child in Chinese socialist configurations of community, as well as the increasing perception of the child as a principal agent of revolutionary change. Stories of child heroism and martyrdom were powerful vehicles for expediting the political transformation of the next generation. These stories furnished images of the ideal new child in action intended to galvanize young readers to follow in the footsteps of their revolutionary forbearers. Perhaps it is for this reason, then, that we see a proliferation of fictional and historical accounts of child hero-martyrs during the Mao years, when the impatient, antagonistic, and future-oriented ideology of continuous revolution pervaded the political and cultural landscape.<sup>16</sup>

One of the more influential literary portrayals of Wang Erxiao in Mao-era China was Xing Ye's 邢野 (1918–2001) poetic drama (*shiju* 詩劇) titled "The Cowherd Boy—Wang Erxiao" ("Wang Erxiao fang niulang" 王二小放牛郎, 1963).<sup>17</sup> Written by the former vice chairman of Hebei's Literary Federation and author of the 1953 drama *The Guerilla Captain* (*Youji duizhang* 游擊隊長; Xing Y 1953), later adapted into the 1955 film

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<sup>15</sup> Liu Hulan is the youngest female Communist martyr. Her story appeared in a wide array of media in post-1949 China, especially after Mao commemorated her martyrdom by penning the slogan, "A great life, a glorious death" (*Sheng de weida, si de guangrong* 生的偉大，死的光榮). For more on the cultural afterlife of Liu Hulan, see X. Wang (2018, 155–189). Song Zhenzhong, more commonly known as Little Radish Head (Xiao Luobotou 小蘿蔔頭), is regarded as "China's youngest martyr" (*Zhongguo nianling zui xiao de lieshi* 中國年齡最小的烈士). He became a household name when his story appeared in "the most popular contemporary Chinese novel in the Seventeen Years [1949–1966]": *Red Crag* (*Hongyan* 紅岩) (Li 2017, 44). Liu Wenxue was fourteen when he "was killed by a landlord who he found stealing the commune's crops at night" (Farquhar 1999, 275). His story circulated widely in Mao-era China in a variety of forms, including folksong, picture book, and spoken drama. In 1983, the Ministry of Civil Affairs conferred on him the title "revolutionary martyr" (*geming lieshi* 革命烈士) (Wang X 2009).

<sup>16</sup> For examples of fictional socialist-era child heroes, see the novels by Guan Hua 管樺, *Yu Lai Did Not Die* (*Yu Lai meiyou si* 雨來沒有死, 1948); Hua Shan 華山, *The Feather Letter* (*Ji mao xin* 雞毛信, 1949), made into a movie in 1954; and Xu Guangyao 徐光耀, *The Little Soldier Zhang Ga* (*Xiao bing Zhang Ga* 小兵張嘎, 1959), adapted into a film in 1963.

<sup>17</sup> The influence of Xing Ye's poetic drama was acknowledged in the post-Mao era when it was awarded second place in a national competition for children's literature covering the period 1954 to 1979 (Xing X 2011, 160).

*Guerillas on the Plain* (*Pingyuan youji dui* 平原游擊隊), this poetic drama was published in the PRC's most important political newspaper, *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日報). Its appearance on May 29, 1963 coincided with Mao's launching of the Socialist Education Program, a massive propaganda campaign aimed at reversing capitalist trends in post-Great Leap Forward society by promoting "collectivism, patriotism, and socialism" (Spence 2013, 531). The CCP's propaganda apparatus used heroes and models to reintroduce socialist values into Chinese society and cultivate greater loyalty to Mao and the party. The most famous model-hero to emerge during this period was Lei Feng (1940–1962), a member of the People's Liberation Army whose dedication to Mao and attitude of self-sacrifice epitomized the values the CCP sought to inculcate in the nation's citizens (figure 3). Mao's proclamation on March 5, 1963, to "Learn from Lei Feng" ("Xiang Lei Feng xuexi" 向雷鋒學習) initiated the Lei Feng cult and simultaneously encouraged the creation and circulation of other stories like it (Larson 2009, 110–111). It was by no means a coincidence, then, that Xing's iteration of the Wang Erxiao story appeared just two months later in *People's Daily*.



