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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

# “Chinese Children Rise Up!”: Representations of Children in the Work of the Cartoon Propaganda Corps during the Second Sino-Japanese War

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## Abstract

During the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945), children were a major subject of propaganda images. Children had become significant figures in China when May Fourth intellectuals, influenced by evolutionary thinking, deemed “the child” as a central figure for the modernization of the country. Consequently, during the war, cartoonists employed already-established representations of children for propagandistic purposes. By analyzing images published by members of the Cartoon Propaganda Corps in the wartime magazine *Resistance Cartoons*, this article shows how portrayals of children fulfilled symbolic as well as normative functions. These images provide us with information about the symbolic power of representations of children, and about authorities’ expectations of China’s youngest citizens. However, cartoonists also created images undermining the heroic rhetoric often attached to representations of children, especially after the dismissal of the Cartoon Propaganda Corps in 1940. This was the case with cartoonist Zhang Leping’s (1910–1992) sketches of “Zhuji after the Devastation,” which revealed the discrepancies between propagandistic representations and children’s everyday life in wartime China.

Keywords: Second Sino-Japanese War, War of Resistance, history of childhood, cartoons, propaganda, Cartoon Propaganda Corps, Zhang Leping

## Introduction

> Who killed your parents? Who killed your sisters? Who pierced our brothers with a bayonet? Who seized our lands and properties? We should go and fight against them! Old people, middle-aged people, young people, it’s time to rise up! You little masters of the New China, rise up! Sing on the street corners, put a play on the stage, transport the wounded from the battlefield, display posters on whitewashed walls. In every piece of China’s land, in every corner, our future masters [Chinese children] were thought to hate, they grew up under the artillery fire! . . . There is no laughter on Children’s Day this year, but there are also no tears, since we have to take revenge! You have to fight! Open your mouths, raise your fists, you can pick up a pen, every child should record the behavior of

> criminals, so that everybody can see, children should teach everybody that we should fight together! (Liao Bingxiong (1915–2006), "Zhongguo haizi qilai le!" [Chinese children rise up!] reprinted in Shen 2005, 223)[1]

During the War of Resistance, children became indispensable figures of the patriotic discourse fostered by Chinese propagandists. In April 1938, the fortnightly magazine *Resistance Cartoons* (*Kangzhan Manhua*) dedicated several articles and cartoons to the annual celebration of National Children's Day. It was in this issue that cartoonist Liao Bingxiong published the text quoted above, in a piece entitled "Chinese Children Rise Up!" ("Zhongguo haizi qilai le!" 中國孩子起來了!), which exhorted Chinese children to participate in the wartime mobilization against the Japanese.[2] Liao Bingxiong's text introduced themes that also appeared in several cartoons published in the magazine, such as children's suffering, children's role as future leaders of the Chinese nation, and the need to mobilize children for the war.

The content, aims, dissemination, and reception of wartime propaganda cartoons in China have been the subjects of several studies (Hung 1994; Edwards 2013; Shen 2005), and pictorials such as *Resistance Cartoons*—published between 1938 and 1940 with some interruptions—are one of the main sources for those interested in wartime political culture in China. *Resistance Cartoons* is considered the political and artistic manifesto of the Cartoon Propaganda Corps (Jiuwang manhua xuanchuan dui 救亡漫畫宣傳隊), a group comprised of some of the most popular Chinese cartoonists, who, at the outbreak of the war, employed their artistic skills in order to rally civilians and soldiers together to fight the enemy (Bi and Huang 2006). From the end of 1937 to the beginning of 1940, the corps was financed by the Political Department of the Military Affairs Commission, headed by Communist intellectual Guo Moruo (1892–1978). Thanks to the government's assistance, the corps managed to publish *Resistance Cartoons* until the end of 1940, when the magazine's financial and political support fell short and it closed down. Yet, even after the demise of *Resistance Cartoons,* cartoonists carried on publishing their work in other publications, such as local newspapers and magazines, until the end of the conflict.

The dawn of the War of Resistance signaled the beginning of an extreme politicization of Chinese cartoons, in which they went from being mainly a means of entertainment to tools for the propagation of anti-Japanese slogans and the education of the Chinese population (Hung 1994, 94). In an attempt to inform the population about the need to fight against the Japanese,

Chinese resisters refashioned conventional forms of urban culture—such as spoken drama, journalism, and graphic art—into propaganda media able to communicate to the widest cross section of the public (Hung 1994). For Chinese cartoonists, the wartime propagandistic efforts aimed mostly to rally the Chinese population together against the Japanese, making people aware of the new exigencies of wartime and dissuading them from collaborating with China's enemies. To convey these messages, cartoonists selected visual symbols and rhetorical tools of high emotional impact that were easily accessible to the public.. A number of recurring themes appeared in wartime cartoons, which featured heroic Chinese fighters, brutal Japanese soldiers, and women, who were represented as both victims and combatants. Some of these themes have been analyzed in depth by others scholars, such as Barak Kushner (2013), who focused on the humorous depiction of Japanese soldiers in Chinese visual propaganda, and Louise Edwards (2013), who showed how images of sexual violence by Japanese soldiers against Chinese women were powerful symbols of China's humiliation. Children also were one of the main subjects of propaganda cartoons, yet visual representations of China's youngest citizens have rarely been considered as research subjects. They have, however, been analyzed in connection with the images of heroic mothers attempting to defend their offspring from invaders (Hung 1994, 101). This article analyzes wartime cartoons depicting children to show how, during the Second Sino-Japanese War, multiple representations of childhood coexisted in order to fulfill symbolic as well as normative purposes. How were children represented by members of the Cartoon Propaganda Corps? What was the purpose of these images? Were all cartoons patriotic and nationalistic, or did some of them suggest a different perspective? These images can provide us not only with useful information about the symbolic power of children in visual media, but also with examples of a less heroic vision of war.

## Historiography, Sources, and Methodology

Scholarship on the history of children can be roughly divided into two main categories: that which examines the social experience of actual children, and that which analyzes the discursive construction of childhood. In this sense, it is possible to distinguish the study of "children" from the study of "childhood," a term that refers to the philosophical, cultural, and social understanding of a specific phase of human experience (Hsiung 2005, 15). While it is essential to differentiate between the history of real children and the development of their

representations in public discourse, it is nevertheless true that ideas and theories held by adults about childhood often have concrete effects on children's everyday lives. This means that in order to understand the experience of children in a specific historical period, it is necessary to consider contemporary discourses surrounding the figure of the child and the values that children come to represent.

While analyzing representations of children, it is also important to take into consideration the problem of speaking about “children” as a homogeneous social group, since they differ in age, social background, and gender. For instance, toddlers and teenagers are both considered children from a legal perspective, but their experiences, agency, and social relations differ greatly. Furthermore, even children of the same age from different social backgrounds may share few life experiences. Finally, gender also plays a key role in the development, education, and social life of each child.

To comprehend the differences and interconnections between children's real experiences and the ways in which childhood has been employed for political purposes is particularly relevant in studies of the First and Second World Wars, when children became one of the main subjects and recipients of wartime propagandistic material in a number of countries. The representation of children in wartime political iconography and the ways in which propagandistic material entered children's lives are separate, yet interconnected, issues that scholars have to address. Numerous scholars have investigated the lives of children, how their images were exploited for propaganda purposes, and the ways their behavior was shaped by propaganda in Europe, the Soviet Union, and the United States during the two world wars. For instance, according to Stéphan Audoin-Rouzeau, children occupied a central position in propaganda discourse in France during the Great War, when they often appeared in visual propaganda in order to mobilize the population against the enemies. While their images were employed in order to rally adults, young French citizens were also initiated into a culture of war through school texts and specialized literature (Audoin-Rouzeau 1993). Similarly, in the United States, children became the recipients and protagonists of a massive propaganda campaign aimed at militarizing the youngest members of American society during both global conflicts (Collins 2011). In the Soviet Union, the government made children into significant actors in wartime propaganda; furthermore, Soviet children were invited to take part in the war effort by helping to collect money for the military (Kelly 2007, 117). Some recent studies describe how, in the Soviet Union

and Europe, especially Germany, propagandistic messages were one of the factors that pushed underage young people to join the army and fight for their country (Kucherenko 2011; Stargardt 2005). Whereas historians have analyzed children's experiences in the Western world during the two global conflicts, the case of China is still underresearched, although the number of studies about this subject is steadily growing.[3]

While historical studies on children and childhood are mostly based on textual analysis, this article focuses on visual sources. To work with visual material as a historical source is not always an easy task, and it requires a specific methodology. It is necessary to take into consideration several elements, such as the historical context in which the image in question was produced, the agencies active in shaping its content and style, the technical means through which it was disseminated, the targeted audience, and—when possible—the image's reception (Jordanova 2012).

