

WET NURSES IN EARLY IMPERIAL CHINA

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Abstract

Wet nurses in early imperial China were chosen from household slaves based on their physical and psychological conditions. A wet nurse would be asked to mind her diet and behavior, with special restrictions on sex and drinks; her duties, besides breastfeeding, often consisted of caring for, and sometimes providing preliminary instruction for, the newborn. Indolent and distrusted wet nurses could be whipped or executed, but loyal and intimate ones could bring themselves and their family material and honorary rewards. It was the honorary rewards that shattered conventional gender and status boundaries and provoked criticism from their contemporaries.

I. *Introduction*

Lower-class women have been employed to breastfeed and rear upper-class children in societies around the world. The blurring or crossing of class and gender boundaries that this practice entails has frequently invited critical evaluation by contemporary moralists and intellectuals. The specific attention such debates draw to issues of gender, status, and social advancement through the female body have provided historians with many insights into broader issues of politics and culture.¹ Historians studying ancient and medieval Europe have investigated a variety of topics on wet nursing, ranging from the sexual regulations of wet nurses in Roman Egypt² and a slave-made-nurse's unspoken decision to spare her milk for the baby slaves³ to the wet nurses' quasi-mother role and its

¹ Over one hundred articles have been published on the history of wet nursing in Europe and America. See Valerie Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Basic Blackwell, Inc., 1988), Appendix.

² See K. R. Bradley, "Sexual Regulations in Wet-nursing Contracts from Roman Egypt," *Klio* 62 (1980): 321-25.

³ Bradley discusses the impact of wet nursing in Roman social relations in "Wet-nursing at Rome: a Study in Social Relations," in B. Rawson, ed. *The Family*

impact on family relations in fourteenth-and fifteenth-century Florence.⁴

In China, wet nurses were mentioned in various documents as well, but the practice and its related issues have received little attention. Recent works on the late imperial period, including discussions of medical opinions on breastfeeding or research on charitable institutions such as foundling homes, mention in passing the practice of wet nursing.⁵ But wet nurses are not the focus of these studies, and the earlier history of wet nursing is not explored. In this article, I hope to provide a sketch of the wet nurse in early imperial China and to fill gaps of information in this field. Information found in standard histories, liturgical documents, medical texts, and archaeological excavations will be examined to substantiate the arguments concerning the selection, duties, rewards, influence, and contemporary evaluations of wet nurses.

Two points should be made before we proceed further. First, although the time period in this article is defined as early imperial China, in some cases, I use source material from periods before the Han (206 BCE-CE 220) and after the Six Dynasties (CE 220-581) for the sake of comprehension. Second, since the Chinese term for "wet nurse" is *rumu* 乳母 (milk mother), and it was this term that caused tension between these women and contemporary moralists, this article will use both terms, the first mainly in modern paraphrasing and the second in historical quotations. Now let us begin with two accounts of wet nurses in early imperial China.

Jia Chong 賈充, one of the founding statesmen of the Jin Dynasty (CE 265-420), married twice in his life but died without male offspring. He had only one daughter by his first wife, and although his

in *Ancient Rome* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 201-09. Sandra R. Joshel explores nineteenth-century American documents of female slaves' nursing decisions to argue a similar case in ancient Rome; see her "Nurturing the Master's Child: Slavery and the Roman Child-nurse," *Signs* 12 (1986): 3-22.

⁴ See C. Klapisch-Zuber, "Blood Parents and Milk Parents: Wet Nursing in Florence, 1300-1530," in L. G. Cochrane, tr. *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 132-64.

⁵ For instance, Angela K. C. Leung discusses the difficult recruitment and limited allowance of wet nurses in foundling homes, and Hsiung Ping-chen describes the selection of wet nurses in wealthy families. Both articles deal with late imperial China. See Angela Kiche Leung, "L'accueil des enfants abandonnés dans la Chine du bas-Yangzi aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles," *Études Chinoises* 4.1 (1985):15-54; and Hsiung Ping-chen, "To Nurse the Young: Breastfeeding and Infant Feeding in Late Imperial China," *Journal of Family History* 20.3 (1995): 217-38.

second wife, Lady Guo Huai 郭槐, gave birth to two sons and two daughters, both male babies died in infancy. The two girls grew into womanhood, married well, and became important figures in Western Jin (265-315) politics. Jia Nanfeng 賈南風, the elder one, became an empress, while her younger sister was married to a famous general. Tracing the life stories of Lady Guo's children, we see that wet nurses played decisive roles in their lives. For instance, a story recorded in the chapter "Blind Infatuations" of the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 of the Liu-Song period (420-79) relates that:

Jia Chong's second wife, Lady Guo Huai, was ferociously jealous. One day when her son Limin was a year old, Chong came in from outside to find the wet nurse carrying the child in her arms in the central courtyard. When the child saw Chong he jumped up and down with delight, and Chong went up to him and fondled him in the wet nurse's arms. Seeing all this from a distance, Lady Guo thought that Chong was in love with the wet nurse, and immediately had her killed. The child missed her so sorely that he continued to cry, refusing to drink the milk of any other, until at length he died. After that Lady Guo never had another son.⁶

The "Biography of Jia Chong" in the *Jinshu* relates that Lady Guo did give birth to a second son later, but the story repeated again. That is, when Guo saw Chong touching the baby's head while its wet nurse was holding it, she killed the nurse out of suspicion, and the baby died of sorrow. Chong was thus deprived of male offspring.⁷

The wet nurse charged with Lady Guo's daughters was more fortunate than the nurses who cared for the sons. In 1950, the epitaph of Jia Nanfeng's wet nurse, Ms. Xu Yi 徐義, was excavated in Loyang. This epitaph was inscribed immediately after Ms. Xu's death in 297 and reveals a different picture of relations among a wet nurse, her charges, and their family. It states:

The epitaph of Beauty Xu, wet nurse of Empress Jia of the Jin dynasty. The name of the Beauty was Yi ... her ancestors resided along the sea. After her parents and siblings died in local disturbances, she drifted south of the river, where she settled down and married into

⁶ Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403-44), *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, Richard B. Mather, tr. *A New Account of Tales of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976) "Blind Infatuations" 惑亂, Chapter XXXV. 486. I use Mather's translation with some revisions.

⁷ Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (578-648), *Jinshu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 40.1170.

the Xu family. The Beauty was ... calm and elegant ... and took care of her children with wise guidance ... Master Jia [Chong] who came from an honorable lineage had few descendants [because] his wife Lady Guo, the Countess Yicheng 宜城君, had lost each of her children shortly after they were born. The Beauty ... disregarding her own honorable genealogy, attended to Empress Jia and [her sister] the wife of the late Master Han of Nanyang 南陽韓公. The Beauty nursed the babies, taking care of them as a tender mother and loving them more than a birth parent would. [When they wet the bed] she would move the babies to the dry part [of the bed] and slept on the wet spot herself ... she loved them from the depths of her heart. She guided and corrected them, teaching them to stay in the inner chambers without displaying their voices and faces to the exterior ... The Empress [Jia Nanfeng], at the age of thirteen ... in the sixth year of Emperor Wu's reign in the Taishi 泰始 era (265-74), was betrothed to the heir-apparent as his consort ... The Beauty followed the Consort into the palace in order to serve her there and was given official dresses and hats by the Emperor ... [The Consort] refrained from speech, meals, rest, travels, and music unless the Beauty also enjoyed them. Their affection was as parent and child. In the third year of the Dakang 大康 era (280-89), Emperor Wu invested [Ms. Xu] with the title of Lady of Talents and appointed her son, Lieh 烈, administrator in the Ministry of Education. In the first year of the Daxi 大熙 era (290) ... when Emperor Wu passed away, [the heir-apparent] was enthroned as Emperor [Hui]. The Beauty started to serve in the imperial palace and was invested with the title Virtuous Lady. On the ninth day of the third month of the first year of the Yongping 永平 era (291), the treacherous Grand Mentor Yang Jun 大傅楊駿 plotted treason. [His daughter] Empress Dowager Yang summoned Empress Jia to her side with the intention of doing evil ... the Beauty made up some excuses and saved the Empress [Jia] from the spot. After the principal criminal Jun was executed, the Emperor, appreciating the contribution [of Ms. Xu], bestowed on her the title Beauty in the first year of the Yuankang 元康 era (291), granting her one thousand bolts of silk and twenty servants ... In the second month of the fifth year of the Yuankang era, the Emperor decreed the investment of the son of the Beauty, Lieh, as Battalion Commander of the Heir Apparent ... In the seventh year of the Yuankang era, the Beauty fell seriously ill and returned home from the palace to recuperate. The Emperor and the Empress cared for her, sending imperial gatekeepers to ask after her every day and commanding palace doctors to examine her at her house. They provided imperial medicine and various food ... [The Beauty's] illness grew increasingly severe, and she died at the age of seventy-eight ... The Empress could not help but cry and wail in lamentation. [The Empress] granted [the Beauty] burial vessels and dresses, sent palace maid Song Duanlin 宋端臨 to oversee the funeral, and granted five million coins as well as five hundred bolts of silk for the funerary services.⁸

The epitaph of Ms. Xu notes that Lady Guo “lost each of her children shortly after they were born.” According to the stories recorded in the *Shishuo xinyu* and the *Jinshu*, this was because she murdered their wet nurses.⁹ She resented the wet nurses as if they were her husband’s concubines, and her jealousy indirectly caused the death of her own sons. Even so, Lady Guo still appointed a wet nurse to take care of her daughters. The origins of the daughters’ wet nurse, Ms. Xu, are not clear; she is said to have “married into the Xu family,” suggesting that the surname of her natal family was unknown.¹⁰ According to her epitaph, she was a mild-mannered person experienced in child-rearing. Since she died at the age of seventy-eight in 297, we know that she was already thirty-nine years old when she started nursing the Jia sisters in 258. She may have been appointed to the task because of her experience and have escaped Guo’s jealousy because of her advanced age.¹¹ Her duties

⁸ “Jin Jia Huanghou rumu meijen Xushi zhiming” 晉賈皇后乳母美人徐氏之銘, in Zhao Chao 趙超, *Han Wei Nanbeichao muzhi huibian* 漢魏南北朝墓誌彙編 (Tianjin: Guji chubanshe, 1992), 8-10. Translation of official titles based on Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).

