



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **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

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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

Annika Pissin

geboren te Kaiserslautern  
in 1973

Promotiecommissie

promoter: Prof. dr. B.J. ter Haar

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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

<b>Xia</b>	夏	21th-16th century B.C.
<b>Shang</b>	商	16th-11th century
<b>Zhou</b>	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
<b>Qin</b>	秦	221-207
<b>Han</b>	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
<b>Three Kingdoms</b>	三國	221-280
<i>Wei</i>	魏	220-265
<i>Shu Han</i>	蜀漢	221-265
<i>Wu</i>	吳	220-280
<b>Western Jin</b>	西晉	265-316
<b>Eastern Jin</b>	東晉	317-420
<b>Northern Dynasties</b>	<b>Southern Dynasties</b>	
<b>北朝 386-581</b>	<b>南朝 420-589</b>	
<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		
<b>Sui</b>	隋	581-618
<b>Tang</b>	唐	618-907
<b>Five Dynasties</b>	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
<b>Song</b>	宋	960-1279
<i>Northern Song</i>	北宋	960-1127
<i>Southern Song</i>	南宋	1127-1279
<b>Liao</b>	遼	916-1125
<b>Jin</b>	金	1115-1234
<b>Yuan</b>	元	1271-1368
<b>Ming</b>	明	1368-1644
<b>Qing</b>	清	1644-1911
<b>Republic of China</b>	中華民國	1912-
<b>People's Republic of China</b>	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!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *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.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Beiji qianjin yaofang* 8.2b-3a: 132.