This article focuses mostly on images published in *Resistance Cartoons* and a series of sketches entitled "Zhuji after the Devastation" ("Jiehou zhuji" 劫後諸暨), published between December 1940 and January 1941 in the newspaper *Southeast Daily* (*Dongnan Ribao* 東南日報) by Zhang Leping, the vice president of the Cartoon Propaganda Corps and one of its most active members. *Resistance Cartoons* was a professional publication targeting mainly writers and artists, and it is a rich source of information about the ideas circulating among the artistic elites active in wartime propaganda (Edwards 2013, 5). An analysis of the multiple representations of children published in this magazine allows us to better understand the symbolic values attached to childhood by propagandists during the war, the expectations of adults toward the younger members of Chinese society, and the normative function of these images. Despite these images' popularity, the nationalist and patriotic rhetoric so apparent in them was less overt in other publications, such as "Zhuji after the Devastation," which offered a more ambivalent vision of wartime childhood.

## Children, Nationalism, and Visual Culture

In their attempt to boost public morale and inform the population about how to persist under the strain of war, Chinese cartoonists based their images on a number of motives that they thought were meaningful and understandable to their public. The key to appealing to their

diverse audience was their massive employment of the image of the Chinese child. The trick was not in the novelty of presenting images of children, but in the power of those images' connotations and their nationalist genealogy. In fact, cartoonists frequently built their wartime images of children on images that were already popular before the war.

May Fourth intellectuals were among the first to identify children as the key for the success of China as a modern country. In his work about evolutionary thinking in Chinese book culture in the first half of the twentieth century, Andrew Jones points out how "the child" became a central figure for the intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement, for whom the new generations represented expectations for the future development of a new China.[4] Following father of Chinese modern literature Lu Xun's (1881–1936) celebrated slogan "Save the Children!," published in his 1918 short story, "A Madman's Diary" (Lu 2009), several intellectuals tried to end the reproduction of Confucian culture by employing new strategies for the development of children's education, literature, and family environment.[5]

Intellectual discourse about the role of children in strengthening the Chinese nation became an essential element of the political culture of the Republic. The education of children as citizens started at school, where they were introduced to the symbols of Republican modernity (Harrison 2000, 61–62). Concerns about the correct physical growth of China's younger citizens also entered public discussions about the country's new generations. Fascinated by Social Darwinism and modern medical techniques, politicians promoted new methods of raising children, hoping to develop healthy youth and guarantee the survival of the nation. Newborns' health was not just a family matter; on the contrary, the importance of children's physical and intellectual development was directly connected with the growing nationalistic feelings and the importance of forming citizens who were able to compete with the rest of the world. The central role of children in nation-building discourse was exemplified by the personification of the Chinese Republic as a sickly child in need of education and a cure (Harrison 2000, 112–113).

This interest in children's development boosted the production of new children's literature, goods, and educational toys, which in turn fostered the growth of commerce evolving around the new needs of young consumers. The middle class's concern about the proper physical and moral growth of their offspring set the groundwork for the introduction of specialized foodstuff and medicines. These new products were advertised in magazines, pictorials, and newspapers, mostly through graphic commercials representing healthy infants. While rosy-cheeked children had long

been a typical subject of Chinese New Year prints (*nianhua* 年畫), new visual representations advocating the role of children as future citizens of the Republic became very popular in the cities (Jones 2011, 129–131; Fernsebner 2010). Intellectuals' and politicians' interest in the appropriate development of Chinese children, together with the advance of an urban visual culture, also resulted in a flood of baby pictures being sent by parents to magazines and pictorials. For instance, in January 1927, the influential magazine *The Young Companion Pictorial* (*Liangyou huabao* 良友畫報) announced a "Baby Contest" in order to elect China's model child. On the occasion of the competition, 170 pictures of infants sent by proud parents were published in the magazine, and readers were encouraged to express their preferences (Fernsebner 2010, 280–281).

Following the ideas of the May Fourth intellectuals, the Nationalists employed the figure of the child for political purposes, identifying the younger generation as "future masters of the Chinese nation." At the same time, the Nationalist Party also promoted children as patriotic consumers through the establishment of events such as National Children's Day in 1932 and "the Year of the Child" in 1934, occasions through which the Nationalists managed to merge the political and commercial roles of childhood (Gerth 2003).

Besides promoting children as Nationalist consumers, the Guomindang Party (GMD) also endorsed a new model for Chinese children: the Boy Scouts (*tongzijun* 童子軍). As explained by the manual *Beginner Boy Scouts* (*Chuji Tongzijun* 初級童子軍), the Boy Scouts were China in 1912 by Wuchang Culture University (Wuchang Wenhua Daxue 武昌文化大學), five years after the founding of the Boy Scout movement by the British lieutenant general Robert Baden-Powell (1957–1941) in 1907 (Hu 1936). Many youth movements in Europe were influenced by Baden-Powell's scouts; in particular, both German Nazis and Italian Fascists modeled their youth groups on the scouts. Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party followed the German and Italian example, and in 1926 Chiang included Chinese scouting in the party structure to ensure that "the Nationalist ideology could be adopted by the young members of the association" (Kua 2011, 162–164). Therefore, in China, Boy Scouts were directly connected with the Nationalist Party, which transformed scouting into a semimilitarized movement. In 1933, the year in which the manual was published, there were more than one hundred thousand Boy Scouts in China, and these scouts swore to always be loyal Chinese citizens, to do their best to serve the people, and to

improve their knowledge and morality (Kua 2011). The manual portrayed young scouts taking an oath in front of the picture of the founding father of the Republic of China, Sun Yat-sen 孫中仙 (1866–1925), and the flag of the GMD, as well as in other patriotic scenes. The Boy Scouts were also popular as a subject of novels and movies, which presented them as ideal citizens, as in the case of director Sun Yu's 1933 movie *Little Playthings* (*Xiao wanyi* 小玩意), whose political and social content has been analyzed by both Susan Fernsebner (2010, 285–287) and Andrew Jones (2011, 129–131).

Homeless and orphaned children also appeared in popular culture. During the 1920s and 1930s, orphaned children were the protagonists of several Chinese movies based on or inspired by foreign novels. Movies produced during the 1920s—such as *An Orphan Rescues His Grandfather* (1923) (*Gu'er qiuzu ji* 孤兒救祖記) and *A Little Friend* (1925) (*Xiao pengyou* 小朋友)—were mostly concerned with middle-class children temporarily separated from their families.[6] In these years, the orphans of the silver screen were model children who eventually located their families, thanks to their high moral standards. This trend changed in the 1930s, when Leftist directors appropriated the image of the orphan to produce politically engaged movies. Movie directors broke with the stereotyped portrayals of model orphans, turning toward more realistic descriptions of the hardships suffered by homeless children. This change was due to the emergence in the 1930s of the Chinese Left-Wing Dramatist Association (Zhongguo zuoyi xijujia lianmeng 中國左翼戲劇家聯盟), a group of filmmakers deeply influenced by the May Fourth Movement's ideas and partially by Socialist and Marxist thinking. Their movies—distributed by some of the major cinema studios in Shanghai—contained a sense of social mission, ethical dedication, and elements of class consciousness (Pang 2002, 5). Left-wing filmmakers borrowed ideas from both Soviet films and Hollywood productions. While they admired the social commitment of Soviet movies, they often copied the style and techniques of American blockbusters, which were the most popular films in Shanghai at the time. One of the most successful leftist movie of the 1930s was director Cai Chusheng's (1906–1965) *Lost Lambs* (*Mitu de gaoyang* 迷途的羔羊), released in 1936 and modeled after Soviet director Nicolai Ekk's (real name Ivakni, 1902–1976) *Road to Life* (1931), a drama about the reformation of a group of homeless children in the post–civil war years (Huang 2014, 96; Kelly 2007, 200).

