

# Section One – Introduction

## Childhood on a Modern Drive: Growing up in East Asia

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### Abstract

In what follows, I first unpack the context of East Asia where fast economic growth, demographic transition, shifting public policies, and historical legacies as well as emerging trends of family norms and practices jointly influence children's and youths' everyday lives and well-being. I show that albeit intra-regional and intrasociety heterogeneities, childhood is part and parcel of the modernization project in this part of the world, which has attracted concerted efforts of intense investment from the state and the family, shaping a trajectory of childhood that is increasingly scholarized. I then sketch the landscape of childhood and youth studies in this region, calling for the intervention of childhood sociology as an approach to bring young people's own perspectives, voices, subjectivities, and actions to the fore. This is followed by an introduction to four compelling contributions that offer rich and nuanced insights into the pains and gains, pressures and perseverance of the growing up experiences of the young in rapidly changing East Asian societies.

*Keywords:* Children and youths; intergenerational relations; East Asia; modernity; mobility; agency

### Unpacking East Asia

Following Benedict [Anderson's \(1983\)](#) pathbreaking redefinition of “nation” as a socially constructed yet empirically (and often politically) useful concept, we could probably have some confidence in the “cultural artifact” or construct of

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East Asia for empirical analysis. Indeed, in either popular parlance or academic discourses, compared to other regions in Asia, East Asia seems to construe a higher level of definitional clarity in terms of its geographic reach (including Japan, the Korean Peninsula, the Greater China Region, and perhaps less visibly, Mongolia), cultural orientation (influenced to varying degrees by Confucian legacies), and economic development (i.e., hosting three of the Four Asian Tigers with impressive economic performance since the 1960s and a rapidly catching-up China after market reform in the late 1970s). As a result, we have witnessed a prosperous academic enterprise across disciplines that aims to unpack the “East Asian” puzzles behind its “success story,” such as a voluminous literature on the developmental state among scholars of political economy (e.g. [Johnson, 1982](#)), and more recently growing research (e.g., [Jerrim, 2015](#)) explaining East Asian students’ scholastic achievement in topping the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings, to name just a few.

By various social indicators, children in many East Asian societies indeed fare reasonably well, compared with not only their parents’ and grandparents’ generations but also their peers in the rest of the world. As [Table 1](#) shows, a child born in this region is less likely to suffer from premature death during infancy or early childhood; her chance of suffering from malnutrition that stunts her physical development in early years is significantly lower than the world average level; she will most likely graduate from high school or equivalent, and in some societies such as Hong Kong and Macau, graduate with at least a bachelor’s degree; and she will very likely live a life stretching to her 70s and 80s. It is noteworthy that the female gender pronoun is used here not only to comply with international practices but also to emphasize that the gender gap in child/youth development in many East Asian societies has been largely closed, and in some areas reversed to girls’ favor, particularly in academic achievement (e.g., see [Gu & Yeung, 2021](#) on China; [Akabayashi et al., 2020](#) on Japan and China in comparison; [Luo & Chen, 2018](#) for Taiwan; [Byun et al., 2012](#) on South Korea; [Adiya, 2010](#) for Mongolia). This is remarkable progress considering that one or two generations ago, girls in this region remained severely discriminated at home and in public spheres due to patriarchal norms rooted in Confucianism; girls then were in general fed worse, labored more, received no or little education, and were subject to male dominance throughout their lives. [Table 1](#) also reminds us of pronounced gaps in child development between the more developed economies in the region and the two “laggards” – North Korea and Mongolia, suggesting a link between social and economic development and children’s well-being.

An overarching success frame, however, falls short of capturing the complexity, heterogeneity, and multidimensionality of young people’s experiences in these societies, if we take account of the structural inequalities along the lines of rural-urban differentials, regional disparities, and class distinctions within each society. The case of China, though some may argue for its exceptional status due to its unique political and social trajectory in the past century (but which country is not?), is illustrative in this aspect. After decades of “experimentation” of a socialist planned economy which ended in a catastrophic decade of Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the country has made a U-turn since the late 1970s and over the next decades gradually developed a hybrid system which combines an authoritarian political structure with a (ultra-)capitalist economy, dubbed as the

Table 1. Child Indicators of East Asian Societies.

