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Beyond triviality barriers: the transcendent poetics of play in Feng Zikai's *manhua* legacy

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Despite the socio-political upheavals that marked twentieth-century China, Feng Zikai (豐子愷, 1898–1975), a Chinese artist and writer, invariably figures his art forms with child subjects in ways that encapsulate a childhood idyll reminiscent of the ancient genre of painting children at play. Drawing from Feng's *manhua* anthology, this study delves into the multi-modal representations of children's play to uncover the intertwined social, aesthetic, and ethical discourses within the context of modern China. It posits that Feng's *manhua* legacy embodies a transcendent poetics of play by integrating the elemental functions and indigenous aesthetics of play. Three aspects of transcendence arise from the paradoxical nature of play, Feng's compassionate outlook, and the imaginative materialisation of cultural heritage along with its contemporary relevance, illuminating the interplay between Feng's artistic journey and the constantly evolving socio-political context in which it unfolds.

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Introduction

Children at play have long been the subject of an ancient painting genre that can be traced back to painted ceramics from the Tang Dynasty, reaching its zenith in the iconic works of Su Hanchen (1094–1172) during the Song Dynasty. Within Su's portfolio, children are portrayed engaging in various forms of play, from traditional games to leisurely pursuits. These activities often take place in expansive gardens, where they revel in the company of playmates, the engagement of toys, and, at times, interaction with domestic animals. The fascination with childhood culture and its connotation of civilisational development, nevertheless, gradually waned over time (Wei, 1988), bequeathing an artistic legacy that spans generations and captures the ubiquity, variety, and kinaesthetic richness of children's play – ranging from pursuits like chasing and gaming to guessing, make-believe, and duelling. After a lengthy period of time, the artistic representation of Chinese children's play activities was continued, renovated, and reinvigorated by Feng Zikai (1898–1975), an artist, writer and lay Buddhist. After his 1925 debut, Feng embarked on a prolific art career dedicated to, by his own account, drawing 'classic poetry, children, society, and idyllic natural environment' in a manner that was 'interactive and intricate without any rigorous demarcation' (Feng 2001, Vol. 1, p. 30). The shifts and priorities in Feng's four main subjects can be attributed to his artistic trajectory which traversed the drastic social-political changes in 20th-century China, particularly the May Fourth Movement (1915–1923), the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937–1945) and the Mao's era (1949–1976). Despite the shifting socio-political landscape, Feng invariably crafted his art around child subjects in ways that encapsulated the idyllic childhood portrayed in traditional Chinese play-worlds, and more profoundly, he broke new ground by expanding the aesthetic and ethical implications of the art form during that era and beyond.

Inspired by Japanese *manga*, particularly Yumeji Takehisa's works, Feng Zikai merged Takehisa's integrated Eastern and Western artistic approaches in his own works. As Feng commented, 'With a free-flowing brush technique, Takehisa's paintings expressed vivid scenes and deep aesthetic sensibilities. He had a rare dexterity not only in wielding satire but also in conveying emotion through imagery, such that his works resembled poetic works of art' (cited in Sheng, 2005, p. 175). While drawing rich inspiration from Takehisa's poetic sensibility and realistic techniques, Feng also imbued his own works with a spirit of humour and developed his distinctive artistic style that, while reflecting Takehisa's approach to depicting 'various aspects of life in his realistic paintings with touches of humanity' (cited in Sheng, 2005, p. 119), also integrated themes and techniques to align with his Buddhist philosophy, Chinese lyrical traditions, and the sensibilities of his domestic readers. Feng called his artistic creations *manhua*, which soon became an umbrella term for several forms of graphic art—sketches, cartoons, caricatures, and comic strips—and a Chinese-style genre within this realm (Feng, 2015, p. 206).¹ In terms of the relationship between images and text, Feng theorised six main comic techniques: realistic, allegorical, exaggeratory, deceptive, eye-catching through titles and captions, and symbolic (1992, Vol. 4, pp. 292–315). While employing each technique in his own works, he understood the different narrative effects that could arise from varying emphases on textual elements. For instance, titles often have an eye-catching narrative effect, as Feng stated, 'Comic paintings relying solely on titles stand out through the catching-the-eye method. But the text in the comic serves to clarify the pictures, not replacing them. Therefore, titles should aim for concise, powerful language. Long-winded explanations would detract from the intended purpose of 'catching the eye' (1992, Vol. 4, p. 309). In

Feng's endeavour to craft 'literary paintings,' he aspired to communicate a cohesive message through the dynamic interplay of text and image (Feng, 1992, Vol. 2, pp. 486–495). This ingenious fusion of diverse texts and visuals results in humour, introspective contemplation, and occasionally, stringent social satire.

While extensive scholarly work has been dedicated to studying Feng's *manhua* styles, themes, techniques and taxonomy (Harbsmeier, 1984; Chen, 1996, 2004, 2011; Wu, 2013), scant attention has been given to his portrayal of children at play (Laureillard, 2013; Wu, 2013).² Within his collection, however, the motif of play emerges prominently, unveiling an alternative aesthetic and ethical paradigm that starkly contrasts with the prevailing pragmatism and societal constraints associated with adulthood, while offering a transcendent means for Feng to navigate the ever-changing social landscape. Feng's vision of aesthetic and ethical education is rooted in his embrace of the child-like heart-mind, known as '*tong xin*' in Chinese, and the playful essence of childhood itself. To explore Feng's poetics of play and its transcendent qualities, this study commences with the contextualisation of Feng's poetics at the nexus of Chinese and Western aesthetics pertaining to art and childhood education in modern China, and then closely examines texts and images from Feng's *manhua* anthology, mainly his categories of 'Children,' 'Painted Poetry,' 'Paintings to Preserve Life,' and 'Colour Paintings.' By chronologically charting his artistic path across three thematic sections, this study explores the poetics of play in Feng's *manhua* legacy and its continued relevance in the 21st century.