Figure 3. Photo of Lei Feng. Source: *Renmin huabao* 人民畫報 (People's illustrated magazine), April 1963. Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1963-04\\_1963%E5%B9%B4\\_%E9%9B%B7%E9%94%8B.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1963-04_1963%E5%B9%B4_%E9%9B%B7%E9%94%8B.jpg).

Whereas Fang Bing and Li Jiefu's 1942 folksong commemorated and, by extension, promoted the child's active involvement in the life-and-death struggle for national survival, Xing Ye's portrayal of Wang Erxiao's martyrdom set its sights on producing community and inculcating in the children of New China the ethos of collectivism and sacrifice. On the one hand, the project to construct a socialist utopia inevitably entailed sacrifice made on behalf of the political collective, and Wang Erxiao's story—repackaged to meet the political needs of 1963—served as a useful vehicle for disseminating the socialist ideals of collectivism, class struggle, and self-sacrifice to the nation's youth. On the other hand, however, Xing's poetic drama, much like the 1942 folksong, is laden with an ethical and existential anxiety triggered by its veneration of the sacrificial death of the new child.

Xing's piece opens with a short preface that begins by quoting the first verse of Fang and Li's folksong, which is followed by a poem written by Fang himself. In addition to lending Xing's account of Wang Erxiao's story credibility, Fang's preface poem serves another important role: it foregrounds the magnitude of the story that is about to be told and constructs a link between the past and the present. The former is achieved in the opening lines when Fang directly addresses his audience as "clever children" (*congming de xiaopengyoumen* 聰明的小朋友們), and proceeds to underline the significance of the story they are about to hear: "This is a tragic [*bei* 悲] and heroic [*zhuang* 壯] paean, / But it is also a battle cry. / This is a story that is written in blood, / Would you like to hear about it?" (Xing Y 1963). Similar to the 1942 folksong, Fang's poem includes a rhetoric that aims to strike a fine balance between the heroic and the tragic in dealing with the tension-ridden topic of child martyrdom. However, in calling the story of the young cowherd's sacrificial death a "battle cry" and then offering to present it to children, the heroic and didactic elements of the tale clearly outweigh any ethical objections the first-person narrator may have regarding the use of a "story that is written in blood."

Fang Bing's preface poem also forges a connection between Wang Erxiao's martyrdom in 1940s rural China and the contemporary PRC. This link is accomplished through the narrator's fairy-tale-like ability to furnish his young audience with "golden wings" so that they can fly back in time to the countryside where Wang Erxiao is still herding cattle. It is worth noting that the point of departure for this historical adventure is Beijing's Tiananmen Square: "the birthplace of the People's Republic" (Wu 2005, 8). The significance of Tiananmen Square in a story about child martyrdom extends beyond its symbolic value as the most sacred political space in post-1949 China; more importantly, the square is home to "the most important national memorial ever created by the Chinese Communists": the Monument to the People's Heroes (Hung 2011, 253). Completed in 1958, the nearly forty-meter obelisk monument was erected to commemorate the new socialist state's dead heroes (figure 4).<sup>18</sup> To begin the tale of

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the history of the construction of the Monument to the People's Heroes, see Wu (2005, 24–50) and Hung (2011, 235–255).

Wang Erxiao's martyrdom in the politically hallowed space of Tiananmen Square is to create a direct link between his death and the socialist state's pantheon of red martyrs. In just sixteen lines, then, the preface poem both sutures the temporal and spatial gap between Wang Erxiao's pre-liberation martyrdom and 1960s PRC and situates his self-sacrifice within the CCP's master narrative of modern Chinese history.

