

Children and War: Anti-Japanese War Propaganda in *Southeast Children*

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Abstract: Founded in Jinhua in 1939, *Southeast Children* was a children's periodical that carried out the core task of Anti-Japanese War propaganda. Its editorial philosophy held national salvation to be the guiding principle of its policy practice with emphasis on the adaptability of the forms of propaganda to children's cognition, psychological characteristics, and life experiences. Against this backdrop, various tactics of propaganda were implemented to ensure a child-appropriate expression of the Anti-Japanese War discourse. These included: using ceremonial occasions like the Double Fourth Children's Day (4 April), publishing literary and artistic works accessible to children, presenting child role models, and introducing children's games. Its Anti-Japanese War propaganda helped the magazine play a positive role in promoting national awareness, uniting children, and working with wartime education. Children's periodicals such as *Southeast Children* offer an effective window to the intrinsic link between wartime society and its children.

Keywords: *Southeast Children*; Anti-Japanese War propaganda; National salvation; Child-appropriate expression

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1. Introduction

With the outbreak of the full-scale Anti-Japanese War, children's periodicals across the country spontaneously adopted Anti-Japanese War propaganda as their primary objective, thereby becoming an effective medium for connecting wartime society and children. Regarding the relationship between children and war, Xu Lanjun raises a core question in *Children and War: Nation, Education and Popular Culture*: "Where did children fit into the multiple, tumultuous wars and revolutions that unfolded on Chinese soil in the mid-20th century?"^[1] Children's periodicals and Anti-Japanese War propaganda offer a crucial perspective for examining the internal connections among mainstream wartime social discourse, periodical media, and children as a group.

Southeast Children was a children's periodical founded in Jinhua by Hang Wei and Chen Huaibai in their personal capacities under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. It was later relocated to Lishui for publication and distribution. Launched in September 1939, it was banned from publication in

November 1940. Published by Southeast Children Press, the fortnightly magazine comprised two volumes and sixteen issues. Issues 5 and 6, 9 and 10, and 11 and 12 of volume 1 were combined into single issues. This paper takes *Southeast Children* as a case study to address the following questions: What editorial philosophy did children's periodicals uphold during wartime? How did children's periodicals convey the discourse of the Anti-Japanese War to children? What social roles did children's periodicals play in Anti-Japanese War propaganda?

2. The editorial philosophy of *Southeast Children*

Zhang Xinke notes in *Children's Literature Education in the Late Qing and Republican Periods: A Historical Study of Its Development*: "From 1922 to 1936, children were generally regarded as 'full-fledged members of human society', special, independent individuals, and the educational objective focused on promoting their experiential growth in accordance with their physiological and psychological characteristics. From 1937 to 1949, children were generally seen as the nation's actual builders and future heirs, and the goal of education was to help them grow into members of a collective who submit to its collective will."^[2] This discussion, starting from the perspective of children's literature education, roughly reflects the evolution of mainstream societal views on the positioning of children's identity during the Republican period. As a children's periodical founded during the Anti-Japanese War, *Southeast Children* had the editorial philosophy that not only resonated with the wartime view of children and the spirit of the age it embodied, but also reflected a critical examination and selective adoption of previous conceptions of childhood.

Southeast Children was fundamentally guided by national salvation. From its inception, the magazine took national salvation propaganda targeting children as its primary goal. Among the publications in Jinhua, Hang Wei recalled, "there was already *Zhejiang Women* published under the name of the Zhejiang Wartime Child Care Association; *Youth Unity*, directed at young people; and *Knife and Pen* aimed at literary woodcut artists. But there was still a dearth of children's publications." So Shao Quanlin, then one of the leaders of the CPC Zhejiang Provincial Culture Work Committee, "considered comprehensively the need to secure more propaganda platforms among Jinhua's publications, tailored to different audiences." He arranged for Hang Wei, who had arrived in Jinhua in the second half of 1939, to cooperate with Chen Huaibai in publishing *Southeast Children* to perform Anti-Japanese War propaganda^[3].