⁹ In his *Jin zhugong zan* 晉諸公贊, Fu Chang 傅暢 (circa 4th-century) mentioned that Lady Guo was a high-minded woman. Fu recorded that since Empress Jia did not bear her own son, Lady Guo loved the heir apparent Minhuai (son of Lady Xie, later deposed and killed) very much and frequently encouraged him. When Liu Xiaobiao 劉孝標 (462-521) commented on the above story in *Shishuo xinyu*, he cited Fu Chang’s remarks and questioned the discrepancies in the two accounts regarding Lady Guo’s personality. Liu then wondered, “Was it a difference between the affairs of others and her own, or a difference between her disposition in old age and in her prime?” For Liu’s comment, see Liu, *A New Account of Tales of the World*, 486.

¹⁰ It has been a custom since the Han dynasty for women of indistinct background to use their husbands’ surnames. See Liu Tseng-kuei 劉增貴, “Handai funü de mingzi” 漢代婦女的名字, *Xinshixue* 新史學 7.4 (1996): 33-96.

¹¹ Traditional Chinese medical texts often describe a woman’s life according to her fertility, starting from her first menstruation at fourteen to her menopause at forty-nine. A preliminary survey through women’s epitaphs in early imperial China suggests that the average life expectancy of women was about fifty-five years old. A thirty-nine-year old woman would most likely be considered passing her middle age in life. For medical discussion of women’s fertility and life, see Jen-der Lee 李貞德, “Han-Tang zhijian qiuzi yifang shitan—jianlun fuke lanshang yu xingbie lunshu” 漢唐之間求子醫方試探——兼論婦科產難與性別論述, *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 68.2 (1997): 283-367. For women’s life expectancy through the survey of epitaphs, see Jen-der Lee, “The Life of Women in the Six Dynasties,” *Funü yu liangxin xuekan* 婦女與兩性學刊 (Taipei: Women’s Research Program, National Taiwan University) 4 (1993): 47-80.

included nursing and tending to the Jia sisters while they were infants, guiding and watching over Jia Nanfeng when she became imperial consort, and moreover, aiding Nanfeng in political struggles.¹² Ms. Xu's talents were so admired that not only was she invested with the title Beauty but her son was also appointed to officialdom. Throughout her life, she was treated well by Empress Jia.

The story of Lady Guo, Empress Jia, and Ms. Xu is the most comprehensive account of wet nurses in early imperial China. It reveals much about the custom of wet nursing in aristocratic families. The episode in the *Shishuo xinyu* indicates the low and insecure status of a wet nurse in her master's house, while Ms. Xu's epitaph shows the close bond between a nurse and her nurslings. Once she was trusted by her master's family, a wet nurse's task would not be exclusively nursing, her award not only money, and her influence not only on the physical condition of the babies. Ms. Xu began as a homeless wanderer but ended up with an imperial endowment and a son among the ranks of officialdom, attained through first, her milk, endowed to her by nature, and second, her care and love, qualities associated to the mother role in Chinese society. Her story is therefore a good point of departure for our discussion of wet nurses in this period.

II. *The Background, Selection, and Duties of the Wet Nurse*

Lady Guo Huai was not legally charged for murdering her two wet nurses, and Ms. Xu, with her commoner's origin, was praised by her epitaph writer for having "disregarded her own dignity" in nursing the Jia sisters. Both points reflect that wet nurses of the early imperial period were often women whose status was even lower than that of commoners. This, however, was not necessarily the case in earlier times.

1. *The Social Background of Wet Nurses*

The Classics state that aristocratic families made use of wet nurses, and some of the women employed were themselves members of the

¹² According to the *Jinshu*, it was Jia Nanfeng's conspiracy to oust Empress Yang and her father from political power. See *Jinshu*, 31.955.

nobility. The “Inner Regulations” chapter of the *Liji* 禮記 prescribes that the sons of a *zhuhou* 諸侯 (feudal lord) should be breastfed by the wives and concubines of *shi* 士 (servicemen) and *dafu* 大夫 (grand masters) respectively, while the sons of a grand master should be breastfed by “feeding mothers,” women chosen from among his maidservants.¹³ These feeding mothers, according to Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, the eminent Han commentator on the Classics, were what the “Mourning” chapter in the *Yili* 儀禮 calls wet nurses (literally *rumu* or “milk mothers”).¹⁴ Only the wife of a serviceman nursed her own child because, Zheng Xuan claimed, she was from the lowest nobility and not in a position to engage the labor of others.¹⁵

Two points can be made here. First, Chinese aristocrats engaged wet nurses not because the blood mothers were ill or had died in childbirth, but because their social status both allowed and encouraged them to do so. Second, though primarily a description of how to exploit the milk and labor of lower-class women, the regulations show that women of the nobility, such as wives of servicemen and concubines of grand masters, could also be assigned the task of wet nursing. This was not the case in the Han and the Six Dynasties when imperial and aristocratic families, with few exceptions, chose wet nurses primarily from among their female slaves and maidservants. The discrepancies between classical prescriptions and early imperial practice, as we will see in following discussions, gave rise to debates over the treatment of wet nurses.

The *Hanguan juyi* 漢官舊儀 states that imperial wet nurses should be chosen from among the official slaves.¹⁶ Historical accounts from the Han dynasty suggest that even when a male imperial offspring was deprived of proper care owing to political struggles, loyal officials would still try to save him by carefully selecting a wet nurse from among official convicts. During Emperor Wu’s reign 武帝 (r. 140-87 BCE), because of his father’s crime, and in keeping with the principle of collective responsibility, an imperial grandson was detained several months after his birth. Records say that the official

¹³ *Liji* 禮記 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1955), *Neize* 內則, 28.12-13.

¹⁴ *Liji*, “Neize,” 28.8a. Also see *Sangfu* 喪服 chapter of the *Yili* 儀禮, 33.8b.

¹⁵ *Liji*, “Neize,” 28.18b-19a.

¹⁶ Wei Hong 衛宏 (circa 3rd-century), *Hanguan juyi* 漢官舊儀 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), B.46. Despite these prescriptions, there were occasions when imperial offspring were nursed by the wives of nobility. Emperor Wu, for instance, was nursed by the mother of Marquis Dongwu. See Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145-86 BCE), *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 126.3204.

who was in charge of the investigation so pitied the imperial grandson that he chose “prudent female convicts” to serve as wet nurses for the infant.¹⁷ During Emperor Cheng’s reign 成帝 (r. 332-7 BCE), an imperial female slave was impregnated by the Emperor and gave birth to a son. The Empress, out of jealousy, made plans to murder both mother and child. To save the infant, several prison clerks and convicts became involved, including a female slave who served as the infant’s wet nurse.¹⁸ Amidst the fierce political struggles toward the end of the Han, an imperial heir was imprisoned eight days after his birth. He was kept alive by the imperial prison clerk who carefully chose wet nurses for him, presumably also from among female convicts.¹⁹

Most Han official bureaus had their own slaves. The official slaves were either voluntarily degraded commoners, captives of wars, or purchased from private owners. But most came from the collectively punished families of men convicted of serious crimes.²⁰ Zheng Xuan, annotating a passage in the *Zhouli* 周禮, writes that “In ancient times men and women who were collectively punished became official slaves, just like the serving men and female official slaves of our own time.”²¹ Female convicts who served as slaves in the palace were therefore a ready resource for the deprived imperial offspring. The decision to employ convicts as wet nurses, although often a matter of convenience, was made in accordance with the Han official regulations.

The Xianbei 鮮卑 imperial house of the Northern Wei (386-534)

¹⁷ This is the story of Emperor Xuan 宣帝 (73-49 BCE), grandson of Emperor Wu and son of the falsely charged heir-apparent Li. The loyal official who saved the infant, the future Emperor Xuan, was Bing Ji 丙吉, and the wet nurses involved included a woman named Ze 則 who was whipped for neglecting her duty. See Ban Gu 班固 (32-92), *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 74.3142, 3144.