	<b>Infant Mortality (per 1,000 Live Births) (2019)</b>	<b>Under-Five Mortality (per 1,000 Live Births) (2019)</b>	<b>Proportion Stunted Among 0–5- Year-Olds (2020)</b>	<b>Expected Years of Education</b>	<b>Life Expectancy at Birth (2019)</b>
China (Mainland)	9	11	4.7	14.2 (2021)	76.9
China, Hong Kong SAR	1	2	-	17.6 (2020)	84.9
China, Macau SAR	3	3	-	17.7 (2020)	84.2
Taiwan	4	4	-	-	80.5
North Korea	13	17	18.2	-	72.3
Japan	2	2	5.5	15.2 (2018)	84.6
Mongolia	17	21	7.1	15.6 (2019)	69.9
South Korea	2	2	2.2	16.1 (2019)	83.0
East Asian average	9	10	4.9	14.1 (2019; +Pacific)	78.0
World average	28	38	22	12.4	72.6

*Source:* United Nations World Mortality Data 2019; World Bank Data; UNICEF Child Nutrition Data 2022.

model of “leftist politics plus rightist economy” in folklore wisdom. Emerging as a rising global power due to its spectacular economic performance, China today is a very unequal society where social cleavages along the rural-urban divide and coast-inland regional lines leave deep imprints on the everyday lives and life chances of ordinary citizens. This has tremendous implications for different social groups who all strive for status and recognition in a pyramid social system, which three contributions on China in this section have incisively delved into, independently and as a collection.

Besides intrasociety heterogeneity, we should also be aware of a set of common social, cultural, demographic challenges confronting this region, which have

considerable implications for the living experiences, as well as future projections and aspirations of children and youth. First, from a demographic perspective, much of the region (except Mongolia; no available data for North Korea) is grappling with ultra-low total fertility rates as well as rapid population aging (see details in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#) in [Chung et al., 2021](#); [Jones & Gu, 2023](#); [Raymo et al., 2015](#)), as a result of rapid economic modernization, a relentless work culture in direct conflict with family responsibilities, the uneven development of gender equity in private and public lives, as well as family planning policies (e.g., China). While policy makers and researchers are increasingly concerned with the macro-level implications of the imminent demographic crisis for East Asia in terms of long-term development and prosperity, less is known from a ground-up perspective about young people's living experiences. For example, what does it mean to be young in an aging society? How does growing up with few or no siblings affect young people's childhood experiences? Second, the public-private dilemma in social support. Traditionally, a stronghold for Confucian social and cultural norms, East Asian societies attach a primordial importance to the family (in its multiple forms, be it nuclear, extended or joint) as the support and social security system for individual members. However, the family as a functional unit has undergone transformation amidst dramatic social, cultural, and economic changes in the past decades. It has become smaller, more nuclear, and more spatially dispersed (due to mass-scale internal and international migrations). This calls into the question of the feasibility of relying on the family alone to solve social reproductive issues such as childcare and elderly care. Indeed, earlier or later, with the imminent demographic crisis in mind, a growing consensus has emerged in many East Asian societies that more public support is needed, leading to more social policies issued by governments of different levels, albeit considerable differences in the level of and the mode of support, and the target group in different contexts ([Chung et al., 2021](#)). Japan, for instance, being the earliest aging society in the region, has made considerable public efforts for decades to support family social reproduction (de Moll & Inaba, this volume). How different combinations of public-private provision in social support are experienced by children and youth on the ground? How family's class condition intersects with policy contexts in shaping opportunities for different groups of young people? Answers to these questions could provide important insights into not only the life worlds of children and youth but also the nature of social systems and governance in each society.

### **Profiling Childhood Studies in East Asia: Potentials and Pitfalls**

Research on children and youths abounds in East Asian societies, with exceptions being Mongolia which receives less attention probably due to its lower economic prowess in a region of superperformers, and North Korea which is literally a no-go zone for international research activities and exchanges due to its political situation. Emerging from numerous publications on East Asian societies, by scholars affiliated in and beyond Asia, are a few key words that could serve not only as our signposts in understanding young people and social changes in this

region but also as our hints to potential contributions of the East Asian experiences to a broader dialogue on childhood and society, or the disciple of childhood studies.