In service of this aim, *Southeast Children* deliberately oriented its readership to the wartime perspective of children: they were perceived as a relevant force in the Anti-Japanese War and also a kind of future reserve for national development. The former was reflected in the magazine's consistent push to encourage children to engage in the war. For example, the magazine promoted the "Little Teacher System" espoused by Tao Xingzhi, which was premised on the philosophy of "teaching the knowledge as one gets to know"; in addition, it set up a section on "How to Be a Little Teacher" to offer guidance. Meanwhile, the magazine was also very busy with coverage of children's groups such as the Taiwan Youth Corps, the Xiamen Children's Troupe for National Salvation, and the Xin'an Travelling Troupe, giving children concrete examples of how to engage in war efforts. The latter was mirrored in the magazine's focus on children's ultimate acquisition of knowledge and skills. Some of the articles, for example, focused on disseminating wartime survival skills and increasing scientific literacy. "When Enemy Planes Attack" not only taught wartime evacuation procedures but also incorporated explanations of general knowledge^[4]. Furthermore, other articles offered interpretations and commentaries on domestic and international situations, aiming to broaden children's

capacity for independent thinking and their global perspectives. “Celebrating the Great Victory in Northern Hunan” discussed the enemy’s offensive routes and the factors behind the Chinese forces’ victory in the First Battle of Northern Hunan, while “Poland Has Fallen” briefly outlined Poland’s two periods of national collapse and analysed the causes of these failures ^[5-6].

From the perspective of the magazine, child readers were first prioritised as members of the nation incorporated into the propaganda and mobilisation system, and only secondarily as independent individuals awaiting enlightenment. However, the most practical problem the magazine faced remained the extent to which any wartime imagination of children’s identity and accompanying propaganda discourse could be accepted by the vast population of yet-to-mature children. In response, *Southeast Children* fully drew upon the editorial experience of previous children’s publications in an effort to achieve a child-appropriate expression of the aforementioned discourse. In “Historical Review of Children’s Newspaper in Modern China”, Fu Ning points out that children’s newspapers since the 1920s have been characterised by content that is “suitable for children’s psychological characteristics and reading tastes” ^[7]. *Southeast Children* continued this editorial tradition, emphasising children’s cognition, psychological characteristics, and life experiences. In “How I Edited *Southeast Children*”, Hang Wei stated: “Children are not adults; adults and children inhabit different worlds. Adults often fail to understand children... I am no longer a child, though I too once came from childhood. There is a certain distance between children and me, but I always wish to understand children and get close to them, because I love children.” Having worked as a teacher in his early years and edited children’s publications such as *Little Baby*, *Children’s News*, and *Guangxi Children*, Hang Wei was intimately familiar with and deeply concerned about children’s lives. He went on to note: “When I write stories, I write those most familiar to them from their daily lives. After finishing a story, I first tell it to them. If they enjoy listening to it, the story is a success. When I create games, I also draw them from their lives. Once devised, I teach them how to play first. Furthermore, in terms of language, children’s tone differs from that of adults, and their vocabulary is not as rich. When I have written a piece, whether it is a story, a poem, or a narrative, I always read it aloud to the children first. If there are parts they do not understand, I amend them immediately until everyone fully comprehends it.” ^[8].

Thus, while serving the purpose of Anti-Japanese War propaganda, the editorial principles of the magazine were to remain close to children’s lives, win their affection, and ensure that the content was easily understood. In other words, in an era of war, *Southeast Children* was inevitably shaped by the dominant nationalist discourse, yet “child-appropriate expression” served as an effective means for the publication to communicate with and mobilise child readers. Through what specific forms did *Southeast Children* achieve child-appropriate expression in its propaganda?