¹⁸ This is the story of Cao Gong 曹宮 and her son. The official slave chosen to be the wet nurse was Zhang Qi 張柔. The jealous Empress Zhao eventually discovered the plot and took the child away, most likely having him killed. See *Hanshu*, 97. 3991.

¹⁹ This is the story of Emperor Xian (202-20), the last emperor of the Han dynasty. See Sima Biao 司馬彪 (circa 4th-century), *Xu Hanshu* 續漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977) 1.325.

²⁰ For the origins of official and private slaves in the Han, see Lao Kan 勞幹, “Handai nuli zhidu jilue” 漢代奴隸制度概略, *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica*, 5.1(1935): 1-11; Qu Xuanyin 屈宜敏, *Zhongguo shehui shiliao congchao*, 中國社會史料叢鈔 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1965), Part A, 637-39.

²¹ For Zheng Xuan’s commentary, see Sun Yirang 孫詒讓, *Zhouli zhengyi* 周禮正義 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1955), 1.39b.

and its successors such as the Northern Qi (550-77) appear to have followed their Han predecessors in choosing wet nurses from among official slaves; these slaves, as extant documents show, were women collectively punished for the crimes of their family members. For instance, both Ms. Dou 竇氏, Emperor Taiwu's 太武 (r. 424-51) *baomu* 保母 (protecting mother) and Lu Lingxuan 陸令萱, the nanny of the Last Emperor's (r. 565-76), were sentenced to remain in the imperial palace with their children after their husbands were executed for crimes.²² Ms. Chang 常氏, Emperor Wencheng's 文成 (r. 453-65) wet nurse was also convicted on the basis of collective responsibility.²³ It could be thanks to their experience in child-rearing that they were assigned the task of wet nursing.²⁴

Among the aristocracy, household slaves served as the largest pool from which wet nurses were chosen. It was common practice to keep private slaves in Han times; even families below average income did so.²⁵ The custom was even more popular in the Six Dynasties among powerful families.²⁶ Debates over whether or not one should mourn one's wet nurse indicate that the selection of female slaves as wet nurses caused problems among intellectuals in interpreting the pre-

²² For Ms. Dou's story, see Wei Shou 魏收 (505-572), *Weishu* 魏書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 13.326, and Li Yanshou 李延壽 (circa 7th-century), *Beishi* 北史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 13.494. For Lu Lingxuan's story, see Li Baiyao 李百藥 (565-648), *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 50.689, and *Beishi*, 92.3047. Lu Lingxuan and her son was sentenced to palace slavery after her husband Chao was executed for treachery.

²³ See *Weishu*, 13. 327-28; also see *Beishi*, 13.495.

²⁴ Regulations on the wives' collective responsibilities for their husbands' crimes changed during the Han and the Six Dynasties periods. For related discussions, see Jen-der Lee 李貞德, "Xi Han lüling zhong de jiating lunli guan" 西漢律令中的家庭倫理觀, *Zhongguo lishi xuehui shixue jikan* 中國歷史學會史學集刊 19 (Taipei: Zhongguo lishi xuehui, 1987), 2-11, and Jen-der Lee, "The Death of a Princess: Codifying Classical Family Ethics in Early Medieval China," in Sherry Mou, ed., *Presence and Presentation: Women in the Chinese Literati Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

²⁵ Feng Yan 馮衍, a Han recluse, once said that he was so poor that he had only one female slave. When Fan Ye 范曄 (398-445), the author of the *Hou Hanshu* described the poverty of Huang Xiang 黃香, a Han literatus, he said that the Huang family did not have any servant or slave. In short, it was considered usual for people to keep slaves and exceptional if they did not. For Feng Yan's self-portrait, see his letter to his brother-in-law, cited in the notes of the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 28.1003. For Huang Xiang's case, see *Hou Hanshu*, 80.2614. For the origins of private slaves and the Han social custom of keeping them, see Lao Kan, "Handai nuli zhidu jilue," 1-11.

²⁶ For the origins and status of female slaves, singing girls, and concubines in the aristocratic households of the Six Dynasties, see Liu Tseng-kuei, "Wei Jin Nanbeichao shidai de qie" 魏晉南北朝時代的妾, *Xinshixue* 2.4 (1991): 1-36.

scription in the Classics which states that one should honor one's wet nurse with three months mourning service after her death.²⁷ Scholars of the Cao-Wei (220-65) and Jin writers, in view of the fact that "nowadays (we) command a female slave to serve as a wet nurse," wondered, "Isn't she too lowly to warrant mourning after her death?" They came to the conclusion that "Of course we do not pay mourning to a female slave," and "Paying mourning to a wet nurse is certainly not the precept of the ancient sages."²⁸

Nonetheless, these comments suggest that there were who did feel an obligation to mourn a deceased wet nurse. Lurking behind such discussions is the ambivalent status of the wet nurse. No longer a member of the nobility as she would have been in ancient times, during the early imperial period, however, slave-made-nurse's role as surrogate mother still made it difficult to treat her as just another household servant. The fact that carrying out mourning rites for a household slave was even a question not only displays the shift of the wet nurse's social background from ancient to early imperial times, but also indicates the emotional bond often found between wet nurses and their charges. This latter point is a theme to which we will return.

In addition to convicts and slaves, commoners were sometimes employed as wet nurses by the nobility. Royal offspring of the Wu kingdom (222-80) appear to have been nursed by commoners chosen from ordinary nuclear families instead of official slaves. Lu Kai 陸凱, a high official of the Wu kingdom, once sent a memorial to the throne reproaching the ruler for not rewarding the princes' wet nurses properly. According to Lu Kai's statement, these wet nurses had their own families, and their husbands were commoners who paid corvée labor to the government.²⁹ Although the northern imperial houses followed the Han precedent and chose wet nurses from among palace slaves, there were exceptions. For instance, Emperor Xuanwu 宣武 (r. 500-15) had lost all of his sons before the future Emperor Xiaoming 孝明 (r. 516-27) was born. In order to preserve his sole remaining heir, the Emperor took great care of him, not only "choosing wet nurses from good commoners who had child-

²⁷ See *Yili*, 33. 8b.

²⁸ These remarks were made by Liu De 劉德 and Tian Qiong 田瓊 of the Cao-Wei and Yuan Zun 袁準 of the Jin dynasty. See Du You 杜佑 (734-812), *Tongdian 通典* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 92.2512.

²⁹ Chen Shou 陳壽 (372-421), *Sanguozhi 三國志* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 61.1406. The ruler at that time was Sun Hao 孫皓 (r. 264-80).

birth experience” but also “raising him in a separate residence so that neither the Empress nor the Lady (the child’s blood mother Lady Hu 胡氏) could fondle him.”³⁰ It appears that for Xuanwu, convicted imperial slaves were not good enough for his valuable heir.

In sum, imperial and aristocratic families in the Han and the Six Dynasties did not breastfeed their newborns according to the prescriptions of the Classics which stated that, a feudal lord’s sons were to be nursed by the servicemen’s wives, a grand master’s sons by his maidservants, and a serviceman’s sons by his own wife. Instead, they engaged female slaves to nurse their youngsters or, in exceptional cases, appointed commoners’ wives.³¹

Commoners did not employ wet nurses unless extraordinary situations impelled them to do so. In case of multiple pregnancy or the death of the blood mother, destitute families would have to depend on either the help of their friends and relatives or relief grants from the government. Rulers who wanted to encourage population growth would offer wet nurses to households with triplets.³² One monarch of the Six Dynasties granted to those of his subjects who had multiple pregnancy not only clothes and food but also “nursing slaves,” indicating that during this period government wet nurses, like those in the Han, were chosen from among official slaves.³³

The poorest newborns whose mothers died during delivery could only escape abandonment through the charitable acts of their friends and relatives.³⁴ A future empress of the Jin lost both her

³⁰ *Weishu*, 13.337.

³¹ A clay sculpture of “nursing” was excavated from the Han dynasty stone tombs in Pengshan county of Sichuan. The simple dress of the woman suggests that it could be a household servant nursing the aristocratic child. For illustration and discussion, see Jia Ruikai 賈瑞凱, *Sichuan pengshan Handai yaimu* 四川彭山漢代崖墓 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1991).

³² For instance, Gou Jian 句踐, the king of Yue (496-65 BCE) decreed that doctors be sent to watch over deliveries of his subjects and that wet nurses be granted to households with triplet births. See Zhao Ye 趙喲, *Wu Yue chungiu* 吳越春秋 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1989), 10.235-38.

³³ When Mrs. Chen of Tangyang 堂陽 County gave birth to three sons in one delivery and Mrs. Chen of Liyang 歷陽 County gave birth to three sons and one daughter in one delivery, Shi Le 石勒 (r. 319-33), ruler of the Latter Zhao (319-50), granted both families clothes, food, and nursing slaves. See *Jinshu*, 105.2737.