Play at the crossroads: Chinese and Western thoughts in art and childhood education

The exploration of modern Chinese play-words cannot be divorced from the cultural and historical forces that shaped the artist's vision, including the rich tradition of child-centred thoughts both at home and abroad. The May Fourth Movement, also known as the New Culture Movement, marked a seminal period in the flowering of Chinese children's literature and education. During this period, intellectuals, such as Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren, sought to disseminate Western child-centred educational ideas and classics, facilitating the acknowledgement of childhood as a distinct psychological phase, rather than a mere preparation for adulthood. Influenced particularly by the educational philosophy of John Dewey, who delivered a series of lectures in China between 1919 and 1921, The concept of child-centred education, which emphasises the developmental needs of children, has been hailed as a means to enlighten young minds and advance educational agendas (Wang, 2019). Over time, children have come to be recognised as unique individuals with psychological requirements for play and age-appropriate pursuits.

Besides the May Fourth awakening, the traditional Chinese literati's aesthetic sensibility also contributed to Feng's conception of play-worlds. This interest-oriented sensibility has roots in Ming writers like Li Zhi, who advocated 'the child-like heart-mind' as 'the original mind' – without it, 'the genuine self' is lost: 'A child is the beginning of a person; the child-like heart-mind is the beginning of the mind. As for the beginning of the mind, how can it be lost?' (cited in Lee, 2012, p. 123). Li's contemporary Yuan Hongdao further stressed the child-like heart-mind for his aesthetic proposition of *quwei* (lit., interest flavour). The child-like heart-mind, as Yuan observes, takes tangible shape through the innate exuberance of childhood, manifested in children's uninhibited antics, for instance, whenever they 'find it hard to look solemn, they wink, they grimace, they mumble to

themselves, they jump and skip and hop and romp' (cited in Barmé, 2002, p. 125). Drawing on Li Zhi and earlier philosophers such as Mencius and Laozi, Yuan believed that recovering the child-like heart-mind was key to reconnecting with one's original nature. In this line of thought, modern Chinese aestheticians, such as Wang Guowei and Zhu Guangqian, similarly underscored the intrinsic value of children's ludic spirit and its affinity with artistic sensibilities. Not only was Feng familiar with these domestic thinkers, but he also had a deep understanding of Western aesthetic theories of play (e.g., Immanuel Kant's 'disinterest', Friedrich Schiller's 'play drive' and Sigmund Freud's 'pleasure principle'), the comprehensive knowledge of which shaped Feng's developmental perspective on the intrinsic bonds between play, art and childhood (Zhu, 2017, pp. 142–151).³ In Feng's words, 'Children's life is oriented towards undivided interest for which they play and even forget eating or sleeping' (1992, Vol. 2, p. 254). In art education, he greatly valued the nurturing of the child-like heart-mind, an intuitive learning approach free from the constraints of 'tedious tradition, social habitus or norms' (Feng, 1992, Vol. 2, p. 255). Art is, for him, non-utilitarian, arising from a psychological foundation akin to that of play, grounded in the natural expression of emotions and realised through the creative process itself.

Feng's interest-oriented sensitivity was also fueled by a deep disillusion with adulthood, which he described as 'perverted, afflicted, even handicapped' (cited in Barmé, 2002, p. 151). Renewing childhood memories and closely observing his own children's behaviours led Feng to sublimate childhood as the best time of life (Feng, 2014, pp. 11–14). He said, 'adults had lost their original nature while children remained innocent romantics, complete people, indeed the only *zhenren* (true persons)' (cited in Barmé, 2002, pp. 131–132). Venerating the child-like heart-mind helped Feng transcend adult pragmatism and denounce rigid, homogenised thinking. For him, the child-like heart-mind is a paragon of virtue for its non-utilitarian purity, a genesis of beauty and benevolence. Feng pronounced: 'Playing is children's duty and toys are tools for their games' (1992, Vol. 2, p. 254). It is from children's exuberance, innocence, and playful deviation from adult orthodoxy that Feng derived unbridled inspiration and profound meaning.

The 'triviality barrier' – a dismissive attitude towards children's imaginative productions reflected in scholarship, as Brian Sutton-Smith terms it – pervades the perspectives of many adults, failing to value the richness of children's creative activities and instead favouring what are considered more 'serious' and 'important' pursuits (Sutton-Smith, 1970). This barrier is observable where play is assessed and discouraged, not just limited to the research field. When play is stigmatised as trivial, devoid of practical value, and not seen as instrumental for an impactful future, such perspectives can erect psychological barriers that obstruct the exploration of play as a wellspring of creativity and innovation. Contrary to this underestimation, Feng approached play as a serious, if not more worthwhile, subject of enquiry. He found pleasure in appreciating how children's play, regardless of perceived triviality or transience, could be a portal to a world larger than reality:

In children's worlds, imagination reigns freely. Children can fulfil any whims and wishes. They can remove the roof to catch the sight of a plane, grow flowers and plants in the bed, clear out some space for imaginative butterflies, dress up a stool, and build railway systems in the room. Siblings can role-play brides and bridegrooms. They can even make a request to take down the moon. (Feng 2004, p. 29).

