

**"MY CHILDREN"**  
By Zhu Ziqing

**Introduction**

Beginning around 1917, Chinese intellectuals began to engage each other in serious discussion and debate on culture, history, philosophy, and related subjects — all with an eye to the bigger problem of China's weakness and the possible solutions to that problem. This period of intellectual debate, labeled the May Fourth Movement, lasted to around 1921.

Zhu Ziqing (1898-1948) achieved fame as a writer of poetry, criticisms, sketches, and essays in the decades immediately following the May Fourth Movement. As a 1920 graduate of Beijing University, Zhu was certainly influenced by the cultural debates of the May Fourth period. The essay below concerns his views on his family, and particularly his five children.

**Document Excerpts with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)

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**"My Children"**  
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Being an egotist through and through, I am not much as a husband, even less as a father. Of course, "Esteem children and grandchildren" and "Youth is the basic unit" are philosophical and ethical principles which I recognize. Once you have become a father, I know, you cannot just shut your eyes and ignore the rights of the children. Unfortunately, many of my ideas remain mere theory; in actual fact, I cope with the situation in the old-fashioned traditional way, savage in style, just like any ordinary father. Only now when I am almost middle-aged do I realize a little of my own brutality ...

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... I still believe that my children in their early years were much more of an annoyance than other people's. I think it may have been mainly due to our ineptness at bringing them up.

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Yet I must admit there was also happiness in the true sense. As anyone will tell you, the little ones are always adorable...

## Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on "MY CHILDREN," BY ZHU ZIQING

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... I think, first of all, I must get all my children together. Next, I must give them strength. I have personally witnessed the case of a man who, although very fond of his children, grossly neglected them by not providing good educations for them. ...

... Of course, a person's social value and success do not altogether depend on his school education. By insisting that our children be university educated, we only follow our personal prejudices. ...

[Translated by Ernst Wolff]

### Questions:

1. The author describes the tension between his ideals concerning childrearing and his actual behavior. What factors lead to this tension? To what extent is the tension that he describes unique to his time and place (China in the late 1920s), and to what extent is it universal?
2. If a person's social value and success do not altogether depend on his school education, then on what other factors might they depend?

### Longer Selection

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### "My Children" By Zhu Ziqing

I am now already the father of five. Thinking of the metaphor that Ye Shengtao<sup>1</sup> likes to quote about the snail that carries a house on its back makes me feel uncomfortable. Recently one of my relatives teased me, saying, "You are getting 'skinned'!" That disturbed me even more. Ten years ago when I had just married, I read Hu Shi's *Sundry Notes*<sup>2</sup> where he says that many famous men never got married. He also quotes Bacon to the effect that whoever has taken a wife has his life "set." That startled me as if awakening me from a dream, but my family had married me off and I had had nothing to say about it. What could I do? Once I had a wife, along came five children, a heavy burden for my two shoulders; I really wonder how I can go on. Not only is my life "set" but I also worry about how the children will grow up.

Being an egotist through and through, I am not much as a husband, even less as a father. Of course, "Esteem children and grandchildren" and "Youth is the basic unit" are philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Ye Shengtao (1894-1988), a leading writer and editor.

<sup>2</sup> Hu Shi (1891-1962), leading philosopher and writer.

## Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on "MY CHILDREN," BY ZHU ZIQING

and ethical principles which I recognize. Once you have become a father, I know, you cannot just shut your eyes and ignore the rights of the children. Unfortunately, many of my ideas remain mere theory; in actual fact, I cope with the situation in the old-fashioned traditional way, savage in style, just like any ordinary father. Only now when I am almost middle-aged do I realize a little of my own brutality, and when I think of the corporal punishment and scolding the children have had to endure, I am at a loss to find excuses. Like touching an old scar, it still hurts to think of it.

Once, reading a translation of Arishima Takeo's "With the Young,"<sup>3</sup> I was moved to tears by his noble and deeply sincere attitude. Last year my father enquired about Ajiu, who was then still with me at White Horse Lake, saying in his letter, "Since I never neglected you, I wish you would also not neglect him." I thought this remark very touching. Why am I not capable of my father's loving kindness? I will never forget how he looked after me. Human nature may really be polarized; I am certainly inconsistent, swinging back and forth like a pendulum.