³⁴ For child abandonment and its social relief system in the Six Dynasties, see Jen-der Lee 李貞德, “Han Sui zhijian de shengzi buju wenti” 漢隋之間的生子不舉問題, *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica*, 66.3 (1995): 747-812.

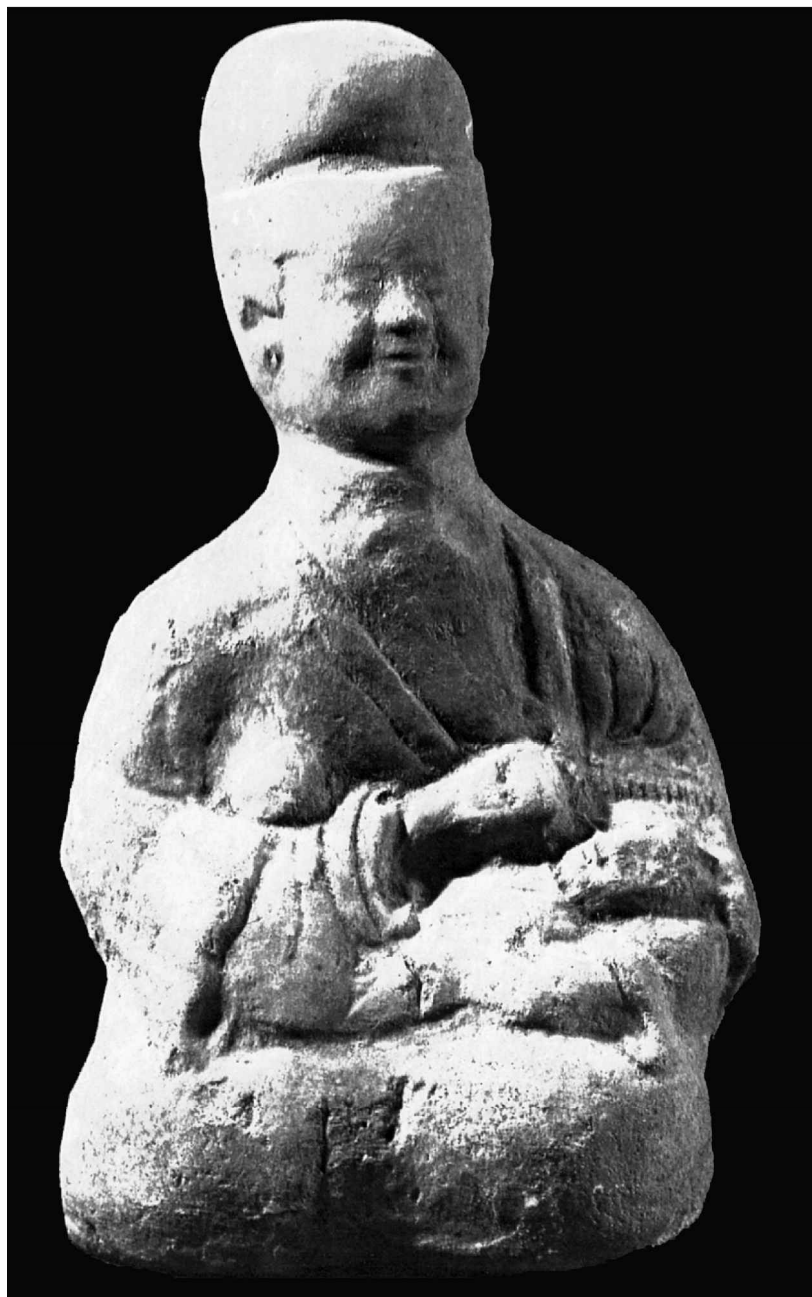


Figure. A Nursing Woman and her Nursling.
from Jia Ruikai, *Sichuan Pengshan Han Dai Yaimu* 賈瑞凱·四川彭山漢代崖墓
(Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1991)

parents in infancy and was raised by her maternal uncle. Her uncle's wife loved her very much, one account tells us, and, in order to nurse her personally, found someone else to nurse her own child.³⁵ Liu Yu 劉裕, the founding emperor of the Liu-Song dynasty, was almost abandoned after birth because his mother died during delivery and his father was too poor to employ a wet nurse. He was able to survive only because his paternal uncle's wife decided to wean her own child, who was not even a year old at the time, in order to nurse Yu.³⁶

Although poor commoners' families were unable to employ wet nurses, they could themselves become wet nurses for imperial or aristocratic households. These wet nurses would have to risk losing their own children if the latter were not allowed to accompany them to work. It is hard to imagine that imperial and aristocratic families would welcome the wet nurses' entire families, especially their husbands, because of the restrictions and regulations on the physical and emotional conditions of the wet nurses.

2. *The Selections and Regulation of Wet Nurses*

When selecting wet nurses, whether from official slaves or from commoners' wives, the imperial and aristocratic families looked for a tender and discreet personality.³⁷ Wet nurses chosen from the official slaves should be "compassionate and meek" as in the case of Ms. Chang, wet nurse for Emperor Wencheng,³⁸ or "full of virtues and propriety" like Ms. Dou, wet nurse for Emperor Taiwu.³⁹ Those chosen from among the commoners' wives should be "experienced in childbirth," as in descriptions of Emperor Xiaoming's wet nurses, or "calm and elegant" as was Ms. Xu, wet nurse for Jia Nanfeng. These criteria were in accordance with the medical texts of the

³⁵ This is the story of Yang Qiongzhi 楊瓊芝, Empress Wu of the Jin. The Yang family was not poor, but apparently Qiongzhi's paternal relatives did not adopt her and she stayed with her maternal uncle. That the uncle's wife had someone at hand to take care of her own child for her to nurse Qiongzhi confirms the prevalence of wet nursing among the aristocracy. See *Jinshu*, 31.952.

³⁶ See Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513), *Songshu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 47.1404. Liu Yu's paternal uncle was perhaps not wealthy either, considering the fact that his son would have to wean abruptly instead of being nursed by someone else like the other child in Yang Qiongzhi's case above.

³⁷ The Classics suggest that wet nurses should be "generous, benevolent, gentle, respectful, discreet, and close-tongued in personality." See *Liji*, 28.12a.

³⁸ *Weishu*, 13.327-328; also see *Beishi*, 13.495.

³⁹ *Weishu*, 13.326; also see *Beishi*, 13.494.

period. The *Xiaopin fang* 小品方 by Chen Yanzhi 陳延之 of the Liu-Song period was the first among extant medical texts to mention the qualities required of wet nurses. It states that “those who nurse the babies should be observant with their joy and anger.”⁴⁰ Tang (618-907) medical texts, such as the *Beiji qianjin yaofang* 備急千金要方 [hereafter cited as the *Qianjin fang* 千金方] by Sun Simiao 孫思邈 reiterated this advice,⁴¹ and the *Cui shi* 崔氏 made the point even more explicit by saying that “those who breastfeed should be serene and gentle in personality.”⁴²

Traditional physicians believed that not only the psychology but also the physiology of the wet nurse affected the quality of her milk and thus her nursling. Therefore, the advice given in selecting a wet nurse focused on not only her emotions but also her appearance. The *Xiaopin fang* suggests that:

The milk of the wet nurse is formed from her blood and vitality ... The health of a wet nurse can be determined in so many ways that it is hard to cover them all. The ailments that should be avoided most are armpit odor, neck tumors, a swollen neck, smells, ulcers, scabies, hairlessness, carbuncles, watery lips, deafness, nasal congestion, and vertigo. Only a woman free of these ailments should be allowed to breastfeed the baby. A physician can determine the causes of such ailments simply by observing scars on the body.⁴³

The *Qianjin fang* and *Cui shi* follow the advice of the *Xiaopin fang*. Although all agree that there were too many signs of an unfit woman to fully describe, the problems that concerned them most seem to have been skin diseases. Physicians are advised to look for scars on the skin even if the woman showed no signs of a disorder at the moment of selection. Moreover, bad odors, ill-functioning ears or noses, as well as a “watery mouth” were all considered symp-

⁴⁰ Chen Yanzhi 陳延之 (circa 5th-century), *Xiaopin fang* 小品方, cited in Yasuyori Tanba 丹波廉順 (912-95), *I shin po* 醫心方 (982; reprint, Taipei: Xinwenfeng chubanshe, 1982), 25.17ab.

⁴¹ For Sun Simiao's 孫思邈 (581-682) advice, see *Beiji qianjin yaofang* 備急千金要方 (copy of the Song edition with punctuation, Jilin: Jenming chubanshe, 1994, hereafter cited as *Qianjin fang*), 5.136. The *Qianjin fang* was completed in the early Tang dynasty, however, since Sun Simiao lived through the Northern Zhou (557-81), the Sui (581-619), and the early Tang, advice in the *Qianjin fang* should have partially revealed the medical ideas of the Six Dynasties.

⁴² Advice of the *Cui shi* 崔氏 cited in Wang Tao 王濂 (circa 713-755), *Waitai miyao* 外台秘要 (reprint of the Song edition, Taipei: Guoli zhongguo yiyao yanjiusuo, 1964), 35.980b.