Esteeming play as a natural activity for children, he commended their inclination for 'playing tricks on their teachers,

making trouble, [and their] reluctance to study hard' as signs of a wholesome mind. Conversely, he viewed those who strictly followed rules and spent their days solely memorising doctrines as 'disabled children' (Feng, 1992, Vol. 2, p. 237). By contrasting these mindsets, Feng celebrated the transformative power of play in nurturing an ingenious and healthy mind.

Feng's ode to play echoes Johan Huizinga's view of play in his seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1949). As Huizinga conceives of it, play, universally pervasive yet ostensibly antithetical to 'seriousness' (p. 13), paradoxically underpins the genesis of civilisation; it is an activity that, despite its apparent frivolity, carries profound import. Huizinga saw 'play' serious in its non-seriousness, which Feng seemed to intuit in his graphic tribute to the significance of children's games and pastimes. Play, uninhibited by external demands or internal pressures, can activate children's imagination and empathy. On this basis, Feng integrated Buddhist themes into his conception of childhood (Harbsmeier, 1984, p. 10). As a student of Buddhist Master Li Shutong, Feng related children's uncontaminated nature to the capacity to 'cut off the causal relationships' (*jueyuan*)—to disentangle themselves from accumulated worldly relations that hinder the experience of beauty per se. Each child, enveloped in such detachment, becomes an artist whose disinterested vision and imaginative capacities see things as they truly are, unfiltered by adult conditioning. Play engrosses children in a fanciful, unfamiliar realm where even Feng, as an adult observer, submits to its enchantment. Taking the child-like heart-mind as the key to unlocking a larger world, Feng proclaimed, 'I obtained this key and have since frequently ventured into their world. Only then did I realise that their world is intricately connected to the world of art and borders on the realm of religion, which explains its inherent beauty and euphoria' (Feng, 1992, Vol. 2, p. 248).

Upon further examination, Feng's illustrations will be shown to transcend multiple 'triviality barriers' with his perspectives influenced by his cross-cultural exchange and Buddhist beliefs, which is an entry point into wider formal and thematic developments within modern Chinese art that endeavours to capture an essential human truth beyond conventional adult conceptions of rationality, seriousness, and productivity. Through the idealised depiction of a playful child, there lies the noble quest for moral elevation: the cultivation of a 'true person' enriched with the capacity for empathetic creativity. Within this vision, aesthetics and ethics are mutually inclusive, harmonising dichotomies of nature and nurture, humans and animals, play and seriousness. First and foremost, this vision is achieved through an acute awareness of the paradox of play and an aspiration to disrupt preconceived notions of its value within a Chinese cultural context.

Play as artistic labour and its paradox. From the outset of his art career, Feng maintained that the essence of children's lives is 'free and playful': 'They play for the sake of play itself, the means is the end – this is true art.' (1992, Vol. 1, p. 76). Aligning with his play-led educational philosophy, in 1927, Feng published four sketches titled 'Artistic labour' (*yishu de laodong*) featuring children arranging chairs in a circle, building a snowman, playing house, and role-playing as workers (Fig. 1) (Feng, 2001, Vol.1, pp. 35–38). Earlier, his sketch 'Happy labourers' had portrayed two children hammering out the furniture layout for their sociodramatic play (Feng, 2001, Vol.1, p. 17). In these works, objects like furniture, snow, baskets and rickshaws are vehicles for children to unleash their imagination through role-playing adults engaged in various activities. Although these play activities mimic adult practices like pulling rickshaws and carrying heavy poles,



Fig. 1 'Artistic Labor' (Feng, 2001, Vol. 1, pp. 35–38). This figure consists of four panels (from left to right), depicting children actively engaging in collaborative activities, including arranging chairs in a circle, making a snowman, carrying a basket (with one child inside) on a shoulder pole, and pulling a rickshaw.

they are conducted, in Feng's words, 'without any utilitarian concerns', in contrast to the 'serious, calculating and tiresome' nature of adult labour (Feng, 1992, Vol. 2, p. 253).

Children's play activities, especially specific object-directed behaviours, are exalted by Feng's deft and minimal brushstrokes. In the series 'Investigation' (Feng, 2001, Vol. 1, pp. 43–46), a child fumbles with his hands inside a spittoon, switches an oil lamp on to study its magical potential, presses the ink from a fountain pen and squeezes a tube of toothpaste. These behaviours, commonly associated with mischief, reveal under Feng's brushstrokes a penchant for uncovering new insights and pioneering inventive trials. Feng's conviction in play is also evident in examples where a child pedals an imaginary bicycle fashioned from two circular fans, or assembles architectural wonders with building blocks (Feng, 2001, Vol.1, p. 12, p.19). The individual playful scenes Feng limns in expressive lines impart those fleeting yet precious moments of spontaneity, genuineness, and abundance that characterise childhood while bringing to life his vision of the 'child-like heart-mind,' which he sees as a source of the authentic well-being of humanity.