You have probably read Lu Xun's "The Happy Family." Mine is indeed such a happy group. At our daily lunches and dinners, two tidal waves seem to be descending on us. First, the children keep running to and fro between the dining room and the kitchen to check on things, urging Mother or me to give out the order to serve food. The hurried patter of many little feet, accompanied by much hilarity and shouting, lasts until that order is given. Then the running and shouting resume as the order is transmitted by many mouths until it reaches the maid in the kitchen. Then back again they rush for the fight for stools: one shouts "I want to sit here"; the other complains "Brother won't let me sit"; brother retorts "Sister hit me"; whereupon I have to assume the role of peacemaker. At times, though, they become so adamant that I cannot stand it. I start shouting and, if that does not settle it, I may lose my temper, and down comes my heavy hand on someone. Then finally, after a few tears, all will find their seats and order will be restored. Next the arguments will break out about large bowls versus small bowls, red chopsticks versus black ones, rice or gruel, tea or soup, fish or meat, bean curd or carrots, with mutual accusations of dipping too often into the meat and vegetable dishes. Mother, as usual, tries to calm everyone down, but with little obvious effect. Then my rather irascible nature will not be able to stand it any longer and, of course, I will apply the old-fashioned method, thereby managing to subdue them instantly. More tears, but finally everyone will be busy with bowls and chopsticks, some wiping tears from reddened eyes. When the meal is over and they leave their seats, off they go helter-skelter, leaving behind a mess of food droppings, rice, sauce, bones, crumbs, and a jumble of chopsticks and spoons in the pattern of a colorful map.

Apart from eating, the children's main pursuit is play. The big ones come up with big ideas and the small ones with small ideas, and no one will go along with the others' wishes. Then the quarrels start again, and either the big ones bully the small ones, or the small ones manage to browbeat the big ones; anyhow, the victimized party will personally bring his or her complaint to Mother or me. Most likely I will again apply the old-fashioned method of settling

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<sup>3</sup> Arishima Takeo (1878-1923), Japanese author and social idealist.

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the argument, but sometimes I just pay no attention. The most annoying are the fights for toys. Even if both have similar toys, one insists on the other's, and no one will give up anything he has. In a situation like this, inevitably tears will have to flow from someone's eyes. Not all of this happens every day, but a good measure of it does. If I want to read a book or write something at home, I can guarantee that my attention will be diverted several times every hour, or I will be forced to get up once or twice. On rainy days or Sundays, when most of the children are home, it has happened that I could not read even one line or write one word. I often tell my wife, "All day our home is like a battlefield with large armies in motion." This goes on not only during the daytime, but even at night when there is the commotion of babies being fed or the sick being tended to.

I was only nineteen the year I married. I was twenty-one when we had Ajiu, twenty-three when we had Acai. At that time I was like a wild horse that could not stand saddle, reins, and bridle. I knew I should not run away from it and yet, unconsciously, I tried to. Thinking back to those days, I see that I really gave the two children a hard time; my acts of violence were unpardonable. When Ajiu was only two and a half years old, we lived on the school ground at Hangzhou. Seemingly for no reason, this child was crying all the time and was also very wary of strangers. When he was not near Mother, or when he saw a stranger, he would start bawling his head off. Since many people lived around us, I could not let him disturb the whole neighborhood, but we also could not avoid having many visitors. I was most annoyed by his behavior. Once I purposely got Mother out of the room, closed the door, put the boy on the floor and gave him a good spanking. Even now, when we talk about it, Mother finds it unpardonable. She says my hands are too harsh. After all, the child was only two and a half. In recent years I have often felt sad at the thought of that incident. Once it also happened with Acai in Taizhou. She was even smaller, just past a year, hardly able to walk, possibly because she was very much attached to her mother. I put her in a corner and let her cry and yell for three or four minutes. It made her sick for a few days, and Mother said it was really a heartless thing to do. But my sufferings were genuine too.

