



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Pissin, A.

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)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13968>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

VIII. Conclusion

This thesis dealt with the medieval elites and their children. Throughout this dissertation I have demonstrated that children were a highly visible part in medieval communities. That is to say, children appear in numerous medieval Chinese texts. However, none of the children appearing in narratives and biographies were put in there unconsciously. I have shown that a man's interest in children in medieval China was based on the maintenance of the ideal foundation of a community. This interest also resulted in practical results, such as medical works. Administrative and legal works relied on medieval classification and understanding of childhood. The most powerful group in medieval times thus used stereotypical images of the less powerful group to reach that goal. Still, some children were beings in transition from the least significant group to become members of those in control. In such cases children were contested grounds by men and women, and women were described to take many measures to ensure her biological son's emotional dependency because she knew of her dependency on him in later years.

Men obviously pondered about pregnancy, the growth of the foetus and birth – events they hardly had any access to nor control over. Men also wondered about what happened when children grew and how the small body turned into an adult body and what the difference was between those two bodies. Men also worried about education, and how a child would be able to result into a morally integer adult, who was going to bring honour to the family within a community and continue the family line. Authors especially deliberated the childhood of outstanding persons. This thesis has furthermore presented material which

namely when children's songs (*tongyao*) turn out to have revealed truth. However, this will be discussed in my article 'The other child' because it does not directly deal with the death of children.

shows that medieval parents worried about their offspring and that grief about the loss of a child was well accepted and perhaps even common.

The children and childhoods I have introduced in this thesis can be summarized under a few dominant images that probably derive from integration processes of childhood-images belonging to various peoples and cultural backgrounds. We saw three basic approaches that authors used to apply images of children and childhood in texts: 1) the child in relation to the surrounding community and beyond; 2) childhood in relation to the life of an extraordinary individual; 3) children and childhood as symbols for personal immortality and the continuation of the family line.

1) the child in relation to the surrounding community and beyond

In the introduction I have mentioned that the most crucial foundation of medieval communities were the bonds and the acknowledgement of hierarchy within a family. This addresses specifically the basic relationships between father, mother and children and the hierarchic structure of the relationships. With respect to these bonds, the most significant child is a son. The quality of the nuclear family bonds exerts influence on the individual. The ability to maintain relationships and to accept the hierarchic order is interpreted to lie in childhood, but the authors of our texts did not investigate if this was really the case. They instead invented the fitting childhood to an eminent person, which means that they chose a childhood-image that was widely accepted to fit to a certain moral and social position within their own community.¹¹³⁴

The fundamental bonds between parents and children are created through education. This especially counts for the father-son bond, because men are the transmitter of rituals and the chief performers of family rituals aimed at maintaining the social order. The bond between mother and child was intimately physical in addition to educational. The physical relationship of mother and child gave rise to much suspicion among men against women.

The family bonds were also maintained in death, when children took their place as anonymous children among the dead family. In narratives about rebirth, which were partly influenced by Buddhist religious beliefs, children returned within their own family or within the range of its former community.

¹¹³⁴ According to modern insight, the ability to accept hierarchy and to maintain relationships is indeed rooted in childhood, among other influences on behaviour. However, while these insights are gained through assessment of children based on the view of childhood as a separate category, medieval authors argued backwards, starting from the position of adulthood to point out what the childhood was like.

Such ideal cases of relationships, however, do not often hold true under medieval living conditions. Fathers were often absent from their sons, and so were mothers. In case the biological mother was not the main wife of the family head, her role with respect to instructions was often taken over by the main wife, and the physical care of the child was taken over by any capable woman. This means that mothers were interchangeable. The role of the fathers could not as easily be taken over by another man. Yet, in the case of the father's death, his family could take over the ritual education and integration of the son. This is why we do not have many examples of a child's maltreatment by paternal family members.

The ideal connection of father, mother and child was constantly challenged by official appointments of fathers, migrations of members of the family, and death. In order to keep the child alive, the extended family played an important role in such cases. This again was a challenge to the system of fundamental relationships, for male members of the extended family on the mother's side, who might take care of their sister as well as her offspring, did not belong to that system. Stepmothers of children whose official mother has passed away also did not form part of the original system, because they belonged to a new father-mother-child structure that overlapped with the former family one. This overlap of structures did not work in favour of the stepmother, whose power over her predecessor's children was limited.

Images of children in relation to the surrounding community are used for numerous purposes. One often-occurring stereotype is the young child that is loved and pitied. This depiction does not assign moral qualities to an adult person, and we find it in narratives that discuss the attitude of adults towards a child. It is thus often used to highlight the bond of a parent to his or her offspring which is then further drawn on, for example to emphasise the pain of loss of that child. The usage of this depiction as a stereotype does not mean that parents did not really love their young children. Nevertheless, the picture of the beloved and pitied child below the age of ten occurs so frequently and in similar contexts that we have to approach it, before all, as a label. The image, as we have seen, was also taken over within an administrative framework, where classifying childhood was an important tool for social control and the execution of power. The classification of the ages was crucial for the administration of labour, and administrators thus assessed persons by their ages.