In the same vein, Feng's brushstrokes infuse even the gravest of endeavours with an essence of playfulness, as if perceived through the innocent eyes of children. In every case, there is no joyless toil that stifles children's innate inclination for merriment, nor aimless play that fails to uplift them into cheerful productivity. What adults perceive as sombre work, such as pulling a rickshaw or building houses, takes on a ludic quality in children's world. Feng calls children 'a leisure class' who find joy and entertainment in everything they do, except for sleeping and eating. 'When the time comes for them to enrol in school, assist in the shop, and tend herds', as Feng puts it, 'what adults call study, apprenticeships, or errands are seen by children as moments of leisure rather than burdensome tasks' (Feng, 2010, p.130). This playful attitude towards affairs of adulthood, driven by a detached zest, is children's way of making sense of the world. To quote Kuriyagawa Hakuson, a Japanese literary critic whose works Feng once translated:

The demarcation between work and play is not inherent. Take, for example, painting and playing the piano, which can be pursued as hobbies or professions depending on one's environment and mindset. Similarly, while gardening may be considered labour for those seeking financial gain, individuals with a tranquil disposition and abundant free time can find joy in tending to plants as a delightful pastime. (Hakuson, 1988, pp. 211–212, my translation from Chinese).

Indeed, the line between work and play is not inherently embedded in the activity itself, but is instead defined by the

mental attitude applied to it: Even the most monotonous tasks are animated by a playful spirit.

As such, it is perceptible that Feng's early artworks pay a thematic tribute to the child's undifferentiated view of play and labour. Nevertheless, an artist's output remains intertwined with the historical context of its inception. In the case of Feng, his post-1937 works shifted to depicting wartime experiences that spanned from 1937 to 1945. As Japanese aggression escalated in 1937, Feng was forced to flee his hometown and witnessed the miseries of ordinary people along the way, an experience that compelled him to reflect on his formerly apolitical stance. He once admitted that his lifelong dedication to painting and writing had left him 'disconnected from the world of manual labour, unable to differentiate crops and their types' (Feng 2021, p. 39). Yet it was amidst these social and personal vicissitudes that Feng reckoned with the importance of cultivating virtues such as altruism and diligence among young national citizens. In 'Ruminations on the third Anniversary of Marco Polo Bridge Incident on 7 July 1937', Feng lauded the transformation of once idle literati and aristocrats who became experts, leaders, generals, and competent figures in all walks of life (Feng 2021, pp. 274–275). 'Resisting war brings them opportunities for self-improvement and hard work', Feng wrote, 'The once-forgotten geniuses and buried heroes now have a chance to rise' (2021, p. 275). Channelling art to evoke the sentiments stirred by wartime experiences, Feng depicted disturbing scenes of slaughter in his comic works firsthand to condemn the atrocities. Among his famous wartime illustrations are ones that capture heart-wrenching moments of the bombing he personally witnessed—such as the tragic image of a mother losing her life as her head was bombed off while she was breastfeeding her child (Feng, 2001, Vol. 9, p. 222). In the face of extreme adversity, however, he also included child-like figures in his illustrations as a reminder of innocence and untainted hope that could prevail in dire circumstances. In one such example, titled 'I wish to transform into an angel, catching bombs in the sky' (Feng, 2001, Vol. 9, p. 138), a crowd of people is seen fleeing with nowhere to hide. In this dire situation, a smiling child angel appears in the sky, about to catch a bomb that is to fall on the crowd. With equally playful poignancy, Feng later characterised the harsh realities he had experienced as 'an artistic exile' (Feng 2021, p. 279), where solace was found only in his retreat into the arts and the maintenance of a child-like heart-mind.

Following the end of the war and the subsequent period of rebuilding China, Feng's artistic focus took yet another turn: he moved away from predominantly social depictions towards embracing the beauty of nature. This transition allowed him to incorporate more cherished landscapes and verses – two additional themes that enamoured him – into his portrayals of children's behaviour. Departing from nostalgic notions of

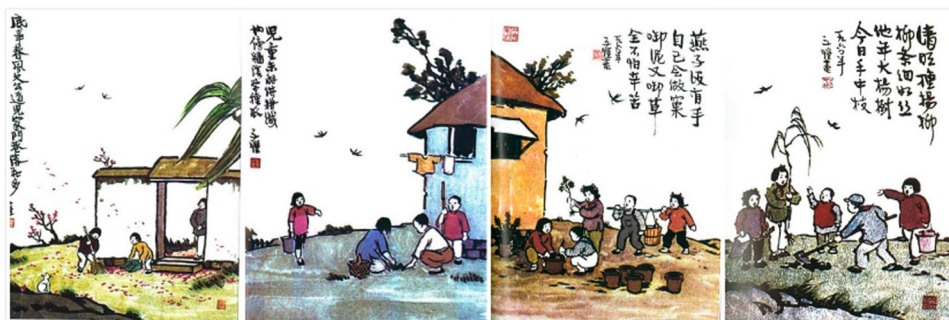


Fig. 2 'Peer Play and Labour' (Feng, 2001, Vol. 8, p. 169, p. 149, p. 71, p. 279). This figure presents a verbal-visual depiction of children engaging in peer play activities intertwined with various forms of labour. The four panels, arranged from left to right, illustrate children sweeping fallen flowers with the caption 'The spring wind must lack due fairness, so many flowers fell on our doorway (panel 1), planting melons with the caption 'Children know neither how to farm nor sew, and under a mulberry tree they learn to sow melon seeds (panel 2), involved in garden work with the caption 'With no hands, swallows know how to make nests, poking their beaks into the mud and carrying grass with tireless energy' (panel 3), and planting trees with the caption 'We plant a young willow tree in the Qingming, its branches are as tender as silk, and the robust tree tomorrow is within our hands today' (panel 4).

innocence, Feng's post-war illustrations recontextualise play from a sheer diversion into a vital means of learning and persevering in a scarred world. In this regard, it is true that Feng's style has shifted from a personal, lyrical and humanistic approach to a highly passionate and nationalistic one due to the socio-political fluctuations (Lent and Ying, 2017, p. 43). The poetics of play in Feng's works likewise veered away from artistic labour towards a more disciplined form of labour, the shift of which corresponds with Feng's social developmental trajectory where play activities gradually serve to cultivate in children an imaginative temperament that enables them to transform, rather than merely succumb to, the realities they encounter. The following coloured paintings (Fig. 2), for instance, represent children in collective, constructive enterprises within outdoor settings.

