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# Difficult decisions by women from the Tang dynasty

## Introduction

Adult women during the Tang dynasty were, before all, mothers.<sup>1</sup> To be a mother, especially the mother of legitimate sons, was the most important role for women throughout Chinese history. This presentation focuses on two decisions of mothers that had, and in fact still, have a great emotional, and socio-economic influence in their lives. The decisions are:

- 1.) taking the life of an unborn child, abortion;
- 2.) and granting life to an illegitimate child.

Women in my sources are presented to take these decisions privately, in the absence of men, while all authors who noted the events around such decisions are men.

The focus of these two decisions: taking life from and granting it to unborn children or infants also allows me to discuss several other related topics:

- a.) female freedom and dependency during the Tang period;
- b.) integration of women into communities, their rights and problems and their relation to 'alien' families, such as their natal families;
- c.) male (his)tory telling and their fears.

Images of abortive mothers and mothers who raise their illegitimate sons (never daughters) are a combination of several ideas about women that were common during the Tang dynasty. I will first introduce these common ideas and also discuss the problems of female integration and alienation in medieval communities, before I present a range of motherhood images. After this lengthy discussion I will tell several narratives that deal with abortion and illegitimate sons which I will then embed in a concluding remark about decision making by and freedom of women during the Tang dynasty.

What I will and what I will not talk about

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<sup>1</sup> A girl became adult when she had undergone the capping ritual which theoretically took place at the age of 16. Mostly it took place several days before marriage which could also be before the traditional age.

I will neither talk about imperial women, emperors' or high ministers' wives nor the female emperor Wu. I will also not discuss courtesans, Taoist priestesses, witches and Buddhist nuns who "created for themselves a lifestyle that presented a comparatively liberated way of living in its deviation from that of common womanfolk."<sup>2</sup>

My focus will be on 'all other' womanfolk that are discussed in the literary production of men during the Tang dynasty. The womanfolk I will talk about generally, with few exceptions, belongs to the circles of writing men and are thus part of the elite. They themselves probably grew up in an elite household and can therefore not be called common. I am interested in them, nonetheless because I assume that they are the most 'standard' women we could come across in our sources: my research subjects are wives and mothers or failed mothers and daughters.

In my paper, I will not consider the writings by Tang women themselves. But instead I use the images of medieval women as they were presented by their contemporary men. Without any doubt the female voice is crucial in order to gain an even deeper understanding of the life of a Tang woman. Yet, the male voice proved to be responsible for the creation of a great portion of the image that we have about Tang women today and is therefore necessary to be analysed.

It is helpful not to forget that when I talk about women and men, I usually refer to members of the elite or, if the person in question does not belong to the elite, he or she most surely belongs to the immediate surrounding of a member of the elite.

We should also not forget that what men have written down and what we have at our disposal often consists of exceptional events.

## Medieval ideas about women

Medieval China was not populated by a homogenous society but by countless communities that were connected through social-economic activities with an often ritual character. The communities that we know of were, ideally, male centered and men determined the function of other community members. Accordingly, women in this male-centered Tang world accordingly were unstable factors, because they had to be transferred from one community to another as part of their role.

Instability and displacement caused the images of unpredictability and transformation concerning women – needless to say, the idea of women as unstable factors are written male products as well.

Tang communities were visited by numerous social instability-factors others than women, such as wandering monks, peddlers and slaves. Women, however, were understood to be the most long-time unstable persons, partly due to their outsider-status, partly to their physical condition, their bleeding and child-giving, and partly due to their emotional connection with their male children, which the male authors described as being dangerous to their hierarchical order.

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<sup>2</sup> Tung 2000: 122.

## Four images

There are four main images into which women from the Tang dynasty can be classified – but of course, the groups have no borders and one image blends over in another and holds traces of yet another.

Independent, lonely, bound by men and dangerous – these are the strong images of women during the Tang dynasty that are handed down to us

### 1. Expressive facets of women during the Tang

#### a. Gay and independent

Material art and texts from the Tang dynasty present us with a whole range of partly opposite ideas: on one hand we get the idea of the independent women and sculptures like the polo-playing ladies on horses might come to our mind. Or the influential voluptuous concubine Yang Guifei whose fate nearly overshadows that of her lover emperor Xuanzong and who has been portrayed in various art-forms. And certainly China's only female emperor, Wu Zetian, is a Tang woman, who according to the common story-line, has ruined the path for any later woman to become official ruler of China.