What is more, children who were described as 'beloved' and passed away were occasionally reported to be in the centre of the power-struggle of a community, a family or between the sexes. At any rate, this image of children is employed to highlight tensions and especially mistrust between men and women within a family.

Mistrust against women was especially thematised. Thus, women were demonised by the male authors, because a young child's disease, misfortune or death was seen in the light of exclusive female care giving. It seems that the medieval times knew many female demons that specialised in harassing and killing children. We also find more examples of women than of men whose lives are in between a demonic and a human existence.

A group of texts that is written specifically about children and aimed at ensuring their survival within the father-mother relationship is comprised by medical works that feature separate discussions about children. While the father most possibly played an important role in rituals around birth, his significance and impact during pregnancy and birth-giving was small. By composing medical texts about children, then, authors firstly tried to achieve their proclaimed aim, which was to reduce early child-death. Secondly, I assume, they wanted to exert influence on the sphere of women, which they suspected to be a threat to their own positions.

2) childhood in relation to the life of an extraordinary individual

Many biographies in official histories, in biographical compendia of religious groups, in narratives about extraordinary persons, and in tomb inscriptions include accounts of a person's childhood. Mostly these accounts were brief and only mentioned certain character traits, but they could also expand in a way that they retold certain events during that person's conception, during his mother's pregnancy, his birth and the person's youth. This approach to childhood centres around the deeds of an adult person and often tries to explain a particular tragic or glorious end of an adult's life – and end which is retrospectively understood to be rooted in childhood.

Writings of elite men approach and define children in retrospective, which means that authors used images of childhood and originated them in adulthood. That implies that children appear in texts only when they were significant for the life of an adult. Similarly, the childhood of a person was often composed according to the social position and the moral integrity of the adult person. The strongest stereotype is the filial, diligently studying and often precocious child, whom we find in the biographies of outstanding men of the elite. A famous Daoist hermit, at one point during his childhood, must have betrayed his parents and left home with the intention to not continue his family line, similar to a Buddhist monk. An eminent official must have been smart and filial when young. An exemplary wife must have been filial and cute during her childhood.

3) children and childhood as symbols for personal immortality and the continuation of the family line

In this thesis I have not focused on the connection between children and personal immortality, which is the source for a certain set of motives in many medieval narratives, such as the Daoist who carries around gourds filled with playing children. However, the image of the child as a symbol for the continuation of the family line is prominent in many instances. One lasting image of a child is the one called to mind by Li Shangyin's poem that I have quoted in the prologue. Analysing this poem now reveals many of the children and childhoods as literary constructs and stereotypes that I have investigated in my thesis.

Li Shangyin remarks that his son wore swaddling clothes at an age younger than one year old. He boasts about his son's remarkable intelligence and beauty, and he places his son's intelligence and behaviour above classically well-known children. This description could fit many elite children, and only by providing his son's name, Kunshi, Li Shangyin gives the poem a personal note.

The games Kunshi plays are riding on a bamboo stick, playing horse, playing eagle and running around wild, alone or in a crowd. These games are those that children generally play and, again, these activities could be used describing any elite child as we have seen throughout the thesis. Kunshi is playing in a crowd with nieces and nephews, annoys his older sister, and he is ordering servants around. Moreover, Li Shangyin's friends and acquaintances take notice of the boy and make admiring and polite remarks about him. The poet is also proud of his son's behaviour when he is making fun of adult guests.

These traits show the social importance of the offspring of an eminent personality. It is also an example of the custom that children who quote poems and well-known texts, and who are engaged in witty conversations with their father's guests, are used as entertainers. This presupposes that the son already underwent some kind of family instruction. In this, Li Shangyin's son is not an exception from many other children. The poet, unsurprisingly, also describes how his son learned, namely by watching his father being busy with what his father predictably does as well: practicing calligraphy and polishing the zither. Again, this behaviour is expected of children and nothing extraordinary.

Kunshi is also used by Li Shangyin to illustrate the poet's complaint about his occupation and his fate as he saw it at the time of the composition. Li Shangyin further mentions his own old age, he is nearly forty, and deems his days counted. He envies the youth of his son, and he pities his own old-age and the fact that he struggles with fleas and lice and emaciation. Finally, in the last few lines of the poem Li Shangyin uses his son to criticize current politics.

All in all, the poem is full of general images of how a child supposedly is and what a child supposedly does in medieval times. Li Shangyin portrayed the bright side of childhood; he described a child that could very well be a child of immortality. He, in fact, told of a child that we find depicted on medieval new-year cards and objects, a blessed child that brings blessings of immortality to the receiver of the card and owner of the object. Descriptions of blessed children are hence used to express an ideal emotional state of mind, and the desire for freedom and security.

Although we can detect stereotypes in the texts on which I have based my thesis, this does not mean that parents did not believe that the stereotypes were actually the true pictures they had about their children. I think that parents indeed loved their children and were concerned with their survival; that they tried their best to help when a child was sick and that they grieved when a child passed away. The depictions of blessed children as blessings for adults probably were partly based on the parents' love for their children.