⁴³ *Xiaoping fang*, cited in *I shin po*, 25.17ab.

toms of bad “blood and vitality” by the medical profession. Interestingly, however, these were also treated as “ugly and ill features” by the Sui dynasty physiognomy text, *Chanjing* 產經.⁴⁴

The *Chanjing* also claims that a baby’s “emotions and spirits are affected by nothing but milk,” and lists several facial and bodily attributes that should be avoided when selecting a wet nurse. A woman with “yellow hair, blackened teeth, big eyes, a masculine voice, or cloudy eyes” is categorized as licentious; a woman with “a protruding backbone, high nose, wide mouth, long arms, or hairy legs” is categorized as “unpleasant at heart”; a woman with “ugly hands, thick skin, strong bones, decayed teeth, mouth odor or red skin” is categorized as “male-dominating”; and a woman with “cold body temperature, dry skin, or a skinny build” is considered to have a poor constitution.⁴⁵

Surprisingly, the physiological requirements of the wet nurse listed in the *Chanjing* are no different from those required of a wife.⁴⁶ The text describes in detail the physiological requirements of a woman, including her body temperature, weight, bone structure, hair, and body parts, such as forearms, calves, and even breasts and private parts. In addition to questions of reproduction, the requirements aim to prevent poverty, deception, and dominance of a woman over her husband. It is understandable that a wet nurse should not be licentious, prone to illness, or unpleasant at heart, since it was thought that these qualities could be transmitted to her nurslings through her milk. But the concern that a wet nurse might be disposed to “male-dominance,” identical to the restriction against “dominating wives,” discloses male anxiety toward the influence of a woman, be she a wet nurse or a wife.⁴⁷ This was actually the main reason behind the

⁴⁴ *Chanjing* 產經, cited in *I shin po*, 25.9a.

⁴⁵ *Chanjing*, cited in *I shin po*, 25.8b-9a.

⁴⁶ In the “Good and Bad Physiognomy of a Woman” section of the *Chanjing*, it is written: “Never marry a woman if she has yellow hair, blackened teeth, and bad odor, or if she walks and sits in crooked manner, or if her eyes are big and her voice masculine.” The *Chanjing* also claimed that “a woman with thick skin, strong bones, and red (skin) will kill her husband; one should not marry her”; “she who has a low body temperature or skinny sick body or dry color or hair on arms and legs or an Adam’s apple or a high nose is unpleasant at heart. All these are bad features and one should not marry her. She will either cheat, control, or kill her husband. All these are features indicating poverty and anxiety.” See *Chanjing* cited in *I shin po*, 24.31b-33b.

⁴⁷ Granted that one who married intended to have offspring by his wife, it is still astonishing that the requirements for a wife, who usually came from one’s peer status, were so similar to those for a wet nurse, who often came from much lower

objection of some male bureaucrats and moralists to wet nurses, a theme to which we will return.

After careful selection, one should carefully supervise the daily diet and activities of the wet nurse. The *Chanjing* points out that the newborn would be prone to diarrhea if its wet nurse often consumed rich food such as chicken and fish.⁴⁸ Other medical texts suggest that if the wet nurse did not refrain from breastfeeding the nursling when she was full, angry, vomiting, overheated or ill, the baby would develop respiratory problems, hernias, depletion, consumption, and insanity. To nurse immediately after sexual activities or drunkenness was considered fatal to the nursling and to be avoided by all means. This was why medical texts particularly warned against indiscreet wet nurses who had husbands.⁴⁹

If a wet nurse neglected her duty, she could be physically punished. As mentioned earlier, imperial wet nurses were whipped for their negligence.⁵⁰ By definition, a wet nurse breastfed the newborn, but her tasks were not confined to breastfeeding. According to extant medical and historical records, imperial and aristocratic wet nurses played a key role in preserving the infants' well-being, as thus often undertook additional responsibilities.

social origins. That gender cut through class when men were observing and selecting women is even more obvious when one compares the physiognomy of women with the physiognomy of men. The requirements for a wife and a wet nurse were almost identical, as mentioned above, while the requirements for a wife and a husband were totally different. When talking about the physiognomy of men, the *Chanjing* mentions only body build, facial features, and voice, and public behavior—all which could be observed without having the men removed his clothes. In contrast, the requirements for women involved not only reproduction but also their relation with and influence on men. Therefore, women with “tiger face and snake eyes,” “more white than black part in eyes,” “black dots on their private parts,” “big forearms and small breasts,” or “a mustache around mouth,” would either deceive or impoverish men and should be avoided. See the “Good and Bad Physiognomy of Men” section in *Chanjing* cited in *I shin po*, 24.31b-33b.

⁴⁸ *Chanjing* cited in *I shin po*, 25.8b. The Song medical text *Shenghui lun* 聖惠論 restrained wet nurses from taking beans, garlic, and radish, but considered mutton, wild chicken, duck, fish, green onions, and other vegetables fine. See *Shenghui lun* cited in Zhu Duanzhang 朱端章, *Weisheng jiabao chanke beiyao* 衛生家寶產科備要 (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1989), 8.115.

⁴⁹ See *Chanjing* cited in *I shin po*, 25.8ab; *Qianjin fang*, 5.138; also *Shenghui lun*, cited in *Weisheng jiabao chanke beiyao*, 8.115.

⁵⁰ Recorded in Bing Ji's biography. See *Hanshu*, 25.3144.

3. Breastfeeding, Caretaking, and Protection

Immediately after delivery of a baby, the mother needed help in washing the baby, clearing its mouth and cutting its umbilical cord. Medical texts such as the *Xiaopin fang* and the *Qianjin fang* suggest using licorice juice and honey to help the newborn clear out its bad humors and calm its soul. The *Qianjin fang* also recommends rice pudding for the three-day-old baby and pig's milk for babies up to one month old. If the wet nurse is chosen from the household slaves, she might begin her work either during or right after the delivery, helping in these chores and preparing extra food for the infant. As for her most important task, wet nursing, the *Chanjing* gives advice concerning the posture, preparation for and regularity of breastfeeding.

She who nurses a child should rest [the child's head] on her arm so that [the child's mouth] is at the same level with the nipple. Extract the overnight milk before nursing to avoid [causing] vomiting and diarrhea in the child. Before nursing, press the breast with the hands to dissipate the heat so that the milk does not overflow in the child's gullet and cause spasmodic diseases. If the breastfeeding mother wants to go to sleep, she should withdraw her breast first so that it will not block the mouth and nose of the child. Moreover, [if she falls asleep] she will not know whether [the child] is full or not and may cause discomfort to the child. When nursing, do not make the child too full or cause the child to vomit. If too full, give the child an empty breast to alleviate [the fullness]. Discard the hot milk of the summer to prevent vomiting and the cold milk of the winter to prevent diarrhea.⁵¹

Medical texts prior to the Tang dynasty hardly mention the recommended duration of breastfeeding. Extant stories indicate a period no shorter than two years. As mentioned above, Liu Yu's paternal uncle's wife was praised for her generous act when she weaned her own son, who was not even a year old, to nurse Liu Yu. The biography of Xiao Daocheng 蕭道成, the founding emperor of the Southern Qi (479-502), indicates that Daocheng's mother was

⁵¹ *Chanjing*, cited in *I shin po*, 25.7b-8a; also in *Qianjin fang*, 5.138. Breastfeeding instructions in later periods mostly followed the medical texts of early imperial times. Only Chen Ziming 陳自明 of the Song (960-1279), author of the *Furen daquan liangfang* 婦人大全良方, made two revisions: first, he suggested that the breastfeeding mother make a bean pillow to hold the child's head, and second, he considered it better for the mother to sit up to breastfeed instead of lying down during the night. For a discussion of these revisions, see Hsiung Ping-chen, "To Nurse the Young: Breastfeeding and Infant Feeding in Late Imperial China," 219-22.

still worried about the wet nurse's shortage of milk when he was two years old.⁵² It appears that one year of breastfeeding was not considered enough; a two-year period was commonly expected.⁵³ Even then, the wet nurse's tasks were not confined to breastfeeding. A Song dynasty medical text instructed the wet nurse to observe carefully the physical activities of the child from the age of two months to one year so that she could help the child to smile and recognize people (two months), turn over (one hundred days), sit up (six months), crawl (two hundred days), stand (three hundred days), and walk (one year).⁵⁴ In fact, children could still be attended by a wet nurse for up to five years, relying on her to gather their toys,⁵⁵ prepare their meals,⁵⁶ or instruct and protect them through the process of growing up.⁵⁷

The duty of instruction, according to the ancient Classics, should belong to the "protecting and instructing women" instead of the nursing one. The *Liji* made it clear that the *zishi* 子師 (child-instructor) should teach, the *cimu* 慈母 (foster mother) should feed, and the *baomu* 保母 (protecting mother) should take care of the child.⁵⁸ But, in rendering the term *mu* 姆 in the *Yili*, the Han scholar Zheng Xuan blurred the division of labor by saying that she should be "a barren woman over fifty years of age, capable of instructing [a child] in womanly virtues, like the wet nurses of our time."⁵⁹ In an attempt to explain this discrepancy, Jia Gongyan 賈公彥, a Tang commenta-

⁵² History says that when Daocheng was two years old, his wet nurse ran out of milk and could not nurse him until his mother dreamed that someone gave her two bowls of porridge. See Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯 (circa 489-537), *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 1.2-3.