The above paintings show children sweeping away fallen flowers, growing melons, and planting trees in pastoral spaces, gently accompanied by swallows. While the humorous flair of Feng's early sketches is diluted, the poetic symbiosis of children cherishing the outdoor space is heightened through Feng's inscribed poetry. By harmonising poetry and paintings, these scenes promote a collaborative, instead of agonistic, ludic experience for children. In 'With no hands, swallows know how to make nests (panel 3), for instance, two children carry a bucket of water, while a trio of their peers tenderly plant a sapling in a pot, all against the backdrop of two swallows' aerial dance overhead. In these scenes, we detect the goodwill Feng confers upon these children, attuning them to a pastoral landscape that reflects their commitment to purposeful action, as the industrious children and amicable swallows convene congenially, conjuring up a poetic vision of childhood. In this domain, children find a sense of belonging, woven into the fabric of the social collective and in concord with the natural world.

The difficulty of understanding these peer activities as play, of course, lies in how they differ from serious goal-oriented action. While these activities may appear to enhance children's physical development and promote frugality and self-sufficiency, they can also be seen through disinterested eyes as opportunities for expanding their innovative and perceptual play space. In 'Reminiscence of my childhood', Feng recalled raising silkworms as one of his top three childhood joys. Whereas the preoccupied adults treated silkworm cultivation, cocoon harvesting, and silk production as a series of procedural steps marked by regularity and predictability, the 5 or 6-year-old Feng found delight in every phase, imaginatively transforming the objects and tools into implements of play – 'What I enjoyed was the atmosphere in the house during that time, as the familiar windows, tables, and chairs

receded, becoming makeshift silk carts, baskets, and jars' (Feng, 2000, p.15). Feng's fusion of adult work with a child's playful sensibility enacts a synthesis of Schiller's aesthetics of the play drive (2004), which enshrines play as a fundamental human experience, and Gaston Bachelard's reveries of the childhood 'within us' as a 'permanent, durable, immobile' repository of sensory, daydream qualities of the world (1969, p. 20). Childhood experience is revisited here not merely as an escape from the fixed orbit of adult consciousness but also as a cherished source of vitality. The illustrated activities, despite involving disciplined labour, are not imitations or drudgery; instead, they embody an artistic expression of play and poetry. Although these collective activities may appear distinct from Feng's earlier works that honour children's unfettered imagination and self-centred energy, the concept of 'play as artistic labour' expands with an ambient perspective, and to some extent, aestheticises 'the goal of cultivating diligence and self-sufficiency through labour' (Chen, 2012, p. 69), which has been a recurring theme in Chinese nationalist education since the early 20th century.

'Between ludic construction (of children) and work in the strict sense there are all shades of transitions', writes Jean Piaget, 'and the first cause of the gradual disappearance of practice games is, therefore, to be found in the reintegration of play into adapted activity' (pp. 144–145). Piaget's emphasis on the 'primacy of assimilation over accommodation' in play can be used to support Feng's transitional style (Piaget, 2013, p. 276). During the period of the eight-year war and post-1949, assimilating external values was crucial for strengthening self-reliance, diligence and responsibility – essential character traits of young citizens of the nation. Feng's illustrations, in which children are absorbed in play, reveal that play is motivated by a desire for acculturation, rather than solely by self-indulgence. As Helen B. Schwartzman notes, play activities can be 'transformed into activities functional for the maintenance (i.e., 'unity', 'harmony', 'consistency,' and 'solidarity') and perpetuation of the social order' (Schwartzman, 2012, p.100). Through this lens, it is quite conspicuous that Feng's graphic representations of children's play practices and personalities show them rehearsing for their grown-up life. This raises the question of whether Feng's later works, which lend credence to the thesis of play's socialising functions, contradict his initial conception of play. The crux is whether the dichotomy between labour and play dissolves within the free play of the mind. As previously discussed, while children take tasks as a playground of delight, adults often trudge the same path shadowed by the weight of obligation.

In general, Feng's illustrated play activities animate both ends of the spectrum of individualistic play and collective labour into



Fig. 3 'Childish Play' (Feng, 2001, Vol. 5, pp. 11-12). In the left panel, two children engage in a butterfly chase, with one child using a fan to catch butterflies while the other observes with her fan hidden behind her back. The right panel portrays a boy who fastens a butterfly to a string and plays with it as if it were a kite, oblivious to the suffering such behaviour causes the butterfly.

equilibrium: labour augments the exuberance of play while play orchestrates the levity of labour. This equilibrium creates an internal rhythm of harmony for a poetics that negotiates the tensions between the dominant socio-political ethos, art styles, and the poetics of childhood at a given time. In 'Life and Art', Feng asserts, 'We do not welcome art for the sake of art, nor do we welcome art for the sake of life. We demand a life of art and art of life' (1992, Vol. 4, p. 400). Amidst the flux of social change, Feng's artistic vision remains anchored in the interplay between work and play. Consequently, it extols the virtues of purposeful purposelessness (a conscious relinquishment of purpose that permits playfulness and creativity), and purposeless purposefulness (actions done for their own sake that may inadvertently fulfil larger purposes). Therefore, there is no simplistic alignment of children's play with innocence and anti-seriousness or dismissal of the necessity of collective activity that Feng attributes to the learning-development relationship at the forefront of play. For Feng, play not only cradles children's imaginative and intellectual growth, but also mirrors the moralistic, authoritarian, and often brutal realities of adult society. With an astute awareness of children's susceptibility to adult influence, therefore, Feng was keen to expose and rectify adverse adult behaviours, cautioning against potential cruelty that may infiltrate children's play – another hallmark of his transcendent poetics of play.