The length of Xing's poetic drama naturally entailed the creation of a more fleshed-out and embellished account of Wang Erxiao's martyrdom than Fang and Li's seven-verse folksong. In addition to Erxiao's political acumen and martyrdom (of which more will be said later), the figure of the enemy garnered greater attention from the author. Xing's detailed portrayal of the enemy both defines and produces community. Whereas the 1942 song only mentions "the enemy" three times and never explicitly identifies them, Xing's piece eschews ambiguity in its portrayal of the young martyr's persecutors. Within the first few lines of the opening act we learn the identity of the poem's principal enemy: "murderous and ruthless Japanese bandits" who have descended upon Erxiao's village as part of their "mopping-up" campaign. In addition to an external enemy, the poem also features an internal enemy, in the figure of a "traitor." His identity as a "landlord's son" and "member of the Guomindang" highlights the centrality of class and lingering sense of paranoia that marked socialist-era articulations of community (Xing Y 1963).



Figure 4. Photo of the Monument to the People's Heroes in Beijing. *Source:* Photo by the author.



Xing's poem goes one step further than providing the identity of the villains; it also presents them in such a way that they are rendered utterly devoid of humanity, a task made considerably easier by the status of their victim: a thirteen-year-old boy. Xing foregrounds this dehumanization in the bestial and supernatural language used to describe the external enemy throughout the poem, such as "monsters," "wolves," "demons," and "devils." As for the traitor, we are told that he "died like a dog, and his infamy spread far and wide" (Xing Y 1963). As Chang-tai Hung points out, "the common practice of portraying political opponents in subhuman or nonhuman form, such as animals, reptiles, and insects, to demonize the enemy allows propagandists to insult their adversaries without guilt and implies that the elimination of enemies would bring about a safer society" (Hung 2011, 161). Besides sanctioning the elimination of those labeled enemies of the people, the portrayal of the martyr's antagonists in subhuman terms also functions to define and redefine the boundaries of community by demarcating friend from foe. In lionizing the child martyr and denigrating his persecutors and soon-to-be executors, the poem produces a binary view of the world in which a feeling of togetherness is forged and sustained through the violent expulsion of those who discursively occupy the position of the "other." This dichotomous construction of community is saliently exhibited in Erxiao's shouts of glee when he later leads the Japanese troops into an ambush: "Our victory is fast approaching, / The annihilation of the enemy is coming! / We will be victorious, / The enemy will perish" (Xing Y 1963). What emerges from the poem's portrayal of the enemy is thus an image of fraternity born out of a shared sense of animosity toward anyone who might impede the realization of a new social order.

Whereas the villain is depicted in subhuman terms, the figure of the boy martyr is portrayed as an object of awe and reverence, a paragon of the new socialist child. Xing's glorification of Erxiao's life and death presents the sons and daughters of the revolution with an image of the ideal Chinese child. This image serves as a source of inspiration and guidance. Although the young cowherd is only thirteen, he has already acquired collective consciousness and understands the importance of political organization and discipline. As the squad leader of the Children's League (*Ertong tuan* 兒童團), Erxiao coordinates and directs scouting operations among the local children while also serving as a liaison between the villagers and the Eighth Route Army. In no way does he allow his status as a not-yet-adult to hamper his participation in the war effort. He tells the commander of the Eighth Route Army: "Pay no attention to my young age, as a tree can still be useful even if it has not yet reached maturity" (Xing Y 1963).

Erxiao's status as a "we-subject" is demonstrated by his active participation in the Children's League and through his selfless devotion to the collective, for which he eventually makes the ultimate sacrifice. His privileging of the collective over his own self-interest is illustrated in his willingness to allow the Japanese to capture him rather than risk the potential demise of the Eighth Route Army and consequently imperil his fellow villagers. Like the model soldier Lei Feng, Erxiao is an orphan. The absence of any family members forges and strengthens his attachment to the political community. As

Russia scholar Katerina Clark puts it in her study of the Soviet novel, “the child without a father is to that extent a child without an identity...all are orphans until they find their identity in the ‘great family’” (2000, 135). For Erxiao, the absence of a biological family ultimately enables him to integrate completely into the socialist family. Indeed, following his sacrificial death, Erxiao receives confirmation of his “identity in the ‘great family’” when he is eulogized as “Chairman Mao’s exemplary child” (*Mao zhuxi de hao ertong* 毛主席的好兒童) (Xing Y 1963).