In the 1920s and 1930s, intellectual and political discourses that saw children as central to the survival and advancement of the Chinese nation were popularized by the contemporary commercial press, cinema, and other forms of visual culture. While middle-class children were the main visual icons of the prewar years, left-wing intellectuals and artists challenged the overrepresentation of wealthy children in urban popular culture by portraying orphans in their stories. During the War of Resistance, cartoonists employed all of these representations of children—toddlers, Boy Scouts, and orphans—in their propaganda cartoons.

## Children as Victims

What did cartoonists' wartime images aim to communicate? The iconographic representations of children during wartime fell into three main categories: children as victims, children as activists, and orphans. These consolidated motifs served different but interconnected purposes. This section analyzes several cartoons presenting Chinese children as victims of the Japanese, underlining the functions that these images fulfilled in the propaganda campaign.

Chinese children suffered incredibly during the War of Resistance: they were often obliged to flee their homes, and they were subject to hunger, disease, and brutality. In the worst cases, they were orphaned or even killed. Cartoonists endorsed one specific representation of children's suffering: their violent death at the hands of Japanese soldiers. Certainly, children were murdered during the war, but cartoons denouncing horrific Japanese deeds against young victims should be read not as a representation of historical reality but in light of the nationalistic wartime discourses circulating among cartoonists and intellectuals and already popular among the urban population.

One of the most emblematic representations of Japanese brutality against Chinese children was found in Zhang Leping's “Ah! A Chinese child!” (“Ah! Zhongguo haizi!” 啊！中國孩子!) (figure 1). In this cartoon, two Japanese soldiers find a baby amid the ruins of a house. One of the soldiers throws the little naked body on the bayonet of his friend, as if it were garbage. The title of the cartoon adds dramatic tones to the already powerful scene. Not only do the two Japanese soldiers show no signs of compassion toward the innocent toddler, but they seem to kill him purely for pleasure.[7] Furthermore, in choosing the title “Ah! A Chinese child!,” the author underlines the importance of nationality in the rhetoric of war. In this cartoon, Zhang Leping

stressed not only the brutality of the enemy but also the Japanese will to destroy the Chinese nation by eliminating its children.

Figure 1. Zhang Leping's "Ah! A Chinese child!" *Source*: *Resistance Cartoons*, issue 7, April 1938. Reproduced in Qiu and Zhang (2007, 31).

The motif of Chinese children pierced by Japanese bayonets recurred in Zhang Leping's work as well as in that of his colleagues. In 1939, Zhang drew a cartoon entitled "This is how the enemy murders us!" ("Diren shi zheyang shahai women de!" 敵人是這樣殺害我們的!), in which the corpses of three babies hang from the spear of a cruel Japanese soldier (figure 2). To emphasize the brutality of this murder, Zhang Leping deliberately gave the Japanese soldier animalistic features, such as big teeth and a large mouth. The soldier's beastly look stands in contrast to the little bodies of the Chinese children. The title strengthened the meaning of the image: by slaughtering Chinese babies, the Japanese destroy the future of the Chinese nation. Certainly, portraying the savage massacre of children served as an attempt to awaken Chinese citizens' spirit of resistance, summoning citizens to avenge their children while ensuring the salvation of the entire country.

Figure 2. Zhang Leping's "This is how the enemy murders us!" *Source*: reproduced in Qiu and Zhang (2007, 110).[8]

The popular artist and president of the Cartoon Propaganda Corps, Ye Qianyu (1907–1995), also included Chinese children in his cartoons. On the cover of the seventh issue of *Resistance Cartoons*, the artist depicted a child crying over the lifeless body of his mother. In the background, two Japanese soldiers watch the scene with satisfied smiles while one says, "We should kill that child!" and the other responds, "Wouldn't it be more interesting to let it die of hunger?" (figure 3). In her analysis of this image, Louise Edwards focuses on the woman's lacerated body, which she claims to be another powerful symbol of China's humiliation (Edwards 2013, 16). However, the crying toddler is the key character of the scene. The soldiers' decision to leave the infant to starve underscores their brutality and their will to inflict even more suffering than that already caused by their act.

Figure 3. Ye Qianyu’s “We should kill that child! Wouldn’t it be more interesting to let it die of hunger?” *Source*: *Resistance Cartoons*, cover of issue 7, April 1938. Reproduced in Shen (2005, 201).

Cartoons portraying the enemy’s violence against children not only aimed to rouse their viewers’ patriotic sentiments but also informed people of the need to help refugee children. The War of Resistance created what we would now call a humanitarian crisis all over China. Cartoonists tried to sensitize public opinion by emphasizing with their images the imminent need to contribute to the rescue of the most unfortunate children. Female cartoonist Liang Baibo's (1911–1987) “Stretching hands out for help” (“Shenchu yuanzhu de shoulai” 伸出援助的手來) is another example that calls attention to this need (figure 4). In the image, a little boy stretches his hand out while at his side an even younger girl cries desperately. The background consists of newspaper headlines and articles spurring people to help Chinese children. The scene is made even more dramatic by the presence of a snake, a highly symbolic figure, wrapping the desperate duo in its coils. Following cartoonists’ tendency to use animalistic features to portray the enemy

(Hung 1994, 106), Liang employed the image of the snake to represent the Japanese invaders. By adding this little detail to the scene, she represented one of the most widespread fears of the time: if not helped and educated, children could be seduced by the Japanese and become collaborators, or even criminals.

Figure 4. Liang Baibo's "Stretching hands out for help." *Source*: *Resistance Cartoons*, issue 8, April 1938. Reproduced in Shen (2005, 214).

In all these cartoons, the children represented are toddlers, physically unable to defend themselves or aid in the fight. By representing helpless, weak, and innocent toddlers as victims of war, these cartoons targeted adults, encouraging them to protect younger Chinese citizens by fighting against the enemy. It is worth noting that images about victimized children often portrayed female toddlers, while images in which children were celebrated as the future of the nation or as future soldiers rarely featured girls.

**Children as Model Citizens**

Children as victims of the Japanese were not the only wartime representation of childhood employed by Chinese propagandists. The wartime iconography of childhood also included representations of children as resisters helping their adult compatriots in war activities. In some cases, children were portrayed as fighters; in others, they appeared as active supporters of the war. What function did these images serve? Were they actually calling for the militarization of children?

The War of Resistance altered expectations of children, who were often considered to be little adults with responsibilities to the state (Plum 2011). In propaganda cartoons, child fighters and activists were elevated as role models for other children or adults; in particular, the behavior, physical vigor, and military preparation of Boy Scouts was believed to reflect the strength of the Chinese nation. For this reason, pictures of Boy Scout parades, military training, and fund-raising activities became even more popular during the war than in the prewar years. For instance, in March 1939, *The Young Companion* published a photographic report completely dedicated to the celebrations for Boy Scouts' Day in Chongqing and Chengdu, showing well-trained children marching in military fashion.

*Resistance Cartoons* likewise published a number of cartoons representing Boy Scouts and child soldiers. For instance, in Zhang Leping's comic strip "Sanmao's broadsword" ("Sanmao de dadao" 三毛的大刀), the popular comic hero Sanmao tries to join the army despite his young age. The soldier in charge of enrollment refuses to enlist him; however, Sanmao demonstrates that his age is not so relevant when it comes to fighting for his country. Under the eyes of the surprised soldier, the child cuts down two trees with his broadsword, declaring: "I don't believe that the Japanese devils' necks can be harder than these trees!" (figure 5). This strip contains pertinent information about the reality and symbolism of child soldiers. Most concretely, it shows that children were not officially allowed to join the army. Despite Sanmao's determination and ability, the strip does not suggest that the child will eventually become a soldier. However, Zhang Leping's strip demonstrates that younger generations of Chinese were ready to fight for their nation, in order to guarantee a future for their country. In this respect, the broadsword adds symbolic meaning to the action. The *dadao* was a traditional Chinese sword, still a part of the standard soldiers' equipment during the Sino-Japanese War. It came to

symbolize Chinese culture, in opposition to the Japanese samurai sword, which thus adds a second level of meaning to Zhang Leping's comic strip. Representations of children skillfully handling the *dadao* underscored children's role in the perpetuation of Chinese heritage and race.