Play as a pathway to cultivate compassion

Feng's collection *Paintings to Protect Life (husheng huaji)*, spanning from the 1920s to the 1970s, is a six-book series dedicated to Li Shutong and their common ethical reverence for animals, an ethos rooted in Buddhist tenets. It is worth mentioning that four books from the collection were published during Mao's era – a time of drastic social movements, which also reflected Feng's predilection for creating a tranquil sanctuary, where he could cultivate children's compassion through his art. In his 1941 appeal for life-preserving materials, Feng stated that the 'stories related to children's lives and of interest to children' were needed to 'foster children's compassion for all life' (cited in Chen, 2004, p. 275). Looking beyond idyllic portrayals of children innocently frolicking with animals, Feng's artistic focus was placed on the subjects that provoked contemplation of the ethical complexities inherent in such cross-species interactions.

By juxtaposing, in his writings, the preservation of life with the child-like heart-mind, Feng not only critically revisited fond childhood experiences – such as raising silkworms, fishing, and savouring crabs (Feng, 2000, pp. 15-16) – but also illuminated the ethical tensions latent in these pastimes through his illustrated play-worlds. The paintings 'Childish Play I' and 'Childish Play II'

(Fig. 3) present archetypal scenes, where children are seen chasing butterflies and playfully interacting with dragonflies. In 'Childish Play I' on the left, one child brandishes a fan to catch butterflies, while his playmate watches the free-roaming butterflies with her fan behind her back, inviting sympathy for these delicate creatures. The text presented alongside is excerpted from Du Fu's poem 'Another Poem on Observing Fish-catching,' a verse that casts the poet's contemplative gaze into the turmoil of his times:

Amidst the clash of arms, shields, and pikes,

Where have the phoenix and the unicorn gone?

Why do we revel in this brutal game?

The sages weep for man's brutality, nature's creatures maimed! (my translation)

A moving aspect shared by both the picture and the poem is the outflow of deep compassion for nonhuman creatures. While Du's full poem conveys his empathetic lament for the symbolic innocent lives ensnared by fishing, Feng's paintings carry a broader cautionary message that no life should be ignored. Thus he urges the cultivation of conscience from an early age before innocence becomes eclipsed by insensitivity. The moral message is even clearer in 'Childish Play II' (on the right), where the boy's gleeful expression shows his indifference to the dragonfly's suffering. Feng's caption further admonishes parents to instil compassion in children early: 'Compassion grows by harming no life. Whoever believes this is already sage-like!'

The ethical warning against children's games that inflict cruelty on those more powerless than themselves, such as throwing stones at birds, watching chained birds, and catching butterflies, recurs in the paintings captioned 'Song of Homesickness,' 'Treating life as if it were not worth a straw,' and 'Holding a fan in my hand, I don't have the heart to put down the butterflies' (Feng, 2001, Vol. 5, p. 165, p. 255, p. 270). However, Feng neither intends to condemn children nor justifies their seemingly innocent but cruel mischief. Despite Feng's unwavering belief in the inherent goodness of children and their innate ability to empathise with all living beings, he also expresses concern that their compassionate nature may inevitably be compromised within an easily corrupted adult society. As Heather Ladd aptly notes regarding representations of cruel children in 18th-century fiction, the key issue when children mistreat animals through play is mainly 'the normalisation of relationships of dominance and abuse' within children's social environments (Ladd, 2018, p. 36). The insight accords with Feng's humanitarian propensity to dramatise the conflict between childhood empathy and adult



Fig. 4 Selected illustrations from *Miscellaneous Poems about Childhood* (Feng, 2001, Vol. 6, p. 367, p. 379, p. 388, p. 389). From left to right, the four panels depict children playing with new toys during the Spring Festival with the caption ‘Last night the new pocket money was received,’ children with the character ‘王’ drawn on their heads, captioned as ‘Tiger head,’ two boys catching crickets with the caption ‘Catching crickets,’ and children appreciating lanterns with the caption ‘Ghost festival.’

callousness towards animals, as in ‘Rescue’ and ‘Men are born good-natured,’ a child tries to spare a chick from an adult butcher’s blade (Feng, 2001, Vol. 5, p. 66, p. 140).

The motif of children kindly caring for those creatures commonly overlooked or disregarded by adults is prominent in Feng’s life-preservation paintings. In several of Feng’s paintings (Feng, 2001, Vol.5, p. 46, p. 50, p. 61, p. 79), children are depicted forming deep bonds with cats and dogs in ‘They are the Eyes of Equals,’ experiencing unending joy while releasing fish into the river in ‘Happy Sympathy,’ warmly embracing the return of swallows in ‘Swallows return with the mud and fallen flowers in their beaks,’ and assisting ants in relocating their nests in ‘Ant moving.’ Empathy, as depicted in Feng’s works, expands beyond the act of projecting oneself into the perspectives of others; it develops into a more encompassing ethic that advocates non-violence towards all sentient creatures and champions the cause of the defenceless. In this respect, Feng’s outlook on child-animal relations advances beyond the conventional pastoral representation of children engaging in play activities with companion animals, as exemplified in Su’s 12th-century paintings. By extension, in Feng’s *manhua* series about preserving life, there is an unmistakable anti-anthropocentric viewpoint that sees children’s interactions with animals as more than mere recreations or opportunities for emotional bonding; it sees them as critical moments to foreground and enhance the welfare of the animals.