3. The propaganda strategies of *Southeast Children*

Major festivals and rituals, such as the Double Fourth Children’s Day, were accorded propaganda value by the magazine due to children’s broad participation. Established on 4 April 1932, the Double Fourth Children’s Day was a significant festival that children could celebrate during wartime. The combined volume 1, issues 11 and 12 of *Southeast Children* were specifically designed as a “Children’s Day Special Issue” to coincide with the publication and distribution for the Double Fourth Children’s Day. Articles such as “On Children’s Day 1940: To Children and Adults” approached the topic from the perspective of celebrating the festival, focusing primarily on those children unable to celebrate, and issued the following call to action:

“Let us all strive to ensure that every child becomes a happy child, so that in the future we may hold an even more joyous celebration”^[9]. Furthermore, traditional festivals such as the Lunar New Year were regarded as important propaganda opportunities. For instance, “How to Spend the Lunar New Year” noted: “The Lunar New Year is a joyous occasion...But please close your eyes and think: how many places have fallen! Do the children and adults in the occupied territories have a New Year to celebrate?”^[10]. The magazine’s main propaganda strategy in using festivals rituals as a way to use the festivals to highlight the hardships endured by children. As Tao Xingzhi put it: “A fortunate child celebrates Children’s Day every single day of the year; 4 April is merely an enhanced version of Children’s Day. An unfortunate child, however, has no connection even to 4 April”^[11]. Building upon this, the magazine sought to construct a collective memory of wartime suffering for children, with the aim of ultimately transforming it into a collective will for the Anti-Japanese War.

Southeast Children boasted a wealth of literary and artistic output, including songs, cartoons, stories, and plays. In form, these were straightforward and easy for youngsters to approach; in content, they were directly connected to the lives of children and depicted in a child’s voice. Songs like “Children’s Anti-Japanese War Song” and “Little Soldier” frequently used the first-person pronouns “I” and “we” to encourage children to take up the national cause. Simultaneously, the lyrics did not pull any punches with violent language, with words like “kill” and “die” used heavily^[12-13]. In general, the comics available in the magazine were presented as large illustrations that were matched with short text. “Kill the Great Traitor Wang Jingwei”, for example, used exaggerated lines to illustrate the grotesque image of a traitor, provoking children’s hatred of the activities of collaborators^[14]. Stories like “Dingding’s Misfortunes” told the tale of a young protagonist, Dingding, as he fled for his life. As the vast number of troubled children had similar experiences, Dingding’s feelings and thoughts resonated easily with young readers, so their emotional pain was alleviated to a limited extent^[15]. Similarly, plays such as “Little Compatriots in Shanghai” were set in Shanghai following the Japanese occupation, and showed the artistic appearance of its young compatriots who feared no threats and bravely resisted. For the kids to read these plays was an inspiration^[16]. *Southeast Children* used fully the characteristic features of literary and artistic genres, with multiple forms such as text, music, and image, prompting an emotional effect in children that could help to strengthen their consensus on fighting unitedly, and their belief in the inevitable victory of the Anti-Japanese War.

Southeast Children presented a group of real-life child role models from the Anti-Japanese War. For example, “Great Skills at a Young Age” featured Yu Tongjin, a fourteen-year-old child who assisted the Loyal and Righteous Salvation Army in fleeing from danger. “Let Us Learn from the Three Children of Xiamen” was about Zhou Zhihui, Ji Heting, and Yang Chunlong, children who refused to be slaves of a conquering nation and were killed by the enemy. Many of these child role models were young and courageous, even audacious enough to take part in the Anti-Japanese War, and dedicated to their country and people. Because they were of a similar age, they shared personal truths that made sense to younger readers. Relevant Articles were aimed at reasoning with child readers. For example, “Great Skills at a Young Age” describes common public attitudes toward children, such as “What do children understand?” and “What can children do?”, and employed familiar illustrations to disabuse child readers of these opinions, admonishing readers: “Children truly do understand the great matters of the Anti-Japanese War and nation-building, and they are truly capable of carrying out the great tasks of the Anti-Japanese War and nation-building.”^[17-18]. In conclusion, the magazine aimed to give readers guidance from these role models on the following aspects: children are the same as adults, it is their responsibility to be involved in the Anti-Japanese War, and children have the

capacity to execute tasks that are for the Anti-Japanese War and play a large part in the war effort.