Figure 5. Zhang Leping's "Sanmao's broadsword." *Source*: *Resistance Cartoons*, issue 2, January 1938. Reproduced on Sanmao's official website.[9]

Although this strip was not a call for children to engage in actual fighting, it suggests that, with enough willpower, even children could overcome the Japanese. Furthermore, Zhang Leping reminds the viewer that children, once they grew up, were destined to become fighters. This concept is made clear in several other cartoons published in *Resistance Cartoons*, such as Tao

Mouji's (1912–1985) “We have to protect those sprouts that have grown on this bloody ground—they are the next generation of soldiers” under the title (“Baoyu bei xueran tudi shang shengchan de xinya, tamen shi xiayidai de zhanshi” 保育被血染土地上生產的新芽他們是下一代的戰士). In this cartoon, a mother holds a toddler who is proudly waving the flag of the Republic of China. As its title makes clear, this image emphasizes the importance of saving children, who are destined to become the future soldiers willing to fight for their nation (figure 6).

Figure 6. Tao Mouji’s “We have to protect those sprouts that have grown on this bloody ground—they are the next generation of soldiers.” *Source*: *Resistance Cartoons*, issue 9, May 1938. Reproduced in Shen (2005, 230).

Another representative image that underscores this notion was Lu Zhixiang's (1910–1992) "Our children will become strong future soldiers" ("Women de ertong yao chengwei youli de weilai zhanshi" 我們的兒童要成為有力的未來戰士). In this cartoon, a child wearing a uniform is marching with a rifle on his shoulder, and in the background we can see his silhouette projected on a wall. Showing the child's shadow as being far bigger than he is, the image gives the illusion of seeing the little soldier's future as an adult fighter. This symbolic meaning is reinforced by a small detail: while the child is looking toward the reader as he marches (as if seeking his parents' approval), his shadow/future himself is proudly looking forward, sure of his mission (figure 7). By representing children as future fighters, cartoonists tried to communicate a sense of continuity in national history. Similar to those cartoons presenting Japanese soldiers' violence against Chinese children, these images of iconic young fighters aimed to mobilize citizens to protect their younger compatriots, while at the same time raising children's awareness of the need to support their country once they grow up.

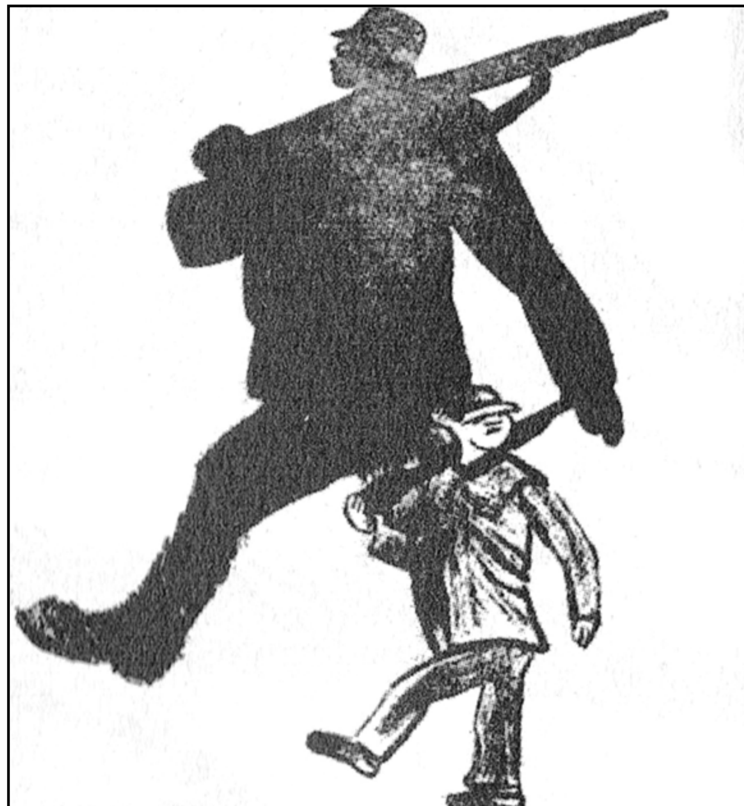

Figure 7. Lu Zhixiang's "Our children will become strong future soldiers." *Source*: *Resistance Cartoons*, issue 9, May 1938. Reproduced in Shen (2005, 230).

Figure 8. Liao Bingxiong’s “Do not say that children are too young; we don't lack any ability! Under fire we deliver letters and spread propaganda on the street corners!” *Source*: *Resistance Cartoons*, issue 9, May 1938. Reproduced in Shen (2005, 230).

Indeed, Chinese cartoonists most often depicted children as active participants engaged in various paramilitary activities. In particular, Boy Scouts often appeared in propaganda images collecting money for soldiers, cultivating land, helping adults with propaganda efforts, and participating in official parades. These figures of model children helping adults fulfilled two different needs: first, they showed how children could contribute to the war effort; second, they established children as models for adults by describing the right behavior to be followed by young and old alike. Liao Bingxiong’s cartoon titled “Do not say that children are too young; we don't lack any ability! Under fire we deliver letters and spread propaganda on the street corners!” (“Wu shuo haizi nianji shao，menmen benling dou qiquan! Paohuo zhong chuan shuxin, jietoucun jiao xuanchuan” 勿說孩子年紀少,門門本領都齊全! 炮火叢中傳書信，街頭村角做宣傳) exemplifies this message (figure 8). The image is divided in two parts: in the top part, Boy Scouts, recognizable by their uniforms, ride bicycles to deliver letters to officials. In the lower left corner of the cartoon, a Boy Scout standing on a pedestal gives a propaganda speech to a group of adults. While in real life, children often participated in propagandistic shows and

parades attended by grown-up audiences, these events were sponsored by organizations headed by adults, such as orphanages, scouting organizations, and propaganda teams. On the contrary, in *Resistance Cartoons,* children appeared as autonomous supporters of the Chinese war effort, showing child readers how they could help their country.

In wartime cartoons, children often behaved better than adults, teaching them how to be good patriots and citizens. As we have already seen in "Sanmao's broadsword," during the war, Zhang Leping transformed his naughty cartoon hero into a patriot. Besides being an aspirant soldier, the character Sanmao appeared in other strips performing his duties as a Chinese citizen, proving himself to be more mature than many adults. In "Sanmao's father" ("Sanmao de baba" 三毛的爸爸), the little hero discovers that his father disguised himself as a woman in order to avoid obligatory conscription. Appalled by his dad's cowardice, Sanmao unmasks him in front of the authorities (figure 9).