Feng’s celebration of play as artistic labour and his ethical interest in preserving life unite in a mutual spirit of transcendence. Whether expressed through the notion of artistic labour or evocation of ethical awareness in play, Feng’s works shed light upon the potential for individuals to connect with something greater than their own existence, to transcend personal losses and social constraints to touch the very core of life’s richness. This, in turn, constitutes a vibrant source of their individuality and cultural identity. In a manner reminiscent of Su’s traditional paintings that incorporate elements of customs, handicrafts and play artefacts, Feng’s works similarly display tangible emblems of play, such as balls, toys, and playthings in the knickknack pedlar’s rack. As traditional play among children has declined globally since the late twentieth century, giving way to home-based pastimes centred around manufactured artefacts and digital technologies (Davey et al. 2013, p. 46), these emblems of play gradually assume the status of cultural heritage. However, the distinguishing virtue of Feng’s oeuvre is its dual power—an ability to pay homage to the cultural legacy of play while retaining its relevance and resonance over time.

Play as an embodiment of cultural heritage. Enthralled by the visual cornucopia of Chinese culture, Feng prolifically portrays children’s games suffused with tangible heritage – the 24 solar terms, the Peking opera, Chinese calligraphy, the Dragon Boat Festival and silk making, and an array of folk toys and figurines. As he reminisces in ‘Visual Feast,’ his beloved muses include ‘toys, patterned papers, blown sugar, dragon-shaped lantern during the Chinese New Year, juggling, local opera, and festive lanterns,’ especially clay idols of Chinese deities and characters from *Journey to the West* (Feng, 1992, Vol. 3, p. 340). Through sketching youthful pastimes awash in cultural artefacts and festivals, Feng preserves an endangered iconography while unveiling play’s role in transmitting tradition.

In 1950, Feng created 69 drawings to complement Zhou Zuoren’s *Miscellaneous Poems about Childhood*, a collection of verses depicting children’s ludic preoccupations and cultural customs largely from an adult’s nostalgic perspective. Although Zhou lambasted Feng’s graphic representations as ‘the most antiquated, shallow and mediocre kind’ (cited in Barmé, 2002, p.286), upon inspection today, the illustrations still summon the vivacity of children’s play and games that once enriched Chinese childhoods. Illustrated across four panels in Fig. 4 are children’s games linked to major cultural festivals—Chinese New Year, Dragon Boat Festival, Beginning of Autumn, and Ghost Festival—with each vignette encapsulating youthful revelry tied to the occasion accordingly (Feng, 2001, Vol. 6, p. 367, p. 379, p. 387, p. 388). During the Chinese New Year, children eagerly spend their pocket money on artisanal toys; on Dragon Boat Festival day, they have the Chinese character symbolising kingship painted on their foreheads to ward off evil spirits; when the Ghost Festival arrives, children light lotus lanterns, guiding the souls of forgotten ancestors; and as autumn descends, the songs of crickets prompt courtyard bug-hunts. These playful vignettes kindle a romantic bond between adulthood and fading childhood memories as much as they galvanise a collective national identity and cultural lineage.

Another prime example is Feng’s colour drawings of kite flying. In 1932, Feng published three vignettes of this perennial springtime pastime. ‘Flying Kite’ depicts a child pretending that a ceiling lamp is his airborne kite and its pulley the string (Feng, 2001, Vol.1, p. 47). ‘Finding a Playmate’ shows a boy knocking on doors, exquisite kite in hand, beckoning friends (Feng, 2001, Vol.1, p. 58). While conveying the youthful anticipation for this activity, the third one, ‘Same Size’ animates children comparing their kite to an aeroplane overhead (Feng, 2001, Vol.1, p. 59). In contrast, Feng’s later colour pieces (originally published in 1963),



Fig. 5 Promotional posters featuring children's play activities from Feng's manhua portfolio. The left poster, designed by BEAST, combines Feng's drawings of children's play with the allure of perfume bottles and the cosy ambience of scented candles. On the right, a collaboration between McDonald's and a Chinese food delivery app for their 'Springtime Banquet' theme incorporates Feng's illustrations of cheerful children's activities.

such as 'Soaring up,' 'Soaring up in the mighty east wind,' and 'When the east wind is steady, it is time for flying a kite; among the kites that fly high, the red-star kite is the highest' (2001, Vol.8, p. 84, p. 85, p. 281), are instances of symbolism, wherein the eastern wind signifies both the advent of spring and the renaissance of China, with red-star kites epitomising patriotic sentiment. Much akin to kite-flying which is ingrained with communal solidarity and national pride, Feng's oeuvre features a variety of other activities, ranging from shuttlecock batting and rope jumping to pyrotechnic displays during Chinese New Year and balloon launches on National Day (Feng, 2001, Vol. 2, pp. 280–281; Vol. 8, p. 49, p. 62).