Not coincidentally, social historians of childhood have documented a similar phenomenon that in a number of East Asian societies in the early 20th century or earlier, the child figure became an important symbol for cultural and political elites to rally for social reform and modernization in order to break away from the “backward” traditional Confucian culture and compete with Western powers (see Platt, 2005 on Japan; Jones, 2002; Gu, 2022b on China; Zur, 2011 on Korea). With almost a fatalistic belief in Social Darwinism, these elites argued against a gerontocratic tendency inherent in Confucianism which upholds a generational hierarchy where younger generations are bound by filial piety norms to unconditionally respect, accept, and comply with the wills of older generations. This, they believed, was the root cause of Asia’s downfall in the world arena vis-à-vis the growing Western powers, hence an advocacy for a new culture where “the child figure has been consistently vested with a social imaginary of rejuvenating an ancient civilization to compete with other global powers” (Gu, 2022b, p. 517). In other words, they argued for a radical renegotiation of *the intergenerational order* toward a more democratic and more age-balanced one in a new nation-building process. It is no exaggeration to say that this message was revolutionary, with tremendous social, cultural, economic, and political implications, and its impact is still felt today. From a vintage point of the 21st century, we could conclude that these early reformers’ agenda is not finished yet, and much negotiation is going on at the societal, family, and interpersonal levels in various East Asian societies.

When putting childhood in the context of nation-building, we probably would not be surprised to see that the child, once again a significant cultural symbol, has become a heavily invested “project” in East Asia since World War II. One particular area of the “project” is children’s education, which has attracted concerted efforts from the state and the family. From the government’s point of view, investing in children’s education increases the human capital of a society, and enhances its economic standing. Indeed a cursory review of education policies in many societies in the region would find a common thread of education expansion, from the institutionalization of compulsory education to massification of higher education. From the family’s perspective, higher attainment of education is perceived as an intrinsically good thing, in line with the Confucian cultural belief that education leads to virtue and self-improvement (Kipnis, 2001). More pragmatically, the *education-social-mobility nexus* (Gu, Chapter 1, this volume), i.e. the pursuit of education by the family as a way of achieving upward social mobility, could be traced back to the Confucian ideology of meritocracy that legitimizes the selection of elites through an imperial examination system (*keju zhidu*), which was practiced in one way or another across East Asian societies in history. In recent decades, with East Asian economies joining the club of success economies in the global capitalism, this *education-social-mobility nexus* has been widely researched with empirical evidence from different societies and subgroups within. The emerging picture shows that parents of different social classes in the

region, but more often of the upper middle class, are actively “curating” the best educational trajectories and opportunities for their children, which increasingly involves dispersing the family unit across regional and national boundaries to maximize family economy and children’s future chances (see Ong, 1999 for Hong Kong’s transnational families; Huang & Yeoh, 2005 for China’s “study mothers” in Singapore; Koo & Lee, 2006 for “wild geese fathers” in South Korea; Lan, 2018 for Taiwanese parents’ global childrearing; Gu, 2022d for China’s internal migrant families; Leung & Waters, 2022 for mainland-Hong Kong cross-border families; Waters, 2015 for a comparative analysis of East Asian societies). These complex and emotionally charged family processes and childrearing practices should be understood in the interplay of local, national and global social, political and economic forces in our world today. Taken as a whole, this body of literature captures prevailing social anxieties in the respective societies (or segments within) over *uncertainties and volatilities of social status attainment/reproduction* for younger generations amidst rapid social changes within short historical spans, a process described by Korean sociologist Chang Kyung-Sup (2010) as “compressed modernity.”

While contextualizing childhood in broader historical and nation-building processes (Gu, 2022a, 2022c) and offering insights into the study of the intensifying trend of scholarization of childhood are important contributions that childhood studies in East Asia could make, I now provide a critical account of (the lack of) *childhood sociology* as a subdiscipline in the academic scene in these societies that prohibits deeper engagements in important topics related to children’s welfare and well-being. Admittedly, across the globe, childhood sociology, the branch of sociological studies that insists on understanding issues related to children from the young’s perspectives, is a fairly young one. It started in the 1980s–1990s when a group of childhood scholars, mainly based in the Global North, began to critique the then prevailing adult-centrism in studies of children/childhood studies and advocate for a “new” paradigm that could overcome the limited conceptualization of children as “human becomings” rather than “human beings” (Qvortrup, 2009) and centers children’s agency and perspectives in social analysis (Prout & James, 1990). Increasingly, it has gained ground in childhood studies across the world. However, childhood sociology, whether as a legitimate branch of social science or as an autonomous subdiscipline at the institutional level, is yet to materialize in East Asia. Below I elaborate on the cases of China and Japan, which this volume has dealt with in detail, to illustrate the situation.