Once I wrote Ye Shengtao that my plight due to the children sometimes got to be unbearable and gave rise to thoughts of suicide. Although in saying this I was merely venting my anger, I really have been in this mood sometimes. Later, with more children, and having to bear my suffering for some time, I found the sharp edges of my youth had become blunted and added age had increased my rational judgment. I became more tolerant, recognizing that in the past I really had been "anything but a perfect father," as I wrote to another friend. However, I still believe that my children in their early years were much more of an annoyance than other people's. I think it may have been mainly due to our ineptness at bringing them up. Yet if we invariably scolded them and had them take all the blame for what should have been our responsibility, it was certainly a shameful cruelty on our part.

Yet I must admit there was also happiness in the true sense. As anyone will tell you, the little ones are always adorable, those captivating little mites and little darlings. Amao is now five months old. When you touch her chin or make faces, she will open her toothless mouth and give out a gurgling laugh. Her smile is like a flower unfolding. She does not like to be inside for

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long and if she is, she cries out loudly. Mother often says, "The little girl wants to take a walk; like a bird, she has to flit away once in a while."

Runer was three just last month; a clumsy one, he cannot yet speak well. He can only say three or four-word sentences with no regard for grammar and a blurred pronunciation, getting every word out only with great effort. It always makes us laugh. When he wants to say *hao* [good], it comes out like *xiao* [small]. If you ask him, "Are you well?" he will reply "small" or "not small." We often make him say these words for the fun of it, and it seems he now suspects as much and has recently begun to say a correct *hao*, especially when we purposely want him to say *xiao*. He has an enamel cup which we bought for about ten cents. The maid had told him, "This is ten cents." All he remembered were two words "ten cents" and he therefore used to call his cup "ten cents," sometimes abbreviated to "cents." When that maid left, the term had to be translated for the new one. If he is embarrassed or sees a stranger, he has a way of staring openmouthed with a silly smile; we call him a silly boy in our native dialect. He is a little fatty, with short legs, funny to look at when he waddles along, and if he hurries, he is quite a sight. Sometimes he imitates me, clasping his hands behind him and walking with a swinging gait. He will then laugh at himself and also make us laugh.

His big sister Acai is over seven years old and goes to elementary school. At the table she prattles along breathlessly with stories of her schoolmates or their parents, whether anybody wants to listen or not. She always ends with a "Dad, do you know them?" or "Dad, did you know that?" Since Mother does not allow her to talk while eating, she always addresses herself to me. She is always full of questions. After the movies, she asks whether the people on the screen are real, and if so, why they don't talk. The same with photographs. Somebody must have told her that soldiers beat up people, which prompted her to ask, "Are soldiers human beings? Why do they beat people?" Recently, probably because her teacher made certain remarks, she came home and asked, "Whose side is Zhang Zuolin on?<sup>4</sup> Are Jiang Jieshi's soldiers helping us?" Endless questions of this type are used to pester me every day, and often they back me into a corner for want of an answer. When she plays with Runer, they make an incongruous pair, one big and one small, and there is constant quarreling and crying. But sometimes they seem to get along. For instance, one might hide under the bed and the other try to squeeze in in pursuit. Then out they come, one after the other, from this bed to that. All one hears is their laughter, shouting and panting, as Mother would say, just like little dogs. Now in Beijing there are only these three children with us since, when we came north last year, Grandmother took Ajiu and Zhuaner back to stay at Yangzhou for the time being.

Ajiu loves books; he likes to read *Water Margin*, *The Journey to the West*, *Heroes of the Sword*, *Little Friend*, and so on. He reads whenever he has a spare moment, sitting or lying down. The only book he dislikes is *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, which, he says, has no flavor; and indeed a ten-year-old can hardly be expected to appreciate its flavor.

Last year we had to leave behind two of the children. Since Ajiu was a bigger boy and since Zhuanger had always been with Grandmother, we left them behind in Shanghai. I remember very clearly the morning of our parting. I brought Ajiu from the hotel at Two Stream

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<sup>4</sup> Zhang Zuolin (1873-1928) was the warlord in Manchuria.

## Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on "MY CHILDREN," BY ZHU ZIQING

Bridge to where Mother and Zhuanger were staying with some friends. Mother had told me to buy something to eat for them, so at Sima Street I went into a restaurant. Ajiu wanted some smoked fish, which I bought for him along with some cookies for Zhuanger. Then we went by streetcar to Haining Street. When we got off, I noticed an expression of apprehension and discomfort on his face. I had to hurry back to the hotel to prepare things for the journey and could say only one or two words to the children. Zhuanger looked at me silently while Ajiu turned to say something to Grandmother. I looked back once, then left, feeling myself the target of their recriminatory glances. Mother later told me that Ajiu had said behind my back, "I know Father prefers little sister and won't take me to Beijing," but this was really not doing me justice. He also pleaded, "At summer vacation time, you must come and pick me up," which we promised to do.