Notably, many of the above colour cartoons originate from Feng's final cartoon collection, *Treasuring My Old Broomsticks*, published in 1971, a mere four years prior to his passing. Feng's commitment in his later years to redrawing and reviving some of his favourite paintings, lost due to the ravages of war and the harsh conditions during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), manifests his deep longing for, and introspective return to, pure innocence and beauty. As he wrote in the preface: 'Reflecting on my earlier works, I deeply regret that my satirical pieces may have only added to the world's negativity, while I find joy in the beauty and innocence of the ancient poetry, which was able to soothe unsettling emotions, suit natural inclinations, and dispel worldly worries' (1992, Vol. 4, p. 583). The affinity between childhood and cultural memory is, with a brush of tender reminiscence, also expressed in Feng's representation of play and poetry in this collection. Throughout his life, Feng's artistic endeavours to overcome historical and social traumas are evident in his harmonisation of individual interests, artistic flavour, and social cohesion in his portrayal of games and customs. From these vivid tableaux, the transcendent qualities radiate from Feng's child-like heart-mind and the ideal of being a 'true person', which remain intact until the very end of his life.

It is such enduring innocence and purity in Feng's work, an affirmation of his artistic resilience and the timeless relevance of his themes, that continues to reverberate far beyond his own era. While some play activities depicted in his *manhua* series might now exist primarily in archives or live on as nostalgic recollections, his aesthetic-ethical vision, which elevates the intrinsic value of play for play's sake in children's lives, has been rejuvenated from time to time; and his works have been adopted as educational resources across different tiers of the schooling system (Wang, 2008). Not only have Feng's comics been carefully

curated in curricula, art exhibitions, and republications, but they have also found new life in digital formats and through collaborations with prominent brands and major events, including the 19th Asian Games (CTJPA, 2023). The following two posters (Fig. 5) showcase the integration of Feng's illustrated play-worlds into contemporary marketing:

On the left, we see Feng's sketch of two girls donning lotus leaf hats, though without the original inscription: 'Forgetting the folded lotus flowers, they return with lotus leaves covering their heads' (2001, Vol. 9, p. 40). To the right, a collage of childhood raptures—borrowing Feng's colour sketches of two innocent playmates hand in hand against a mountainscape (Feng, 2001, Vol. 9, p.116), children flying kites after school (Feng, 2001, Vol. 9, p. 125), and two men on horseback marvelling at nature's splendour (Feng, 2001, Vol. 9, p. 215). Tapping into Feng's art world, the brands position themselves as champions of the values and experiences represented—humanity, simplicity, playfulness, and the evocative beauty of nature. Taken together, Feng's *manhua* legacy transcends time and remains relevant in the contemporary world as it captures the essence of the human experience and the play ethos thereof, thus allowing its evolving dialogue to connect transformations over history rather than endure merely as a relic of the past.

Conclusion

Idealising children as the epitome of humanity and sketching their play-worlds bespeaks Feng's yearnings to hark back to his childhood and to dismantle the trivality barriers that often cloud the appreciation of the symbiosis of childhood, creativity, and art. This thematic preoccupation finds continuity in his *manhua* anthology, which articulates a lyrical narrative—part hymn, part elegy—of the idyllic, innocent, and spiritual amidst deep socio-political transformations of his times. Within the modern socio-historical context of China, this study identifies Feng's poetics of play as existing in three interconnected aspects of transcendence. In the first place, as a novel artistic intervention into the tradition of painting children at play, Feng's works delve into the paradoxical relationship between play and utility—a debate deeply ingrained in a society seeking transformation and development. As a means of transcending the hegemonic adult-centric norms and tumultuous social changes of his time, these works demonstrate the transcendent power of play by preserving innocence and artistic sensibilities for their own sake. Furthermore, his artwork embodies a poetics of creative compassion, offering a melodic call for children and adults alike to ponder a

spectrum of amusements, ranging from the enchanting to the possibly cruel, that are set in nature and interact with its denizens, with an emphasis on advocating for the careful stewardship of the delicate balance between enjoyment and ethical responsibility in these interactions. In addition, Feng's graphic record of culture-specific childhood, rich in heritage, becomes a testament to what an idyllic and unburdened childhood should entail, providing a relevant counterpoint to the swift social and technological progression of the twenty-first century. Through his artwork, the poetics of play, conjoined with artistic labour, cross-species empathy, and idiosyncratic cultural heritage, illuminates the valuable intersection of art, childhood, and play within an ever-changing society, while reminding us of the transcendental power that stems from the child-like heart-mind, a power capable of surmounting tempo-spatial, psychological, and cross-species communicative barriers.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Notes

- 1 In this article, terms such as 'sketches,' 'paintings,' 'illustrations,' 'drawings,' 'vignettes,' and 'pictures' are employed interchangeably to convey the multifaceted nature of Feng's manhua style. The lexical choice aims to underscore the diversity of artistic traditions and cultural influences that shape Feng's oeuvre, and also to highlight the richness and complexity of Feng's art which defies easy categorisation.
- 2 Scholarly examinations of playful children in Feng Zikai's body of work are presented in Marie Laureillard's 2013 essay 'Regrets of spring: The child according to Feng Zikai' and Wu Yunfeng's 2013 monograph *Feng Zikai tuwen chuanguo zhong de ertong shijie yanjiu* (A study of Feng Zikai's graphic representations of the child-world). However, both Laureillard and Wu have primarily interpreted such images within social, aesthetic, and intellectual contexts, thereby not capitalising on the concept of play as a discerning lens for Feng's artistry.
- 3 When discussing his artistic view of the interrelations between the child-like heart-mind, art and religion, Feng often referred to Freud, Schiller and Kant. In particular, he drew an analogy between *jueyuan* and Kant's disinterest.

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CY is the sole author.

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The author declares no competing interests.

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