⁵³ Hsiung Ping-chen, who works on breastfeeding customs in late imperial China, suggests that "rarely would anyone wean a child at age one; most did so when he reached two years." See her article, "To Nurse the Young," 231.

⁵⁴ Zhang Huan's 張奐 treatise cited in *Weisheng jiabao chanke beiyao*, 8.113.

⁵⁵ Yang Hu 羊祜 of the Western Jin asked his wet nurse to bring a golden band for him when he was five years old. It turned out that the golden band had belonged to a neighborhood child who had died years before. Contemporaries therefore considered Hu the reincarnation of the deceased child. See Gan Bao 干寶, *Soushen ji* 搜神記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979) 15.185, and *Jinshu*, 34.1023-24.

⁵⁶ Also at the age of five, says the "Biographies of the Filial" in Yao Silian 姚思廉 (557-637), *Liangshu* 梁書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), Xie Lin 謝萬 of the Eastern Jin declined his wet nurse's bidding to eat unless his parents had also dined. See *Liangshu*, 47.658.

⁵⁷ As in the case of Jia Nanfeng and her wet nurse Ms. Xu.

⁵⁸ *Liji*, 28.13ab.

⁵⁹ *Yili*, 5.16.

tor of the Classics, proposed a shift in wet nursing practice from classical times to the Han. He suggested that in the pre-Han period there was a division of labor among different types of female caregivers, which was given up in the Han when people simply chose virtuous women to both nurse and teach their children.⁶⁰ Because of the lack of extensive cases from antiquity, it is hard to decide whether or not there was actually a shift in the division of labor. It may well be that the discrepancy between Zheng's commentaries and Jia's explanation is due less to differences between customs in ancient times and the Han than between classical ideals and actual practice.

Although the Classics prescribed a division of labor, in reality nursing, protection, and instruction could have and must have happened altogether. There are several reasons for this. First, it is hard to imagine a barren woman over fifty years old breastfeeding a child. Zheng Xuan probably advocated this in order to assign different duties to one woman.⁶¹ Second, in the *Weishu*, Ms. Dou, "protecting mother" of Emperor Taiwu, is described as "kind and instructive," and Ms. Chang, "milk mother" (wet nurse) of Emperor Wencheng, as "protecting him with diligence." It seems that a "protecting mother" was praised for her instruction while a "milk mother" was praised for her protection, yet both of them were honored as Empress Dowager Bao (protection) 保太后.⁶² In the *Nan Qi shu*, the southern author Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯 abhorred the fact that the northern Emperor Taiwu "honored his milk mother as empress dowager." It appears that, to Xiao, there was not much difference between a protecting mother and a milk mother.⁶³

Finally, in the Han, a wet nurse was also called a *mu* 阿母 (caring mother).⁶⁴ In the *Hou Hanshu*, the Tang commentator Li Xian 李賢

⁶⁰ Jia Gongyan's commentaries cited in *Yili*, 5.16.

⁶¹ It is interesting to ask whether a barren woman could nurse. In her appeal sent to Emperor Cheng (r. 326-42) of the Jin, Lady Yü said that she could not have children but started to nurse her adopted son after taking some effective medicine. See *Tongdian*, 69.1907-1908.

⁶² For Ms. Dou, see *Weishu*, 13.326, and *Beishi*, 13.494. For Ms. Chang, see *Weishu*, 13.327-28, and *Beishi*, 13.495.

⁶³ See *Nan Qi shu*, 57.986.

⁶⁴ Chunyu Yi 淳于意, an eminent doctor in the early Han dynasty, was once called upon to cure the disease of King Jibei's a *mu* 阿母 (caring mother), which, according to the commentator, was a way to address one's wet nurse at that time. See Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 105.2805. Several cases in the Han suggest the interchangeability of these two terms. See *Hou Hanshu*, 45.1525; 54.1761; 61.2021-22.

interpreted this term as follows: “to protect means to guard, and to care means to support; [*a mu*] means a woman who protects and cares by guarding and supporting.” Thus, Li Xian identified *a mu* with *baomu* or “protecting mother”.⁶⁵ On an epitaph written for his protecting mother, a famous Jin calligrapher praised her for being “skilled in composition, capable of script calligraphy, and versed in Buddhist and Daoist ideas.”⁶⁶ This was apparently a nanny qualified to give instruction of many kinds. It appears that from early to imperial China, there was not much differentiation in aristocratic families between the terms and tasks of a child-instructor, a foster mother, and a protecting mother. In fact, cases in extant historical records suggest that these duties very much overlapped since it was this very woman who constantly attended the child in daily life. Furthermore, since a wet nurse was chosen from among the household slaves, she would continue to participate in various household chores after her charge grew up.⁶⁷

With few exceptions, a wet nurse lived with her nursling’s family, of which she was originally a slave or a maidservant.⁶⁸ However, there is a case of an Eastern Jin (317-420) aristocrat who sent his son by a concubine to live in the wet nurse’s home because the child was not formally accepted by his family. When he was about to be killed in a coup, the aristocrat asked his friend to ensure the child was taken care of in order to preserve his family line.⁶⁹ Though an

⁶⁵ Li Xian’s comment cited in *Hou Hanshu*, 6.282.

⁶⁶ This is Wang Xianzhi’s 王獻之 composition. See his “Baomu zhuanzhi” 保母傳志, in *Quan Jin wen* 全晉文, 27.11b; in Yan Kejun 嚴可均, comp., *Quan shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liucao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文 (1894; reprint, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958).

⁶⁷ For instance, when Yuan Hong 袁閎, an Eastern Han erudite, traveled a long distance to visit his father in his official residence in the capital, it was Hong’s wet nurse who came out from the residence to receive Hong, indicating that she followed her master to his office to work as a servant after Hong grew up. Also note that Hong’s wet nurse was addressed as *a mu* in the text. See *Hou Hanshu*, 45.1525.

⁶⁸ The practice of wet nurses staying with the nurslings’ families in the Han and Six Dynasties is similar to the custom in ancient Rome and early medieval Europe. This is different from the late medieval and Renaissance European practice whereby wealthy people sent their children to the countryside to stay with the wet nurses. For the Roman practice, see Bradley, “Wet Nursing at Rome: a Study in Social Relations,” 201-09 and Joshel, “Nurturing the Master’s Child: Slavery and the Roman Child-nurse,” 3-22. For late medieval and Renaissance practice, see Klapisch-Zuber, “Blood Parents and Milk Parents: Wet Nursing in Florence, 1300-1530,” 132-64.

⁶⁹ This is the story of Wang Gong 王恭. In the coup, Wang Gong was killed

exception in one way, this story is typical in another: it indicates the intimate relations and the interwoven fates of the nurse, her nursling, and the nursling's family. That is why in the political and military conflicts so frequent in the Eastern Han (25-220) and the Six Dynasties, wet nurses became important figures in preserving the lives of aristocratic descendants and sometimes even the patriarchal family lines.

For instance, an Eastern Han imperial prince whose mother had committed suicide in the palace and could not be buried properly, asked his wet nurse to offer sacrifices to his mother in his place.⁷⁰ A dethroned emperor of the Wu kingdom, while being attacked by rebelling generals, was physically pulled back by his wet nurse and other palace attendants and thus kept alive.⁷¹ In the Southern Dynasties, a Liu-Song general who sided with the defeated faction in a military conflict would not have been survived by his five-year-old son if not for the wet nurse who took the child and hid him away in the mountains.⁷² During the fall of the Liu-Song, when a loyal general was killed by the rebel army the wet nurse took his son to one of the general's students for safe-keeping. Sadly, the student betrayed his mentor and turned the child in for a monetary reward, for which act he was cursed by the wet nurse.⁷³ In the Southern Qi, an aristocratic youngster was hushed by his wet nurse when he

together with all his five sons, his brothers, and their sons. See *Jinshu* 84.2186-87. The concubine's son was described in the *Jinshu* as "buju" 不舉 (not raised), which in the Han and the Six Dynasties context often meant to abandon or to kill the child. However, in its original meaning in early China, "juzi" 舉子 (raise the child) was also a ceremony in which the father held the newborn up and presented it to his family to symbolize its acceptance into the family. For the meanings and practice of "juzi" in early and imperial China, see Anne B. Kinney, "Infant Abandonment in Early China," *Early China* 18 (1993): 107-38; and Jen-der Lee, "Han Sui zhijian de shengzi buju wenti," 747-48.

⁷⁰ This is the story of Liu Qing 劉慶, son of Emperor Zhang 章帝 by Lady Song. Qing was first established as the heir-apparent but deposed later when Lady Song was accused of witchcraft by Empress Dou and killed herself. See *Hou Hanshu*, 10.415, 55.1801.