In the case of China, studies on children are often subsumed under the child development section of the psychology department, with a strong tendency to treat children/youth as developmental products-in-the-making. Similarly, topics related to children, a less studied area, in sociological studies are often merged into the dominant paradigm of social stratification research populated by quantitative methodologists trained in the tradition of American positivism. “Children” in this line of research is largely conceptualized as an equivalent of “generation” who are trapped as passive recipients of influences from their parents’ capitals (of various kinds). In this context, the idea of establishing children’s status as subjects and childhood as a parameter of social analysis is radical. For

example, of the 216 issues (each with at least 10 articles) of the Chinese-language journal – *Sociological Studies (shehuixue yanjiu)* – between 1986 and 2021, the top sociology journal in mainland China, only 12 articles were devoted to topics related to children and none used *childhood* as a key concept. At the institutional level, the Chinese Sociological Association has 41 “professional committees” (*zhuanye weiyuanhui*), each dealing with a subdiscipline such as Rural Sociology and Social Policy; no such committee exists for studies of children and childhood. Similarly, *de Moll and Inaba* (this volume) note a lack of strong roots of childhood sociology in Japan. According to them, though historical and cultural research in the context has dealt with representation of children and youth as social actors, rarely have studies on education and care arrangements engaged with young people’s personal experiences and perspectives. In a sense, this section of the handbook constitutes a modest effort by our authors and editors toward bridging a disciplinary gap in East Asia – to make visible childhood sociology as an approach to exploring young people’s life worlds through their eyes, and in their own voices.

### Contextualizing the Contributions in This Section

This section includes four chapters on two East Asian contexts, i.e., mainland China and Japan. The first three chapters focus on the China case, making it the most exhaustively studied case in this handbook, and the last chapter focuses on Japan.

The chapters on China all have explored intergenerational relations and migration in its diverse forms, i.e., internal migration, transnational migration, and diaspora-homeland movements. Interreferencing each other, they jointly ask *what mobility and migration mean for families* constantly on the move, and *how familyhood and intergenerational ties are maintained and negotiated* against spatial and temporal distances. In the chapter on China’s 100 million children in rural migrant families, *Xiaorong Gu* attempts to reorient the scholarship toward a critical interpretative approach after a sharp critique of the dominant research paradigm that unreflexively uses quantitative modeling to test a debatable hypothesis – “parents’ out-migration breaks family and damages children.” Instead, she rephrases Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) famous question into “can subaltern children speak?” and unpacks multiple meanings migrants’ children attach to *mobility* in their childhood experiences, based on life history and longitudinal ethnographic data gathered with three adolescents from migrant families. As divulged in their narratives, the youths are not mere passive recipients of parents’ migration, but rather active participants in their families’ coping mechanisms in maintaining everyday functioning and future projections of social mobility against institutional discrimination and the resultant family “instability.” They derive three interrelated meanings of *mobility* in their lives: first, instead of feeling abandoned, they perceive parents’ migration as a “mobility imperative” to escape poverty and fund their education and living, which is necessitated by decades-long rural underdevelopment. Second, they have a grasp of an intricate relationship

between their families' "unstable" and "flexible" mobility patterns and their parents' aspiration of upward social mobility strategy through their own educational performance, i.e., the *education-social-mobility nexus*. This, as Xiaorong argues, should be understood as a cultural strategy of China's subaltern new working class to struggle for social recognition and respect in an illiberal society without class politics. Last, children actively contribute to the everyday organization of their "mobile" family life through sharing domestic responsibilities and developing routines of communications to keep alive intergenerational exchanges and togetherness. While documenting the strengths and resiliencies of these children in simultaneously "doing family" and "doing class" against formidable barriers, Xiaorong incisively lays bare their emotional baggages, or "emotional labor," where they process their emotions to present socially acceptable selves as filial and behaving children who reciprocate parents' enormous sacrifices. This leads us back to the neoliberal-authoritarian social governance system toward the rural migrant population in contemporary China (Gu, 2022b), which, as this study shows, has profound and detrimental implications for children and youths from migrant families.