In volume 1, which deals with issues 9 and 10 combined, *Southeast Children* introduced two games: “Defend East Zhejiang” and “Recapture West Zhejiang.” The former made sure participants were divided into two camps: invaders and defenders of Zhejiang, having them play using props like “copper coins (or roof tiles)” and “national flags.” The latter involved the primary gameplay of “capturing the flag”, with flags that read “counties in Zhejiang that have fallen”, and players needing to yell “Recaptured!” after pulling up a flag ^[19-20]. Games like these incorporated the wartime situation into children’s play and were effective vehicles for connecting children’s lives with political discourse. In particular, as children immersed themselves in the games, “defend” and “recapture” and other words entered their daily conversations and gently influenced their understanding of the Anti-Japanese War and their own national identity.

To sum up, *Southeast Children* embraced the above four propaganda strategies. In terms of form, all four strategies looked to break down a complex national salvation discourse into simple terms that the children could grasp and accept, all of which aimed to serve the primary goal in shaping children’s principles and behavior.

4. The social role of *Southeast Children*

In just over a year of *Southeast Children*’s publication, the magazine saw its circulation grow steadily, and its influence expand accordingly. “Important Notice from the Magazine” in issue 2 of volume 1 stated: “Since its publication, this magazine has received praise from all quarters, being regarded as the finest children’s publication in the southeastern region; letters of subscription have poured in from all over... Within a month, subscribers were spread across thirty-four counties in this province, nine in Jiangxi, two in Anhui, and one in Fujian. The entire issue 1 had long since sold out.” “To Readers at the End of Volume One” in the combined issues 11 and 12 of volume 1, mentioned: “Since its publication, thanks to the care and support from all quarters, sales have exceeded 3,500 copies per issue. The distribution area has extended to over sixty counties throughout Zhejiang Province, over thirty counties in Jiangxi, and more than ten counties each in Fujian and Anhui. Furthermore, it has recently reached distant regions such as Guangxi, Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangdong, all of which have subscribers... From the beginning of volume 2 to its conclusion, we intend to increase circulation to 10,000 copies.” ^[21-22]. On this basis, *Southeast Children*’s Anti-Japanese War propaganda played a positive role in shaping ideology, fostering social cohesion, and providing wartime education.

Firstly, the Anti-Japanese War propaganda of *Southeast Children* fostered national consciousness among children. The “Children’s Writings” column published creative submissions from young readers across the country. Among these, “The Lunar New Year” issued a powerful appeal: “Rise up! Strive on! We shall give birth to a New China on the bright path of national liberation”, brimming with patriotic sentiment ^[23]. This national consciousness was further manifested in the construction of children’s subjectivity. They gradually transformed from mere subjects of mobilisation into the vanguard of the Anti-Japanese War. For instance, the article “Children’s Responsibilities in a Time of Emergency”, published in the “Children’s Writings” column, pointed out that the “extraordinary period of the Anti-Japanese War and nation-building” was a “matter of life and death”, calling upon “children in this extraordinary period to directly shoulder the responsibility of saving the nation, so as to fully harness their potential”, and detailing the duties children should fulfil ^[24]. The child author of this piece took the initiative to carry the baton of Anti-Japanese War propaganda, not

only recognising their own responsibilities in the Anti-Japanese War effort but also widely mobilising other children.