⁷¹ This is the story of Sun Liang 孫亮 of the Wu in the period of the Three Kingdoms. See "Jiangbiao zhuan" 江表傳 cited in *Sanguozhi*, 64.1448.

⁷² This is the story of Yuan Yi 袁顛 and his son Yuan Ang 袁昂. See *Liangshu*, 31.451.

⁷³ This is the story of Yuan Can 袁粲 and his student Di Lingqing 狄靈慶. Rumor had it that the wet nurse cursed Di for his faithlessness, and the Di family was later on attacked and ruined by the ghost of the child and his dog. See Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Nanshi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 26.706-707.

loudly made a resolution to drive out the invading barbarians.⁷⁴ When the last emperor of the Southern Chen (557-89) was stabbed in the neck by his half-brother, who planned to usurp the throne, he was saved only by his grandmother and his wet nurse, who threw themselves on top of him to protect him from further blows.⁷⁵

In fact, wet nurses were such important individuals in preserving the lines of the politically powerful that the image of a wet nurse was used by a Liu-Song emperor to describe his heir-apparent's protector. Shortly before Emperor Ming (r. 465-72) died, he summoned one of his most trusted officials, Chu Yanhui 褚彥回, back to the capital, asking Yanhui to take care of the heir-apparent "like a dutiful wet nurse," saying that he would have Yanhui "put on the yellow silk shirt." It appears that not only were wet nurses considered by the imperial house to be key figures in protecting their youthful successors, but also that imperial wet nurses had uniforms in the Liu-Song palace.⁷⁶

Similar stories are recorded in the Northern histories. In the Northern Wei, to avoid political turmoil, a youngster was carried away from the capital by his wet nurse until he was fourteen years old. The wet nurse not only saved his life but also raised him to adulthood.⁷⁷ An Eastern Wei (534-50) imperial prince also fled the capital with his wet nurse during a barbarian invasion when he was a child.⁷⁸ At the fall of the Sui dynasty (581-618), various warlords competed for followers to increase their military force. A general intended to abandon his lord and take refuge with Li Yuan 李淵, the founding emperor of the Tang dynasty. When his plan was discovered, he was executed and his three-year-old son was kept in custody by his lord. The child's wet nurse, Wang Lanying 王蘭英, asked to be banished into slavery together with the child so that she could take care of him. Lanying's story is recorded in the "Biographies of Eminent Women" of the *Jiu Tangshu*, which says that she kept the

⁷⁴ This is the story of Xiao Dazhi 蕭大舉, the son of Emperor Jianwen 簡文 of the Southern Liang. See *Liangshu*, 44.618.

⁷⁵ Yao Silian 姚思廉, *Chenshu* 陳書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972) 28.366, 28.496.

⁷⁶ It is interesting to note that it was precisely because an imperial wet nurse would often be involved in political struggles that she was either praised for saving the youngster if he gained power or condemned as a corruptive influence when he went astray. For Emperor Ming and Chu Yanhui's story, see *Nanshi*, 28.750.

⁷⁷ This is the story of Zhao Yan 趙瑛; see *Weishu*, 86.1882.

⁷⁸ This is the story of Yuan Shao 元紹, nephew of Emperor Xiaozhuang of the Eastern Wei. See *Bei Qi shu*, 28.388.

child alive by begging for food on the streets and, when opportunity arose, fled to Li Yuan with the child. To honor Lanying for her courageous and righteous act, Li Yuan bestowed on her the title of Countess Yongshou 永壽郡君.⁷⁹

In return for the wet nurse's service and loyalty, the master's family would also try to help the wet nurse when she was ill or in trouble. A Han prince called upon an eminent doctor to cure the disease of his wet nurse.⁸⁰ Jia Nanfeng, as mentioned in the beginning of this article, sent imperial doctors to heal her wet nurse, Ms. Xu. When an aging wet nurse of the Cao-Wei imperial family was arrested for worshipping an unsanctioned deity, the Empress Dowager sent a messenger to ask for her release, though the request was denied by the official in charge.⁸¹ Examples like these illustrate the close relation between the wet nurse and her nursling's family.

Intimacy, however, did not always come along with reward, and reward was not always approved. The Cao-Wei Empress Dowager did try to save the old wet nurse of her house, but cases in which matrons like Lady Guo distrusted their wet nurses and had them killed seem to have been even more frequent. Lady Guo was never charged with any crime, and the Cao-Wei Empress Dowager failed to save the wet nurse of her house. Both cases indicate how difficult it was for wet nurses to obtain official legal protection, mostly because of their lowly social origins as slaves. When they did acquire favor from their masters through unofficial influence, they attracted contemporary criticism as well as historical attention. This was also because of their inferior status, both as women and as slaves.

III. *Rewards and the Evaluation of Wet Nurses*

Evidence for regular payment for wet nurses in the Han and the Six Dynasties is hard to find because of the lack of documentation.⁸²

⁷⁹ See Liu Xu 劉詢 (887-946), *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 193.5139-40.

⁸⁰ This is the story mentioned above, in which King Jibei asked the famous Chunyu Yi to heal his wet nurse. See *Shiji*, 105 .2805.

⁸¹ *Sanguozhi*, 9.278; 12.388.

⁸² Wet nurses in foundling houses of late imperial China would sometimes be rewarded with certain amount of money and vacations to return home. European families from the Roman period to the Renaissance left contracts for hiring wet nurses, which help immensely in research. For the late imperial Chinese cases, see Angela Leung, "L'accueil des enfants abandonnés dans la Chine du bas-Yangzi

Commoners' wives who nursed the Wu imperial princes, according to Lu Kai's statement, were rewarded with money and grain and often allowed to visit their own children at home, and their husbands were exempted from corvée labor. This seems to have been the usual official reward when imperial houses used commoners as wet nurses, which was why the Wu ruler was criticized by Lu Kai for not following the rules, depriving the children of their parents and thus destroying households.⁸³

It is difficult to discern whether the aristocracy applied similar regulations when hiring commoners. For example, Ms. Xu, who nursed the Jia sisters was allowed to bring her son with her to work. It is hard to imagine any official payment other than food and boarding for household slaves who nursed the master's child, be he an imperial prince or an aristocratic son. However, unofficial reward and trust bestowed on wet nurses out of the nurslings' favor should not be underestimated. This was what the moralists criticized most and ironically also the reason why many wet nurses found a place in the historical record.

1. Rewards and the Influence of Wet Nurses

Once grown, the nursed child at times would out of gratitude grant his wet nurse money, clothes, farmland, houses, slaves, and even a noble title while she was alive and mourned her when she passed away. Most material rewards caused no comment from scholar-officials, but any honorary tribute attracted their ire. We will discuss the material rewards to wet nurses in this section and leave honorary tributes and related criticism to the next.

Imperial wet nurses attract more attention in historical writing than other wet nurses. Emperor Wu of the Han, once nursed by the mother of Marquis Dongwu 東武侯, repeatedly conferred favors on her after he came to the throne.

The Emperor [Wu] addressed her as "grand wet nurse" and allowed her to come to the palace twice a month. When she came, [the Em-

aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles," 15-54. For the European cases, see Bradley, "Wet Nursing at Rome," 201-09; Klapisch-Zuber, "Blood Parents and Milk Parents," 132-64.

⁸³ Lu Kai claimed that under Sun Hao's rule, wet nurses were separated from their husbands who were forced to serve corvée labor, and their children consequently died, destroying the households. For the wet nurses' treatment and Lu Kai's memorial, see *Sanguozhi*, 61.1406.

peror] would decree that she was to be granted fifty bolts of cloth as well as fine food and drink. The wet nurse sent a memorial, saying that she intended to buy a certain piece of official land. The Emperor said that if the wet nurse wanted it, he would simply give it to her. He hardly refused any request of the wet nurse. He permitted the carriage of the wet nurse to drive on official roads. At that time, all the officials respected the wet nurse. Slaves and servants of the wet nurse's family members bullied the people of Chang'an [the capital], stopping people's horse-carriages and stealing their clothes. [The news] reached the inner court, but [the Emperor] could not bear to punish her. The officials in charge asked to remove the wet nurse's family to the borderland, and the Emperor approved the sentence. The wet nurse, before saying good-bye to the Emperor in person, visited Guo Sheren 郭舍人 and wept. Guo told her to turn her head to the Emperor repeatedly when she bid him farewell. The wet nurse thanked Guo and agreed to do so. [When bidding the Emperor farewell], the wet nurse turned her head back to the Emperor every several steps. Guo then scolded her fiercely, saying, "What are you looking at? Do you think His Majesty still needs your milk for survival? What do you turn your head back for?" The Emperor, hearing this, felt deeply sad and pitied the wet-nurse. He then decreed that she should not be banished [to the borderland] but instead punished those who had made the suggestion.⁸⁴

Emperor Wu, the vigorous ruler of the Han, was notorious for having his wives and son killed.⁸⁵ Yet he bestowed countless favors, including official land, on his wet nurse and could not bear to see her punished. Going even further, Emperor Ai 哀帝 (r. 6-1 BCE), five generations after Emperor Wu, once gave palace soldiers and weapons to his wet nurse as a gift, much to the disapproval of his officials. Their objections, however, focused not on rewarding the wet nurse, but on the Emperor's application of public resources for private matters.⁸⁶ A wet nurse was considered a "private figure" in the emperor's household. Mr. Guo's device and Emperor Wu's sorrow in the above story are striking illustrations of the nursling's compassion for his nurse that resulted from their long-term inti-

⁸⁴ *Shiji*, 126.3204. Liu Xin 劉歆 (?-23), *Xijing zaji* 西京雜記 in Wang Mo 王謨, comp., *Zhengding Han Wei congshu* 增訂漢魏叢書, (1791; reprint from Taipei: Dahua shuju.), however, attributed this scheme to Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 instead of Guo Sheren. See *Xijing zaji*, 2.1075-1.