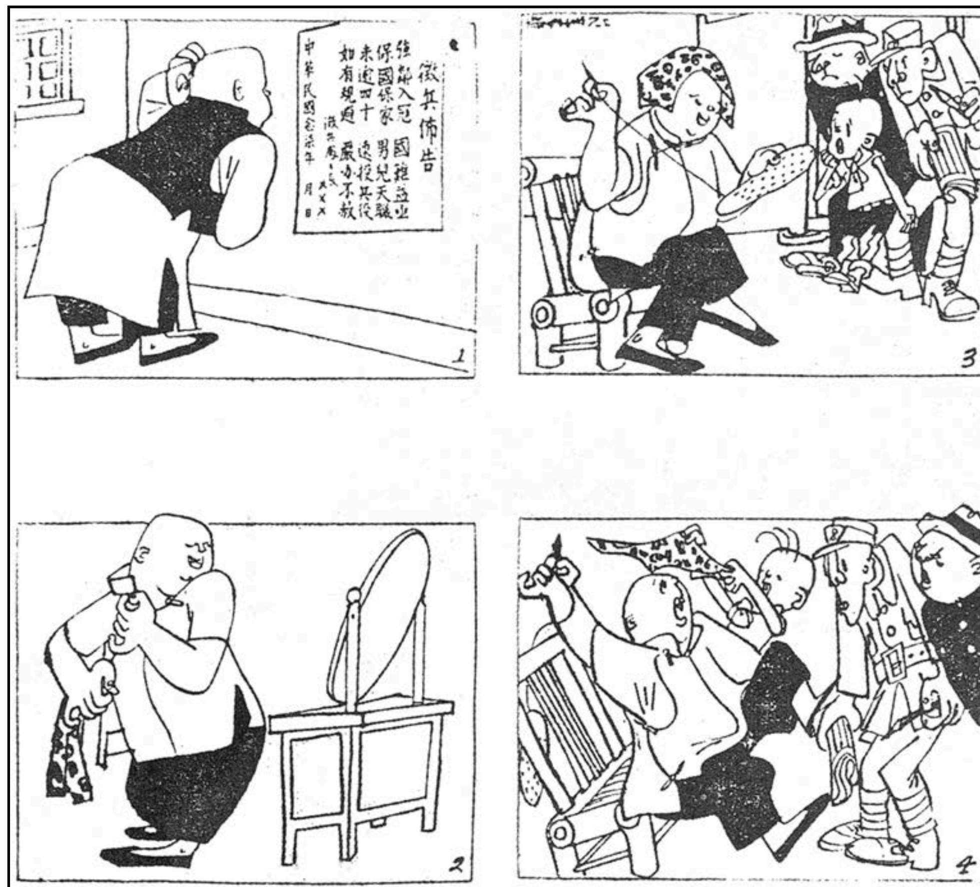


Figure 9. Zhang Leping's "Sanmao's father." *Source*: *Resistance Cartoons*, issue 3, February 1938. Reproduced in Shen (2005, 155).

In a similar strip, entitled “Taken by Strategy” (“Keyi Zhiqu” 可以智取), Sanmao witnesses more upsetting behavior by his father, who, when asked by a group of scouts for a small financial donation to the soldiers on the front, refuses to make any contribution. Sanmao decides to obtain his father's help by using a different strategy. When his father goes to sleep, the child takes away the thick coat his father uses as a blanket, forcing the man to understand some of the privations suffered daily by Chinese soldiers. His father eventually wakes up trembling with cold, at which point Sanmao shows him the same poster displayed earlier by the scouts and asks his father to be more understanding toward the suffering of his fellow compatriots (figure 10).

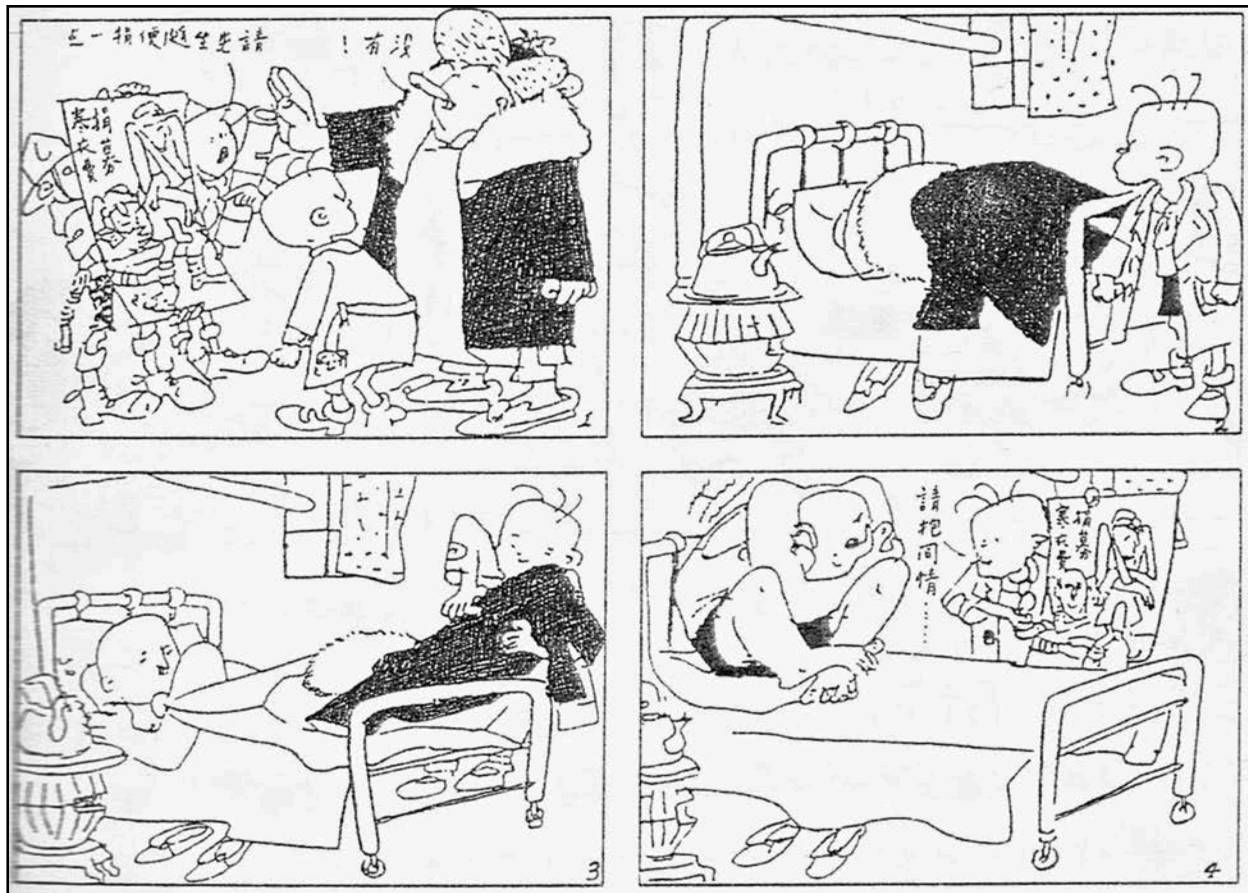


Figure 10. Zhang Leping’s “Taken by strategy.” *Source*: *Resistance Cartoons*, issue 6, March 1938. Reproduced in Qiu and Zhang (2007, 23).

Like Liao Bingxiong's cartoon, Zhang Leping's strip presents children as model citizens, whose exemplary actions should be considered valuable examples for adults. Sanmao's adventures reminded adults of their misbehavior and provided his readers with a model to follow, and thus these images were both symbolic and educational. On the one hand, representing children as resisters, cartoonists tried to communicate a sense of continuity in national history, expressing hope for a bright future; on the other hand, they invited Chinese citizens to reflect on their behavior, denouncing the misconduct of the population. By shaming adults, cartoonists tried to dissuade them from evading military service and, instead, fight for the survival of their country. In this way, these cartoons turn the classic adult-child relationship upside down. By presenting children as models, cartoonists also connected their work to a long-lasting discourse about Chinese parents' ability to educate their offspring as good, modern Chinese citizens (Plum 2011). These cartoons present children as the real citizens of the nation, while adults still fail to understand what a nation is.

## War Orphans

Orphans were popular subjects of propaganda cartoons. It is estimated that at least twenty million Chinese died during the Sino-Japanese conflict for war-related reasons (Lary and McKinnon 2001, 6). The death of so many people led to the creation of several other social problems, among which orphans were one of the most critical. According to available statistics, during the war at least two million children were orphaned in China, causing the Nationalist government and China's National Relief Commission to build and subsidize children's homes all over the country (Plum 2011). First Lady Madame Song Meiling (1898–2003) was one of the key individuals involved in the establishment of several institutions for children. As documented by *The Young Companion*, the First Lady, together with her sisters Song Qingling (1890–1981) and Song Ailin (1888–1973), traveled around China visiting institutions and hospitals for refugees and orphans. Naturally, the First Lady's awareness of orphans' problems was connected both with the unquestionable necessity to provide help for these wretched children and with the important role played by orphans in the war propaganda campaign.