It is unlikely, though, that Wang Erxiao would have been held up as a model child and become a household name for generations of Chinese youth if he had been merely a selfless, loyal, and politically awakened boy. Rather, Erxiao owes his apotheosis in the popular imagination entirely to his heroic act of self-sacrifice. As a martyr, he holds emotional, political, and pedagogical significance in death, because his martyrdom imparts to the living “an obligation to emulate [his] high moral example” (Clark 2000, 179). As self-sacrifice for the revolutionary collective, Erxiao’s martyrdom symbolizes the supreme attainment of “we-subjecthood,” a feat that even a child could aspire to achieve. Although the poem’s representation of Erxiao’s sacrificial death largely adheres to the rhetorical conventions adopted by the new socialist state in its commemoration of its dead heroes, Erxiao’s status as a thirteen-year-old introduces an underlying tension that is absent from accounts of adult martyrs, the sacrificial death of the new child both empowers and imperils the utopian project to create a new humanity. On the one hand, the child’s death serves as a clarion call for solidarity and collective action; on the other hand, the premature death also deprives the nascent socialist nation of its future new citizen. In this sense, then, the fate of the new child is conceptually conjoined with the fate of the new nation, lending greater urgency to the task of ensuring that the child did not die in vain.

The transformation of Erxiao’s death into a redemptive narrative is in part achieved through Xing’s portrayal of the commemorative activity that follows in the wake of the young hero’s sacrificial act. The theme of death and regeneration permeates the account, from the rhetoric of the poem to the behavior of Erxiao’s surrogate family. The final act of the poem, which immediately follows Erxiao’s execution, opens with the politically symbolic image of daybreak: “The red sun rises in the east” (Xing Y 1963). As the red sun symbolizes Mao and the revolutionary project, it suggests not only that the death of Erxiao has given birth to a glorious new future but also, to borrow from Clark, that “even death cannot deter History’s onward march” (Clark 2000, 181). The future of the socialist nation, moreover, is also safeguarded through the symbolic transfer of Erxiao’s “revolutionary spirit” to his fellow Children’s League member Shanni. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that the first person to appear on the scene to mourn Erxiao’s death is the politically enlightened young shepherd. Shanni’s status as a young female is noteworthy, as it suggests that girls, too, are expected to contribute to the socialist project. Ultimately, her timely presence in Erxiao’s moment of corporeal demise reassures the reader that the children and youth of New China will carry on his revolutionary legacy. Finally, for the political community at large, the public burial of

Wang Erxiao renews the bonds of kinship and galvanizes collective action toward the realization of socialist perfection.

The poem explicitly uses the memory of Erxiao's martyrdom to encourage young readers to learn from his heroic example and follow in his revolutionary footsteps. Toward the end of the final act, the narrator exhorts the children of New China to: "Learn from his revolutionary spirit, / Learn from his combative example, / Learn from his loyalty to the nation and the people, / Learn from his loyalty to the Communist Party!" (Xing Y 1963). Xing's piece thus proffers up the figure of the revolutionary child martyr as both an instrument of the child's political awakening and a model worthy of emulation. The poem goes one step further, though, to ensure that its target audience understands that its role in the building of a socialist utopia is not confined to the classroom, nor is it to be relegated to a future date when they become adults. In the coda, Xing Ye incorporates another poem by Fang Bing to address the child readers one last time, urging them to immediate action:

Dear children,  
There is no need to shed tears or be overcome by grief.  
Sing loudly this tragic and heroic song,  
And receive Erxiao's red horn call.  
Raise up your strong arms,  
As the sound of singing will triumph over any weapons.  
Unfurl your heroic wings,  
Since this horn call will bury any enemy. (Xing Y 1963)

Therefore, in a manner identical to the prefatory poem, Fang gestures beyond the imaginary realm of the poetic drama to speak directly to his young audience. This narrative feature underlines Xing's and Fang's ultimate intention in writing about the heroic exploits of a child martyr: to not merely describe but prescribe a larger role for children in the construction of a new social order. If the new child's death is to be redeemed and not imperil the future of the socialist nation, it is then necessary for the children of New China to attain political maturity in the present and assume their rightful position within the revolutionary collective as radical agents of change. Or, to put it more polemically, if the new child's death is not to be for naught, it is then incumbent on the nation's youth to follow in his heroic footsteps, which may entail greater acts of blood sacrifice. In the end, as the story of Wang Erxiao demonstrates, "destruction and foundation" lies at the heart of socialist configurations of community and Mao-era conceptions of the new child (Badiou 2007, 39).

## Conclusion

The emergence and development of the trope of child martyrdom in mid-twentieth-century China is linked to the country's wartime experience with Japan and the socialist

project to mold the new child. Although Nationalist Scout discourses militarized children’s culture in the years leading up to the War of Resistance, the dominant view of childhood promoted by the Nationalist Party was premised on a notion of children as “patriotic consumers” and “future masters of the Chinese nation” (Pozzi 2014, 105). In short, Nationalists regarded children primarily in terms of their potential as consumers and future citizens of the republic. By contrast, Communists identified children as “revolutionary successors” who were expected to assume a vanguard role in defending the socialist community and contributing toward the realization of a Communist future. Communist perceptions of children as viable political actors were reflected in the abundance of cultural productions that featured children as heroes and martyrs; foremost among these was the story of Wang Erxiao. At the same time, however, socialist-era narratives of child martyrdom brought to the fore tensions that arise in politicizing and aestheticizing the death of a child and were laden with an existential anxiety triggered by the premature death of the “revolutionary successor.”



Figure 5. Collage of images from the 2003 film adaptation of the Wang Erxiao story *Shaonian yingxiong* 少年英雄 (Young hero). Source: *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 (People’s daily), November 7, 2003, 16.

This article began by referencing *Red Tassel*, a contemporary-era children's theatrical production about Wang Erxiao, to foreground the continuing significance of the memory of child martyrdom in molding the mind of the modern Chinese child. That play is just one of the many cultural reproductions of the Wang Erxiao story to appear in the post-Mao period. Indeed, Wang Erxiao's apotheosis in the popular imagination has led to the dissemination of his story across a wide range of materials, including "documentary literature" (*jishi wenxue* 紀實文學), feature-length film (figure 5), musical theater, animated film (*donghua pian* 動畫片), and even a CCTV music video.<sup>19</sup> The story of Wang Erxiao's martyrdom has also found its way into school primers and textbooks, further cementing the young cowherd's status as a national hero in post-Mao China (Sun N 2015, 69–70). Whereas pre-1949 and socialist-era representations of Wang Erxiao were motivated by, in Badiou's (2007, 32) words, "the passion for the real" (a desire to use the memory of child martyrdom to mold the new socialist child), contemporary depictions of the boy martyr Wang Erxiao, by contrast, are aimed at educating, entertaining, and profiting from the post-socialist child. Child martyr stories in today's China are thus no longer tied to a notion of the child as a political actor in his or her own right; instead, they are intended to inculcate love of nation and obedience to party in children so that when they grow up they will contribute to national development under the leadership of the CCP.

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<sup>19</sup> For the CCTV music video, visit <http://tv.cntv.cn/video/VSET100242188747/329249905d374f0b8c13631fb32c6e08>.

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### About the Author

Andrew Kauffman is a PhD candidate in modern Chinese literature at Indiana University.