Secondly, the magazine's Anti-Japanese War propaganda strengthened ties among children. As "Letters from Little Friends" wrote: "It has been two years since the Anti-Japanese War began, yet adults seem to have completely forgotten about children. I have heard that a primary school in a certain county has even banned children from participating in the national salvation movement outside school... Under the call of *Southeast Children*, we must immediately unite to form an iron wall to defend against both internal and external traitors and foreign enemies."^[25] As mentioned above, *Southeast Children* placed great emphasis on strengthening ties between children's groups across the country, with the aim of pooling children's strength to support the Anti-Japanese War. To this end, the Southeast Children Press formulated the "Organisational Rules for Southeast Children Correspondence Stations" and published them in *Southeast Children*. The rules stipulated that the Southeast Children Press would serve as the central station, while local areas would independently establish correspondence stations to write a monthly letter to the central station, reporting on local children's activities^[26]. The children across the country responded enthusiastically, and their letters made it into the magazine's "Correspondence and Reports" column. Specifically, Zhang Ping's "Our Year: Report on the Guilin Children's Organisation Forum" provided a detailed introduction to the work of Guilin children's groups over the past year^[27]. Fu Chengmo's "Children's Day in Chongqing" documented how children in Chongqing celebrated Children's Day^[28]. "Moreover, the Southeast Children Press formulated and published the 'Three-Year Plan of Southeast Children for the Anti-Japanese War and National Salvation', and launched activities like the 'Southeast Children's Aircraft Donation Campaign' and the 'One Day of Southeast Children' writing contest (New Year's Day 1941)"^[29]. These activities enabled children from different regions to exchange memories of the Anti-Japanese War and share experiences and insights, thus strengthening the bonds forged through the magazine.

Thirdly, the magazine's Anti-Japanese War propaganda went hand in hand with the implementation of wartime education. *Southeast Children* was viewed from the start as not just propaganda but as supplementary wartime teaching material. Hang Wei recalled: "This magazine was issued during wartime. Indeed, it was precisely because of wartime shortage of teaching materials that the motivation to publish this magazine arose. Therefore, its content placed particular emphasis on such supplementary materials."^[8] The Southeast Children Press actively collaborated with primary schools in the Southeast region; indeed, for issue 1 of volume 1 alone, "primary schools across the entire counties of Yiwu, Songyang, Yunhe, and Qingyuan adopted it as supplementary wartime teaching material"^[21]. Furthermore, according to Zhang Weifang's account in "Party-Led Children's Publications and Underground Distribution Networks in Lishui", numerous schools utilised *Southeast Children* to "conduct teaching across all primary school subjects centred on the defence of the Southeast", "such as incorporating the reading of literary works like 'Stories of the Anti-Japanese War' and poems on 'Defending the Southeast' into Chinese language lessons, delivering lectures on 'Defending the Southeast', teaching Anti-Japanese War songs in music classes, drawing pictures of fighting the enemy in art lessons, and playing 'Defend the Southeast' games during physical education, thereby closely linking teaching with the Anti-Japanese War and transforming it into a vivid, lively and meaningful educational experience." Furthermore, "many of the 'one-act plays' in *Southeast Children* were subsequently performed by various children's groups and schools. Some of the stories and poems in *Southeast Children* were frequently selected by schools as supplementary teaching materials and propaganda resources. One

poem, ‘My Life with the Diesel Engine’, written for young factory workers, was written in a warm and original style and was widely recited”^[29]. The rich content of *Southeast Children* was organically integrated into wartime teaching, alleviating to some extent the difficulties during the transitional period of wartime education, and providing valuable insights into how to better conduct wartime education.

5. Conclusion

Southeast Children was an influential children’s periodical in the Zhejiang region during the full-scale Anti-Japanese War. It served not only as daily reading material for children but also as a medium for Anti-Japanese War propaganda. Specifically, the magazine sought to employ diverse propaganda strategies to organically integrate the collective will for national salvation into children’s daily life experiences. Children’s periodicals, represented by *Southeast Children*, effectively constituted a significant arena for the expression of political discourse, consolidation of social forces, and cultural and educational practices centred on children. Within this sphere, the multiple identities constructed for wartime children by society were gradually refined through tangible forms and ultimately conveyed to the young readership. However, children’s periodicals were, after all, founded by adults, which implies that all their editorial practices were grounded in adults’ accumulated experiences of war and childhood. The question of how children responded to the discourse of national salvation and contributed to the formation of collective wartime memory still awaits further exploration.

Disclosure statement

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