Orphans became central characters in the propaganda campaign for two main reasons: first, it was necessary to raise public awareness on this issue, and second, by claiming to protect orphans, the Nationalists promoted a vision of the nation under state control. In order to

underline the importance of saving Chinese orphans, propagandists represented them as important personalities for the future of the country by referring to them as "children of the ancestral homeland" (*zuguo de haizimen* 祖國的孩子們), or the "nation's children" (*gujia de ertong* 國家的兒童), instead of using the standard word *gu' er* 孤兒 (Plum 2011, 189).

Zhang Leping made extensive use of orphans in his work, in particular in his twelve-panel tale, "Sanmao escapes from the enemies' bayonets" ("Cong diren qiangci xia taichu de Sanmao" 從敵人槍刺下逃出的三毛), in which he turned his fictional hero into a war orphan (figure 11). In the strip, the Japanese soldiers brutally kill Sanmao's parents, leaving the child alone and unprotected. Sanmao is rescued by his uncle, who soon leaves him to join the army. Hungry and lonely, the little hero looks for help in a village, but the locals avoid him. Finally, Sanmao meets a group of children willing to listen to his heartbreaking story, and they decide to start their own propaganda group in order to convince adults to join the Chinese army and fight their enemy.

"Sanmao escapes from the enemies' bayonets" contains almost all of the motifs connected with the figure of the war orphan. The death of parents was a ubiquitous theme in contemporary cartoons, as was the exemplary behavior of Chinese children. However, Zhang Leping's strip presents two other interesting themes: child abandonment and the Chinese population's lack of concern for orphans. In the sixth panel, Sanmao is left alone by his uncle, who has to join the army. In this way, the artist introduces the problem of abandonment, suggesting that the difficult conditions faced by orphans were often caused by their families' participation in the war efforts. This message becomes clearer as the story develops. When the orphan Sanmao arrives in a village, the inhabitants do not pay attention to him, leaving the poor child alone and hungry. The peasants' uncaring attitude toward Sanmao reflects their indifference toward the national war. In the end, the orphan and his new young friends manage to rally the peasants to war, despite the suffering inflicted on him by the conflict. Clearly, by depicting orphans as victims, Zhang Leping was trying to inform the population about this widespread problem. Furthermore, by portraying these unfortunate children as resisters, he reminded his public that orphans were Chinese citizens, too, able to make the greatest sacrifices.

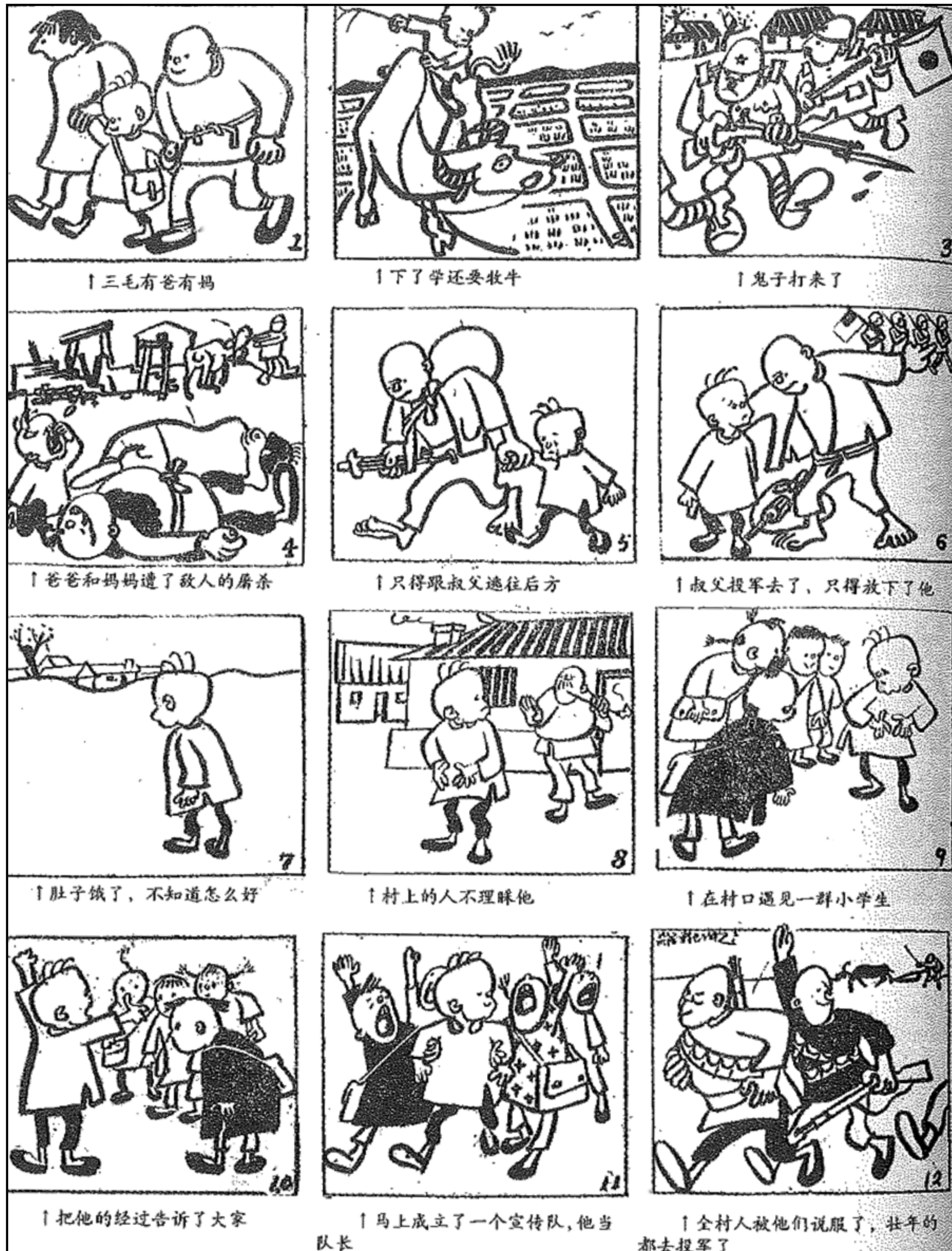


Figure 11. Zhang Leping's "Sanmao escapes from the enemies' bayonets." *Source*: *Resistance Cartoons*, issue 10, May 1938. Reproduced in Shen (2005, 240).

Propagandists often encouraged orphans to seek vengeance for their families, suggesting that they take the place of their deceased parents in the fight against the enemy. Similarly, the last panels of Zhang Leping's story show the personal reprisal of Sanmao, who engages in propaganda efforts persuading adults to fight against the soldiers guilty of massacring his family. The idea that children would avenge their parents' deaths by taking over their positions as soldiers was also put forward in Zhang Leping's "Father's relics" ("Fuqin de yiwu" 父親的遺物). In this powerful cartoon, a child grabs a rifle in front of a massacred corpse (figure 12). From the child's dress we can infer that he is poor, and his young age is made evident by his small size. However, his expression—a mix of sadness and resolution—communicates strength to the readers. In this case, the title of the cartoon is revealing: the child is standing in front of his father's body, ready to take his place in the fight and avenge his death. As in other cartoons portraying the brutality of Japanese soldiers, in this image Zhang Leping abandons the abstract and minimalist style of comic strips in favor of a realist depiction of war.