Now it is already the second summer and the children are still left waiting in faraway Yangzhou. Do they hate us or miss us? Mother has never stopped longing for her two children. Often she has wept secretly, but what could I do? Just thinking of the old anonymous poem, "It's the lot of the poor to live with constant reunions and separations," saddened me no end. Zhuanger has become even more of a stranger to me, but last year when leaving White Horse Lake, she spoke up in her crude Hangzhou dialect (at that time she had never been in Yangzhou) and her especially sharp voice: "I want to go to Beijing." What did she know of Beijing? She was just repeating what she had heard from the big children. But still, remembering how she said it makes me terribly sad. It was not unusual for these two children to be separated from me, and they had also been separated from Mother once, but this time it has been too long. How can their little hearts endure such loneliness?

Most of my friends love children. Shaogu once wrote to reproach me for some of my attitudes. He said that children's noises are something to be cherished. How could anyone hate them as I had said? He said he really could not understand me. Feng Zikai<sup>5</sup> wrote an article for his *Viewing China*, which is all "amiable talk from a most kindhearted man." Ye Shengtao often talked about his worries too, such as what middle school to send the children to after they finished elementary school. He brought this topic up with me two or three times. Those friends made me feel ashamed of my own attitude. Recently, however, I have grown more aware of my responsibilities. I think, first of all, I must get all my children together. Next, I must give them strength. I have personally witnessed the case of a man who, although very fond of his children, grossly neglected them by not providing good educations for them. Not that he was spoiling them in any way; it was merely that he lacked the patience to take good care of them. As a result, they will never amount to much. I think if I go on like I have, my children will be in even greater danger. I must make plans, must let them gradually know what it takes to become a good human being. But do I want them to become like me? Once at White Horse Lake where I was teaching lower middle school, I had asked Xia Mianzun this question, to be considered from the standpoint of the teacher-pupil relationship. He answered unhesitatingly, "Of course!" Recently, I came to talk with Yu Pingbo<sup>6</sup> about raising children and he had a clever answer: "In

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<sup>5</sup> Feng Zikai (1898-1975), artist and essayist.

<sup>6</sup> Yu Pingbo (1900-1990), poet and scholar.

## Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on “MY CHILDREN,” BY ZHU ZIQING

any case, do not make them worse than we are.” Yes, indeed, raising them to be not worse than we are, that would do! Likeness to oneself need not be of any concern. Profession, world view, and so on — let them figure that out for themselves. Whatever they decide for themselves, they will value. Merely to guide them and help them develop themselves seems the most enlightened path to follow.

Yutong once said: “Only if we have our children graduate from universities can we say that we have fulfilled our parental duties.” S. K. disagreed: “Consider also in this context your own economic ability and the children’s capabilities and goals. If they graduate from middle school and cannot, or will not, go on to higher studies, let them do something else; even becoming workers, for instance, would not be improper at all.” Of course, a person’s social value and success do not altogether depend on his school education. By insisting that our children be university educated, we only follow our personal prejudices. I cannot decide these issues now, especially since the times are so unstable. How can one possibly foresee the future? It is a good thing the children are still small; we can wait and see what happens. All that we can do at present is to give them basic strength, breadth of mind, and good judgment. Since they are still children, it is of course too early to talk about high and far-off objectives; we should rather start out slowly from what is near at hand and basic. This, quite naturally, will proceed from the way I am. “It is up to each individual to solve for himself the mysteries of life!” Be it glory, misfortune or an undistinguished fate that awaits them, let each exert himself to the utmost of his strength. I only hope that with all these reflections I will from now on do well as a father; that would satisfy me completely. The call of the “madman” to “rescue the children”<sup>7</sup> is a frightening warning to all of us!

*[Translated by Ernst Wolff]*

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<sup>7</sup> In Lu Xun’s story “Diary of a Madman.”