#### b. Lonely and melancholic

On the other hand we have sources left by women themselves, mostly in the form of poetry, which display a different image of women during the so-called golden ages of imperial China. The Hong Kong-based scholar Tung, who discusses women during the Tang and draws her information from their poetry, states:

“the images of Tang women in their own lyrics are disconcertingly marred by a sense of inertia, a quiet anxiety that borders on melancholia. Writing in the mode of boudoir lament invented by the literati since the Han folk songs, Tang women express discontent in the enclosing space of the inner chamber, and seldom do they describe the spring outings when peonies were in full bloom or the gala events of major Buddhist sermons, the two common occasions that brought them out in the public. The persistent inward turning of the gaze on their sorrow over the prospect of abandonment or over a transience that will soon deprive them of their beauty, more than anything else characterizes their poetry that has passed down to us.”<sup>3</sup>

#### c. dependent and bound by men

Next to the gay, happy and free women formed by men into plastics but also described in poetry, narratives and anecdotes about concubines, Daoist priestesses, and Buddhist nuns and next to the anxious and depressed descriptions given by women themselves, we find women tightly bound into the lower ranks of a male-centered hierarchical social system. Not yet with bound feet but

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<sup>3</sup> Tung 2000: 19.

portrayed as weak and dependent or, at their best, as chaste, serving and quietly suffering in their roles as not-(yet)-married and as daughters-in-law.

The position and role of women during the Tang is expressed in the early imperial saying:

三从四德: “Three dependencies and four virtues”. This saying, which is still valid for the Tang dynasty condition of women, defines a woman’s relation to the male centers during her life and her economic contribution in the communities they live. “Three dependencies and four virtues” is also praised and followed in order to uphold peace and order in a community that feared the intrusion by strange women. The three 从, dependencies, focus on the three male centers a woman is supposed to have: her father, older brother or master; her husband and her son or sons.

When the girl turns older, the male responsible person – head of the household, which can be the father, uncle, grandfather or master – has to arrange the transfer of the girl to her new home and different male centre.

While this is the father’s responsibility, mothers have to insure that their daughters are well-educated, i.e. have interiorized the expected skills, the four 行. Although men did not write much about these four 行 in narratives, they appear standardized here and there. We can see in a few sources that the four 行 are of considerable importance with respect to finding a good husband.

d. dangerous

The dangerous image comes into existence due to the instable character of the female position and the reason that she lives in part-seclusion, hidden from men. The male world is more or less transparent for male writers but the female world is not because as son, husband and father a man has not an all-encompassing insight into what happens with and among women. Since the greatest dependency and pressure of men on women are the latter’s reproductive abilities and the female care of their offspring, the more creepy stories exist around that motive: woman in reproductive age, pregnant woman, woman in childbirth and woman as mother – all those images, if mentioned in male literature production, can be whether greatly beneficial or greatly demonic.

## Motherhood

Because motherhood was something so normal biographies of women often present us with lists in the style of: “so-and-so gave birth to three sons” Narratives about extraordinary events concerning motherhood are also interesting sources. These events could be extremely moving or extremely cruel, surely they were regarded as salient events, real or imagined, within the author’s community and his audience.

When a child was exceptional, sometimes his or her personality was related to the mother and her behavior or dreams during pregnancy or birth. Mothers are believed to love their children very much – both, girls and boys. Mothers sell themselves in order to provide for the survival of their offspring. Mothers do all they can to protect their offspring and provide them with a good education – again both, boys and girls. Mothers are told to weep bitterly when their children die.

Narratives also tell of mothers who eat their offspring after birth, who eat the offspring of others or who abandon their children. Legends tell of mothers who die during giving birth and then turn into demons who will kill the offspring of other women forever unless they are stopped by ritual means again and again. Then we also find mothers who are clear shapeshifters: they are demonic birds or tigers or ladies from paintings who manage to get pregnant by a man and carry his child – usually the child dies shortly after the mother returns to her supernatural realm.