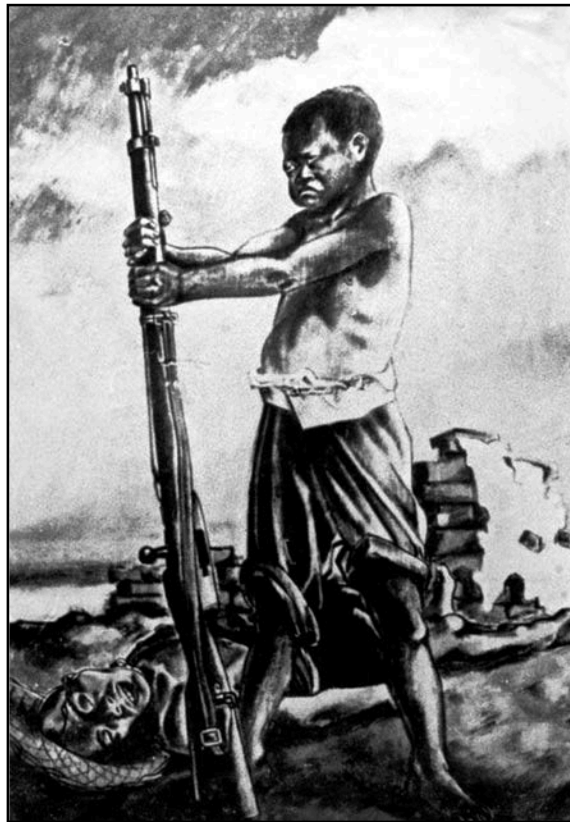

Figure 12. Zhang Leping's "Father's relics," painted on cloth, April 1938. *Source*: Sanmao's official website (see note 9).

**Children in "Zhuji after the Devastation"**

Patriotism, nationalism, and heroism formed the basis of the visual representations of children propagated by the Cartoon Propaganda Corps, but Chinese cartoonists also produced images that suggested a different perspective on the ongoing conflict. Although cartoonists knew that war was indispensable for the survival of the country, they were also conscious of the human suffering, destruction, and sorrow it caused. Cartoonist and scholar Feng Zikai (1898–1975) articulated this ambivalent view in several sketches he produced during and after the conflict. Thanks to his lyrical images, the artist managed to unveil the horror of war and the necessity for a world of peace (Hung 1990). A similar perspective also appeared in Zhang Leping's "Zhuji after the Devastation." These images differed from those he published in *Resistance Cartoons*, since in them the artist privileged descriptions of the grim reality of war over the heroic deeds of Chinese soldiers and children.

Zhang Leping's change of style was connected with the deterioration of the alliance between the Nationalist and Communist Parties. At the beginning of 1940, the Nationalist authorities reshuffled the Third Section and cut funding to the Cartoon Propaganda Corps, an action that soon led to the dismantling of the group and the demise of *Resistance Cartoons* (Hung 1994, 95). The members of the corps divided into several groups, and many of them ended up working in the wartime capital, Chongqing. The disbandment of the corps and worsening conditions in the country influenced the work of cartoonists, who, after 1940, began to produce images that differed slightly from those published earlier. This was the case for Zhang Leping, who after 1940 worked mostly in Zhejiang and Jiangxi Provinces organizing exhibitions and publishing his sketches in local newspapers. Some of the images he produced in these years focused on the life of Chinese soldiers in the barracks and on the destruction in the countryside caused by the Japanese. While Zhang engaged with similar themes in *Resistance Cartoons*, the new sketches sometimes revealed a perspective on war that contrasts with the heroic vision disseminated by most propaganda cartoons. In "Zhuji after the Devastation," the artist describes the plight of the inhabitants of the old city of Zhuji, in Zhejiang Province. Civilians' suffering was one of the recurring themes of *Resistance Cartoons*, yet the stereotyped features of these images made these cartoons into symbolic representations that were almost detached from reality. In contrast, "Zhuji after the Devastation" stands out from the standard model, presenting a more genuine portrayal of human suffering.

In these sketches, Zhang Leping portrayed in realistic fashion the disruption provoked by Japanese bombing in the old city of Zhuji.[10] The destruction of buildings and agony of people in the city were skillfully rendered by the artist in black-and-white sketches. Children often appeared in these images. For instance, in "A group waiting for assistance" ("Dai jiuji de yiqun" 待救濟的一羣), two adults—seemingly two women—and two children sit on the street looking destitute and waiting for help (figure 13). While in *Resistance Cartoons* Zhang Leping privileged representations of model citizens reacting to the Japanese invasion by patriotically fighting against the enemy, the expressions and postures of the protagonists of "A group waiting for assistance" communicate feelings of resignation and defeat. Adults and children look equally miserable, waiting for help instead of looking for solutions to their miserable condition or planning revenge against their enemies.

Figure 13. Zhang Leping's "A group waiting for assistance." *Source*: *Southeast Daily*, January 19, 1941. Reproduced in Qiu and Zhang (2007, 124).

In "Zhuji after the Devastation," Zhang Leping privileged the realistic representation of daily life in wartime China, generally avoiding the bombastic tones of his earlier propaganda cartoons. This is also the case in "An orphan" ("Gu'er" 孤兒), a sketch in which Zhang returned to one of the most widespread icons of wartime propaganda. As we have seen, Chinese orphans were usually represented as victims, but they were also able to transform themselves into courageous champions of the national cause. In contrast, the orphan depicted in this sketch appears lonely, poor, and helpless. He certainly does not seem prepared to avenge his parents or defend his country (figure 14).

Figure 14. Zhang Leping's "An orphan." *Source*: *Southeast Daily*, unspecified date between December 1940 and January 1941. Reproduced in Qiu and Zhang (2007, 121).

In "A group waiting for assistance" and "An orphan," children are shown not as aspirant heroes but as victims looking for aid. They are not independent members of society but dependents in need of an adult's help. These sketches also differ stylistically from propaganda cartoons. For instance, while most wartime images conveyed a sense of urgency through

standardized rhetorical devices—such as simplified facial expressions or short lines that communicated movement—these sketches are more naturalistic in style and stand apart from the stylized representations of cartoon and comic strips.

"Zhuji after the Devastation" did not contradict the message of other propaganda cartoons. Zhang Leping's images still focused on bombing by the Japanese as the cause of children's suffering, accusing the invaders of trying to destroy China and its population. However, Japanese people never appear directly in these images; the real protagonists are the devastating effects of war on the population. In another of his sketches, Zhang Leping portrays a mother mourning the death of her child. Read from a nationalistic perspective, the title of the sketch, "The last heir" ("Zuihou de sizi" 最後的嗣子), seems to suggest that by eliminating children the enemy was aiming to destroy the Chinese nation. However, this title might also indicate that this is not the first child that the woman lost during the war, but the last of many, concentrating on the dramatic consequences of war on the life of civilians (figure 15).

Figure 15. Zhang Leping's "The last heir." *Source*: *Southeast Daily*, December 16, 1940. Reproduced in Qiu and Zhang (2007, 124).

It is not easy to explain why Zhang Leping decided to depart from nationalistic representations of heroic children in "Zhuji after the Devastation." Perhaps by 1940, when these images were published, the artist was more aware of the devastating effects of war on the population in general and on children in particular. Certainly, these sketches prove that while the images in *Resistance Cartoons* were the model for propagandists around the country, more realistic and less standardized representations of children also circulated in China during the war. The children of Zhang's sketches still represented the future of the country; however, their symbolic meaning was obfuscated by the tragic reality of war.

**Images for Children?**

To study the public reception of images is a tricky endeavor. However, after analyzing so many images representing children, it is natural to wonder if children themselves came in contact with these illustrations. As in the case of French and American wartime propaganda, during the War of Resistance, Chinese children's literature was mobilized as part of the propaganda war effort. Even before the official outbreak of the war, images of boy soldiers were already popular in children's magazines. In 1939, a group of teachers established the Juvenile Publishing House in Shanghai with the specific purpose of mobilizing children. The result was the publication of a pamphlet-like magazine titled *The Good Child* (*Hao Haizi* 好孩子), later renamed *Reading for Children* (*Ertong Duwu* 兒童讀物) (Farquhar 1999, 169–170). However, literature was not considered the most effective method for reaching children, for two main reasons: First, the scarcity of paper and the interruption of the distribution network made the circulation of books and magazines problematic. Secondly, endemic illiteracy made written prose less powerful than more straightforward means of communication. Cartoons thus represented a valuable substitute to children's specialized magazines.

