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Elites and their children : a study in the historical anthropology of medieval China, 500-1000 AD

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Citation

Pissin, A. (2009, September 10). *Elites and their children : a study in the historical anthropology of medieval China, 500-1000 AD*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13968>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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ELITES AND THEIR CHILDREN

A STUDY IN THE HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY
OF MEDIEVAL CHINA, 500-1000 AD

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van

de graad van Doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,

op gezag van Rector Magnificus prof. mr. P.F. van der Heijden,

volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties

te verdedigen op donderdag 10 september 2009

klokke 13.45 uur

door

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geboren te Kaiserslautern
in 1973

Promotiecommissie

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In every old person is a young person,
wondering what happened.

T. Pratchett

Cover

Playing children, wall painting, Mogao caves. In: Wang Renbo. *Sui Tang wenhua* 隋唐文化. Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1990: 199.

Underlying: Writing exercise from Dunhuang, IDP database.

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List of Chinese Dynasties

Xia	夏	21th-16th century B.C.
Shang	商	16th-11th century
Zhou	周	11th century – 256
<i>Western Zhou</i>	西周	11th century - 711
<i>Eastern Zhou</i>	東周	770-256
<i>Spring and Autumn Period</i>	春秋	770-476
<i>Warring States</i>	戰果	475-221
Qin	秦	221-207
Han	漢	206 B.C.-A.D. 220
<i>Western Han</i>	西漢	206 B.C.-A.D. 24
<i>Eastern Han</i>	東漢	25-220
Three Kingdoms	三國	221-280
<i>Wei</i>	魏	220-265
<i>Shu Han</i>	蜀漢	221-265
<i>Wu</i>	吳	220-280
Western Jin	西晉	265-316
Eastern Jin	東晉	317-420
Northern Dynasties	Southern Dynasties	
北朝 386-581	南朝 420-589	
<i>Northern Wei</i> 北魏 386-534	<i>Song</i> 宋 420-479	
<i>Eastern Wei</i> 東魏 534-550	<i>Qi</i> 齊 479-502	
<i>Northern Qi</i> 北齊 550-577	<i>Liang</i> 梁 502-557	
<i>Western Wei</i> 西魏 535-556	<i>Chen</i> 陳 557-589	
<i>Northern Zhou</i> 北周 557-581		
Sui	隋	581-618
Tang	唐	618-907
Five Dynasties	五代	907-960
<i>Later Liang</i>	后梁	907-923
<i>Later Tang</i>	后唐	923-936
<i>Later Jin</i>	后晉	936-946
<i>Later Han</i>	后漢	947-950
<i>Later Zhou</i>	后周	951-960
Song	宋	960-1279
<i>Northern Song</i>	北宋	960-1127
<i>Southern Song</i>	南宋	1127-1279
Liao	遼	916-1125
Jin	金	1115-1234
Yuan	元	1271-1368
Ming	明	1368-1644
Qing	清	1644-1911
Republic of China	中華民國	1912-
People's Republic of China	中華人民共和國	1949-

Note

Age counting of children in medieval Chinese texts started right after conception, which means that a child was one year old at the time of birth. The term for 'age' is *sui* (歲). Thus a seven-*sui*-old child theoretically corresponded to a six-years-old one. However, for very young children this calculation was not used. The age of a child was often specified according to how many months after birth had passed. This was applied up to two years of age in some texts. The fact that ages are often given in a vague way, such as 'six- or seven-*sui*-old', suggests that the Chinese writers of that time were not always certain whether they were including the date of conception or not. I use months and years instead of *sui* for the reader's benefit. If necessary, and if the source was clear about it, I have deducted a year from the *sui*-age.

Prologue

Boasting of My Son

Kunshi, my pride, my son,
Is handsome and bright without match.
In swaddling clothes, less than a year
old,
He already could tell six from seven,
In his fourth year he knew his name,
And never cast his eyes on pears and
chestnuts.
My friends and acquaintances often look
at him
And say, "This child is a young phoenix!
Even in a previous age when looks were
esteemed,
He would have been placed in the first
class!"
Or else, "He has the air of an immortal!"
Or, "He has the bone structure of a
swallow or a crane!"
How could they have said such things?
Just to comfort me in my declining years!
In a beautiful and mild month of spring,
He joins my nephews and nieces at play,
Rushing round the hall and through the
woods,
Bubbling with noise like a golden
cauldron boiling!
When a worthy guest comes to the door,
He will rashly ask to go out first;
When the guest asks what he wants,
He will hedge and not tell the truth.
Then he'll come back to mimic the guest,
Breaking through the door and holding
Father's tablet.
He'll ridicule the guest for being dark
like Zhang Fei,
Or laugh at him for stuttering like Deng
Ai.