The next chapter by *Siqi Tu* turns our attention to the experiences of a group of relatively more privileged youths – only children of China's upper middle class in cosmopolitan cities – who are "parachuted" to the United States for private high schools. Reversing the pattern often seen in the migrant working class as Xiaorong and others studied, these "left-behind parents with migrant children" families also face considerable challenges posed by temporal and spatial distances, albeit in a transnational landscape. Analyzing ethnographic interview data with parents and students, Siqi reveals different forms of intergenerational relationships as these families negotiate their parent–child dynamics distantly: those who formed closer intergenerational ties against physical and temporal distance, children who experienced "accelerated growth" yet questioned the necessity, and those with more delicate parent–child relationships. Her analysis further reveals a host of factors in the picture, including the frequency of communication, duration of spring and winter breaks, and the existence of third-party agents such as for-profit intermediaries (or educational consultants) and host families. The complexity and nuances as skillfully presented by Siqi enrich our understanding of the gains and losses these families experience as a result of a transnational educational strategy, challenging the often one-sided and stereotypical media representation of children of China's nouveau riche class who splurge and indulge themselves overseas. More importantly, through shedding light on the unintended emotional consequences of educational migration that these youths experience which lead to the questioning of the "mobility imperative" by some of them, Siqi fills in a missing piece in the growing literature on the translocal/transnational educational project in many East Asian societies as described in the last section – bringing children/youths' voices and subjectivities back to the picture.

This is followed by *Laura Lamas-Abraira's* equally compelling research of childhood experiences of youths growing up transnationally in Chinese diasporic communities in Europe. Based on data from a multisited ethnography and a survey with 77 adolescents during a "Roots-seeking Journey" summer camp,



Laura explores the experiences of children growing up in Chinese transnational families split between Zhejiang province and their parents' immigration countries in Europe. The survey data reveal tremendous heterogeneity and flexibility of living arrangements and care circulation during their childhood. While the majority were born abroad and current residents overseas, over half had spent episodes of their childhood in China, and many had migratory experiences to and from a third country; seven of the participants were "left-behind" children and 33 were sent-back children (most being sent as satellite babies). In terms of care arrangements, when living in China, children spent portions of their childhood under the care of extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, sometimes great-grandparents; in destination countries, whether the child was born and raised locally or had been sent back from China (as a "satellite baby"), the majority were cared by parents, followed by grandparents who moved along as part of the transnational circulation of care, and less frequently by professional nannies. Such flexibility and fluidity of childhood care and living experiences, which Laura characterizes with the concept of "fluid childhoods," reminds us of similar family childrearing strategies in China's rural-urban migrant working class (Gu, 2022d). From a class perspective, these families with parents working as small business owners or staff in this chapter could fall into the category of a transnational "petite bourgeoisie" class, who when facing challenges in balancing childcare and work turn to a cultural strategy of relying on their extended and transnational family as a support system. Due to data limitation, we are not able to know directly how these youths perceive and react to the family care strategies during their childhood. Laura, however, adds to the picture by showing the continuing transnational ties and communications these adolescents engage in and expand through social media platforms such as WeChat, and through international travels.

We conclude the section with *Frederick de Moll and Akihide Inaba's* panoramic study of the transformation of early childhood in Japan, based on multiple sources and types of data. They start by contextualizing childhood in two major social and demographic trends in this society, i.e., an ultra-low fertility context and women's increasing labor market participation post childbirth. Such trends have implications for early childhood care arrangements at home and on the policy level. On the one hand, as the family structure of an only child in a dual-income family becomes the norm, traditional gendered care (i.e., by full-time mothers) is not sustainable, which leads to an increasing trend of institutionalization of early childhood where children spend significant amounts of time in care and education institutions. On the other hand, low fertility as not only a demographic but also a political issue compels more government policy support of childcare. In terms of education, Frederick and Akihide capture an interesting "disruption" of socialization goals between preschooling years and the formal education stage. According to them, during preschool, family and care institutions tend to maintain traditional childrearing goals that emphasize free play and social skills based on collective morals. However, once into formal education, children's lives are increasingly influenced by intensive parenting and the pursuit of educational success, which resembles the situation faced by children in other

East Asian contexts. This study vividly portrays the transformation of childhood at the intersection of social norms, demographic pressures, and policy interventions in the Japanese society. It enriches our understanding of the increasing institutionalization and scholarization of childhood in East Asia as a region. In particular, how children experience, understand and respond to the rather abrupt transition to new socialization goals and norms could be a direction for future research, which the authors have also noted.

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