Propaganda cartoons circulated through specialized magazines such as *Resistance Cartoons*; however, most Chinese citizens could also view these images in public exhibitions organized by resisters. Images similar to those published in wartime magazines, including cartoons featuring children, were often hung or painted on public walls. In February 1939, *The Young Companion* dedicated two pages to the work of cartoonists, showing readers a selection of the images they had painted on walls in some Chinese cities. One of the most powerful images

presented in the article depicted a group of helpless Chinese babies with bound wrists being attacked by a pair of scrawny bleeding hands (figure 16). The caption pointed out that this image was based on a real event. According to the author, the hands of a number of Chinese children were bound with iron wire by the Japanese in the area of Jiujiang and Hukou in Jiangxi Province. The gravity of this action is underscored by the Japanese hands dripping blood from above onto the frightened children.

Figure 16. “Kangzhan bihua” (“Resistance murals”). The caption reads: “The Japanese robbers are inhuman and brutal. In Jiujiang and Wukou they bound with iron wire the hands of our little brothers and sisters. I hope that we will be avenged soon.” *Source*: *The Young Companion*, issue 139, February 1939.

From the pictures published in *The Young Companion*, we can see that, despite their violent content, propaganda cartoons were visible to everybody, irrespective of age, and were meant for a heterogeneous public of adults and children. In fact, children were invited to look at and understand the content of wartime cartoons, as demonstrated by several contemporary photographs in which children attentively view propaganda images in the street under the supervision of adults (figure 17).

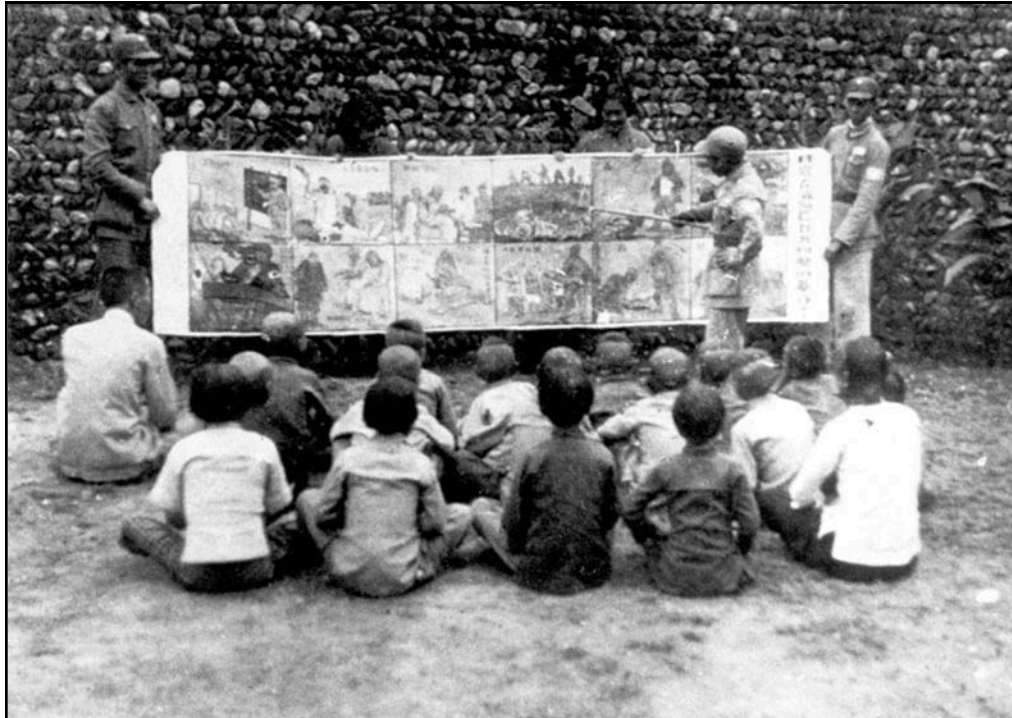

Figure 17. Explaining cartoons to children. *Source*: Sanmao's official website (see note 9).

It is not easy to know how children reacted to the content of propaganda cartoons. One of the rare points of access to children's reception of these images are the few drawings sent by actual children to *Resistance Cartoons* and published by the magazine on the occasion of Children's Day.[11] One such example is “Forging a broadsword” (“Da dadao” 打大刀), a cartoon drawn by seven-year-old Yu Guangmei, in which a man forges a broadsword for a child in order to teach him how to fight against the enemy. The child, dressed as a Boy Scout, accepts the sword, ready to fight (figure 18). While Yu Guangmei drew the cartoon, his eleven-year-old brother wrote the sentence by the side of the picture. We cannot know if little Yu Guangmei drew this cartoon by himself, or if he was actually asked to produce this image by his parents or

teachers. Although this is not proof that children autonomously engaged in propaganda, it shows that they were made conscious of the content and meaning of contemporary cartoons. The young author of this image was familiar with several motifs—such as the broadsword and the Boy Scouts—that were popular in wartime cartoons. Certainly, propaganda cartoons representing children addressed adults and children alike, attempting to unite them in the fight for their country.

Figure 18. Yu Guangmei's "Forging a broadsword." *Source*: *Resistance Cartoons*, issue 8, April 1938. Reproduced in Shen (2005, 224).

## Conclusion

Children were central to Chinese cartoonists' propaganda campaign during the War of Resistance. Propagandists' work was strongly connected with the political nationalistic discourse about Chinese children that developed before the war, when prominent politicians and intellectuals promoted the idea of children as future masters of the nation. Already popular subjects in urban visual culture, toddlers, Boy Scouts, and orphans were transformed by cartoonists during the war into the main heroes of several propaganda cartoons. These images—often published in the magazine *Resistance Cartoons* and then reproduced on walls and in public exhibitions around the country—served both symbolic and normative aims. Since children came to symbolize the future of the Chinese nation, to protect them from aggressors meant to save China. Similarly, by showing children ready to work and fight for their country, cartoonists underlined the importance of preparing children for their role as future citizens. Highly standardized and symbolically charged representations of children were not the only kind of images circulating during wartime. In the case of "Zhuji after the Devastation," Zhang Leping portrayed the catastrophic consequences of war on the youngest members of Chinese society, downplaying the heroic tones of the images published in *Resistance Cartoons* and partially revealing the discrepancies between propagandistic representations and the actual conditions of children during the war.

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***Notes***

1. This text was originally published in the wartime magazine *Resistance Cartoons* in April 1938.
2. For more information on National Children's Day, see, for instance, Gerth (2004, 323–324).
3. For instance, in recent years, scholars such as Colette Plum and Lily Chang have begun to tackle this subject from different perspectives: Plum (2011) has focused on the establishment of state-financed institutions for war orphans, while Chang (2012) has researched how increasing criminality among underage citizens during the war contributed to changing the contemporary legal understanding of childhood. These two works combine studies of the history of children and the history of childhood by

researching the symbolic power of children and the challenges they met during the war. Both studies focus on the experiences of orphans and homeless children by showing the changing attitudes of the population and the Nationalist authorities toward these problematic groups.

4 The concepts of evolution and Social Darwinism spread in China at the end of the nineteenth century through the translation of Thomas Huxley's (1825–1895) *Evolution and Ethics* by the famous scholar Yan Fu (1854–1921). For more information about this subject, see Jones (2011, 1–27).

5 Lu Xun's short story "Kuangren Riji" (A madman's diary) was originally published in 1922 in the collection *Na Han* (Call to arms).

6 For a discussion of the content and relevance of these two films, see Xu (2007).

7 This cartoon was one of the forty-five images created by Chinese propagandists to be featured at the Soviet Union Exhibition organized in Moscow in June 1938 (Qiu and Zhang 2007, 31).

8 According to Zhang Leping's son, Zhang Weijun, the name of the publication in which this image was originally published is untraceable.

9 Sanmao's official website is available at http://www.sanmao.com.cn/index.html (accessed May 19, 2014).

10 Zhuji was a city in Zhejiang Province, located south of the provincial capital of Hangzhou.

11 Other examples of cartoons drawn by children can be found in Shen (2005, 223–224).

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