One moment he is a heroic eagle with
bristling feathers;
Next moment he is a brave horse in high
spirits.
Having cut a thick bamboo pole,
He rides on it and runs with wild
abandon.
Suddenly he starts to play the stage
bully,
Calling the servant in a measured voice.
Then, at night, by the gaze lantern,
He bows his head and worships the
Buddha's image.
He raises his whip to catch a spider's
web,
Or bends his head to suck the honey
from a flower.
He vies with the butterfly in agility,
And does not yield to the floating
catkins for speed.
Before the steps he meets his elder sister,
And loses heavily in a game of draughts.
So he runs away to play to play with her
dressing case,
And pulls off all its golden knobs!
Held by her, he struggles and stumbles,
But his angry pride cannot be subdued.
He bends down and pulls open the
carved window;
Then spits on the zither to wipe its
lacquered surface!
Sometimes he watches me practicing
calligraphy,
Standing upright, without moving his
knees.
The ancient brocade he wants for a coat;
The jade roller, too, he begs to have.
He asks Father to write on a "spring
banner";

The "spring banner" is suitable for a
spring day.
The slanting banana leaves roll up the
paper;
The magnolia flowers hang lower than
the brush.
My son, your father was formerly fond
of studying;
He worked earnestly and hard at his
writings.
Now, haggard and wan, and nearly
forty,
He has no flesh left and fears fleas and
lice.
My son, don't follow your father's
example
In studying hard and seeking A's and
B's!
Look at Rangju with his Art of War,
Or Zhang Liang with what he learnt
from the Yellow stone;
They became teachers of kings
overnight,
And no longer had to bother about
trifling things!
Moreover, now in the West and in the
North,
The Qiang and Rong tribes rampage
unchecked;
The Court can neither kill nor pardon
them,
But allows them to grow like an
incurable disease.
You, my son, should quickly grow up,
And go to the tiger's den to look for
cubs!
You should become a marquis of ten
thousand households;
Don't stick to a bag of Classical Books!¹

¹ Li Shangyin, transl. by James Liu 1969: 154-6.

Zengzeng's story

In the mid Zhenyuan period (785-805) Liu Ji (柳及) from Henan, the son of a *jinshi*-graduate, married a woman from Huizhang, near a place where he was travelling. They got a son together and called him Zengzeng (甞甞). However, because of poverty, Liu Ji left his wife and child after about a year and went into the far South, where he lived under a different identity. There, in Wuxian, he married again, a woman from the Shen family. He then stayed alone with his new wife and her mother at the place where his was working.

At the time the event takes place, it was autumn, after nightfall when the heaven was clear and the moon bright. Suddenly, Mrs Shen saw a little boy in the window. He pointed at her with his hand and said: "Don't be afraid! Don't be afraid! I am a nice boy. I will tell you a story and you can listen to it." Mrs Shen told her mother about him. Her mother then asked who he was and where he came from. He answered: "I am Zengzeng. I died last year in the seventh month. Therefore I am coming now to say good-bye. Usually, when someone dies immaturely and has not reached the seventh year yet, he has not committed any crimes during his life time, and he does not receive retribution. Granted that I am not reborn immediately, I am given duties of office, and I bring back and forth documents from and to the palace of the underworld. The lord of the underworld is making notes about the evil and good [deeds] of everybody and every month he is sending them to the palace of the underworld. Between [these errands] I have leisure time and can go wherever I want to."

When Zengzeng's father returned home and his wife told him what happened, he at first did not believe it and thought that his wife and mother in law were victims of an evil ghost. However, Zengzeng showed himself to his father who finally he believed that it was his son indeed.

[Zengzeng's father] then sobbed and cried and asked how it came that he died an early death. [Zengzeng] told him: "Last year, in the middle of the seventh month, I caught dysentery while playing, and neither the doctor nor the pharmacist could help me, and thus [it happened] that I came here. It is fate. Now I receive orders from the underworld and it's not yet my time for incarnation"

Zengzeng, before he enters his new life through rebirth, foretold his father's death and helped his stepmother, whom he had never met when he was alive.²

² *Taiping guangji* 149: 1075-6 (*Qianding lu* by Zhong Lu 9th century). A note says that "Meng Hongwei 孟弘微 from Pingchang 平昌 and Liu Ji knew each other." I have partly translated, partly summarised this narrative, as I have done with many narratives throughout this thesis.

Steaming and Changing

Usually, thirty-two days after being born the child changes. Sixty-four days [after birth] it changes a second time – [it passes through] both [stages], Changing and Steaming. Ninety-six days [later] there is the third Changing, one-hundred and twenty-eight days [later] the fourth Changing – [it passes through] both, Changing and Steaming. One-hundred and sixty days [after birth] there is the fifth Changing, one-hundred and ninety-two days later the sixth Changing – [it passes through] both, Changing and Steaming. Two-hundred and twenty-four days [later] there is the seventh Changing, two-hundred and fifty-six days [later] the eighth Changing – [it passes through] both, Changing and Steaming. Two-hundred and eighty-eight days [after birth] there is the ninth Changing, thirty-two days [after birth] the tenth Changing – [it passes through] both, Changing and Steaming. After accumulating three-hundred and twenty days, sixty-four days [later] there is a big Steaming. After this Steaming, sixty-four days later there is again a big Steaming. After this Steaming, one-hundred and twenty-eight days later there is again a big Steaming. Usually, from birth onwards children have a Changing each thirty-two days. [Together with] each Changing comes a Steaming. Usually there are ten Changings and [among them] five Steamings. Further (thereafter), there are three big Steamings. Altogether it takes five-hundred and seventy-six days. When the big and small Steamings are finished, [the child] becomes a person.³

³ *Beiji qianjin yaofang* 8.2b-3a: 132.