Mothers, however, do not even have to be cruel or demonic to harm their children. Male sources warn repeatedly about over-caring: feeding a child too much or giving it too many clothes to wear. Spoiling a child like this can cause its death. Of course, mothers are also blamed to neglect their children and therefore expose it to extreme dangers.

Another mother-type is the stepmother who, in China is not much different in her cruelty from what we know from European stories. It seems odd that male authors found writing about the evil stepmother so interesting. Odd, because the maltreatment of legitimate children by a stepmother seems to point out the flaws of a system that put children in a pitiful situation where they could easily be maltreated without male intervention. Children are usually displayed to be under the absolute power of the stepmother, and men can only interfere with the help of supernatural power – mostly with the help of their deceased wife, the legitimate mother.

An explanation could be that although birth mother and stepmother theoretically hold the same position, the position of the stepmother was elevated during the Tang dynasty. If a boy's mother was divorced and left her husband's house, the child became the stepmother's son. If the mother died, on the other hand, the half-orphan remained the dead mother's child and therefore carried no responsibility towards the stepmother. This custom would explain the theme in narratives of dead mothers protecting their offspring against stepmothers, because the former still had the legal and emotional bond with her children.

## Abortion

Abortion was not a taboo-topic: medical books gave recipes for abortive medicine in cases that the mother's life was in danger. The decision about abortion then might have been made by a man. Abortion was also mentioned in the legal Code of the Tang dynasty. Here the focus lied on the forceful abortion with a knife and bad intentions. The male authors of our sources describe situations in which robbers stabbed a pregnant woman, and we also find the fear expressed that magicians steal fetuses with the intention to prolong their own life. Furthermore, Buddhist sources mention jealousy by other women who therefore would kill another woman's fetus. Buddhist texts, in fact, mostly present women themselves as the culprits in cases of abortion for women would abort due to their low moral standard.

That abortion was also done for other reasons is rarely mentioned. Luckily we have one tragic story at our disposal that tells of a woman who sees that her 16 year old daughter becomes seriously ill. At the same time the mother finds out that she is pregnant. She is shocked about it and wants to take abortive medicine because, as she exclaims loudly, she already had lost so many sons and daughters in young age, and she can't bear the pain of losing yet another. The reason here for abortion is not a low moral standard, but the desperation of a mother who saw too many children die. However, this motive for abortion, as well as the possible motive to restrict the number of the members of a household, is hardly visible in our sources. And we can only assume that more women took their own decisions to abort – not necessarily due to low morality.

## Illegitimate children

In the case of raising an illegitimate son, we are confronted with a different decision: to let the child live. Stories about this kind of situation depict the mother in a position of low moral standard, or as a pitiful being who has been invaded by demons. In one situation that I have found, however, the husband of the women who commits adultery is described as utterly stupid and thus, I assume, medieval readers of this narrative feels no pity for the duped man. The illegitimate son is able to grow up in seclusion and becomes a great sorcerer, as his father was an immortal. In other cases, illegitimate sons are mischievous and dangerous. They only care for their mother and display no filial piety towards their mother's husband's family. In one case a son kills the whole family and takes his mother away with him and his 1000 man big gang of robbers.

Why does the mother not abort? Although abortion did happen in medieval China as I have shown. It might not have happened as often as infanticide. The reason therefore lies in the fact that abortions are very risky, too, and that sons are desirable. Sons, in fact, are nearly more important for a woman than a husband, as a son has to show his loyalty to his mother. He might be ritually bound into the family of his father but his emotional bondage with his mother is equally strong. This bondage is partly encouraged, partly feared by men: they write about it in Buddhist scriptures and thereby also emphasize the dependency of the mother on her son, which is as strong as that from her husband.

Due to the dominance of the male voice in our sources we cannot find enough material to make a statement about women's freedom and decision-making in medieval China. However, since writing is depicted as one of the most important and indeed was a very important skill, and since women did not take much part in this activity we can take this a sign that their freedom was limited compared to men.