⁸⁵ One of his sons, the heir-apparent Li, was distrusted and executed, while his grandson, the future Emperor Xuan was kept alive by Bing Ji who selected wet nurses to take care of him. See the story in *Hanshu*, 25.3144 and Bing Ji's story above.

⁸⁶ *Hou Hanshu*, 77.3264.

macy, which no official would oppose as long as it was kept in its place. However, the constant succession crises and the presence of successive child emperors in the Eastern Han imperial palace provided the wet nurses, as it did the Empress Dowagers, with a way to break through the boundaries between the public and the private.⁸⁷ The story of Wang Sheng 王聖, Emperor An's 安帝 (r. 107-24) wet nurse, is a vivid example.

When Empress Dowager Deng 鄧太后 ruled as a regent early in Emperor An's reign, Wang Sheng, together with concerned palace eunuchs, fearing that the Empress Dowager would dethrone the emperor, would often accuse the Deng family of being disloyal in front of the child emperor. Therefore, immediately after Empress Dowager Deng passed away in CE121, Emperor An executed the Deng family members so as to eradicate their influence in court. The *Hou Hanshu* tells us that, "Since then, the wet nurse Wang Sheng, who once diligently protected the Emperor, exploited their intimacy and acted extravagantly; her daughter Borong 伯榮 freely came in and out of the palace, engaging in illicit sexual behavior."⁸⁸ At the peak of her power, Wang Sheng even managed to obtain a noble title for Borong's illicit lover, who married Borong after their affair was disclosed.⁸⁹

Wang Sheng's power did not go unchallenged. When Emperor An's heir-apparent, the future Emperor Shun 順帝 (r. 126-44), suffered from a shock in 124, he was taken to Wang Sheng's house for a rest. This was opposed by one of the heir-apparent's wet nurses, Wang Nan 王男, who claimed that Sheng's house could not serve as a princely residence since, due to a recent renovation, the "earth element" had been disturbed. To contest the opposition, Sheng and

⁸⁷ The political power of various empress dowagers in the Eastern Han is a favorite theme of Chinese historians. For instance, the Qing dynasty (1664-1911) scholar Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727-1814) suggested that it was due to the successive child emperors that their mothers came into power; see his *Nianershi zaji* 廿二史劄記 (Taipei: Huashi chubanshe, 1977), 4.92-94. Modern historians, such as Yang Liansheng, also refer to the Eastern Han empress dowagers in their discussions of the rule of the females; see his "Female Rulers in Imperial China," *Studies of Governmental Institutions in Chinese History*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Studies XXIII (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1968), 153-69.

⁸⁸ *Hou Hanshu*, 5.233; 16.616-17; 78.2514.

⁸⁹ Liu Huai, Borong's lover, was the paternal cousin of a childless noble whose land was confiscated after the noble died. Huai, after his marriage to Borong, was allowed to inherit the noble title as a successor. See *Hou Hanshu*, 14.564.

another of her daughters, Yong 永, started to denounce Wang Nan, who subsequently was arrested and died in prison. The heir-apparent grieved so deeply over his wet nurse's death that Wang Sheng and her faction worried for their future; they then presented false allegations against the heir-apparent until he was deposed.⁹⁰

Shortly after Emperor An's death in 125, a new child emperor was enthroned but shortly afterwards died unexpectedly. The reigning empress dowager, together with her party, kept the death secret, executed Wang Sheng and her gang, and arranged for the deposed heir-apparent to come back. The new party, which included Song Er 宋娥, another wet nurse of the deposed heir-apparent, eventually gained the upper hand. When the heir-apparent was finally enthroned as Emperor Shun, he bestowed on Song Er the title of Countess Shanyang 山陽君 out of appreciation for her contribution.⁹¹ In the rise and fall of Wang Sheng, we see not only the competition for power between wet nurses of the reigning emperor and the heir-apparent and the joined forces of the wet nurse's daughters and palace eunuchs, but also recurrent scenes of influential wet nurses in the child successors' palace.

Similar events took place when Emperor Ling 靈帝 (r. 168-88) ascended the throne. Adopted as an heir because of the barrenness of his predecessor and received into the imperial palace from his own principality, Emperor Ling appears to have depended heavily on his wet nurse, Zhao Rao 趙嬈, to communicate and to get along with the reigning empress dowager. Zhao Rao, allied herself with the palace eunuchs, eventually gained the trust of the Empress Dowager and often proposed candidates for official appointments.⁹² When concerned officials tried to murder the eunuchs' gang in the palace, the leading eunuch "asked Zhao Rao, the wet nurse, to protect the Emperor, obtained an imperial order to shut all palace doors," and had the officials slain instead.⁹³ When Emperor Ling instituted his notorious sale of official positions later on, his wet nurses also acted as agents to bargain for the best price for him.⁹⁴

The unofficial influence of the imperial wet nurses carried well

⁹⁰ *Hou Hanshu*, 15.590-591.

⁹¹ This is bestowal included five thousand households as her fief. See *Hou Hanshu*, 51. 2021-22.

⁹² *Hou Hanshu*, 23.636; 66.2169; 69.2242.

⁹³ *Hou Hanshu*, 69.2243.

⁹⁴ *Hou Hanshu*, 52.1731.

into the Six Dynasties. They were accused by their contemporaries not only of stealing the power of the emperor but also of misleading the imperial princess. An Eastern Jin emperor was reproved by his officials for having ignored his public duties and indulged in the corrupting company of “old women, wet nurses, Buddhist nuns and monks.”⁹⁵ These people were said to have robbed the emperor’s power by taking bribes and by recommending their gangs to official posts. A Liu-Song emperor, while reprimanding his sisters and daughters for their jealous behavior, claimed that it was the bad influence of “the wet nurses and the Buddhist nuns” that was to be blamed.⁹⁶ Though paired with nuns instead of eunuchs in this period, it appears that imperial wet nurses still played an important role in public affairs through private channels.⁹⁷

An aristocratic wet nurse, chosen from household slaves and servants, could also open a pathway of upward social mobility for her children, though on a smaller scale. When a Western Han high official was asked by the emperor to propose candidates for official posts, his colleagues complained that he only recommended “his private guests and his wet nurse’s children.”⁹⁸ The appointment of Ms. Xu’s son to various offices by the emperor, owing to her intimacy with Empress Jia, is just one example in the Western Jin. Sometimes the master would adopt the wet nurse’s sons, thus giving them even greater opportunity for political advancement.⁹⁹

In addition to material rewards, wet nurses in the Han and the Six Dynasties could sometimes acquire noble titles and be mourned as “milk mothers”. Emperor An of the Eastern Han appears to be the first to bestow a titular reward on his wet nurse; Wang Sheng was

⁹⁵ This is the story of Emperor Xiaowu of the Eastern Jin; see *Jinshu*, 64.1733.

⁹⁶ *Songshu*, 41.1290-91.

⁹⁷ With the flourishing of Buddhism in this period, Buddhist monks and nuns of the Six Dynasties replaced the palace eunuchs of the Eastern Han as the archetypal bad influence on the emperors. When Emperor Xiaowu was criticized for neglecting his duties, he was described in the *Jinshu* as being “devoted to Buddhism and spending luxurious resources on it to the point that his subject could not bear it anymore.” Wet nurses, however, were not out off the suspect list of corruption in the Six Dynasties. See *Jinshu*, 64.1733.

⁹⁸ This is the story of Shi Gao 史高 in Emperor Yuan’s 元帝 reign (r. 48-33 BCE). See *Hanshu*, 81. 3332.

⁹⁹ This is the story of Mao Hongxian 毛鴻顯 of the Western Wei (535-56), who was adopted and raised as a younger brother by his mother’s nursing Mao Xia 毛嫫. Hongxian was brought into official position through his foster brother but acquired much higher posts later on through his military feats. See *Beishi*, 49.1809-1810.

granted the title of Countess Yewang 野王君.¹⁰⁰ We also know that Emperor Shun granted his meritorious wet nurse Song Er the title of Countess Shanyang;¹⁰¹ Emperor Ling granted his wet nurse Zhao Rao the title of Countess Pingshi 平氏君; and Emperor Xian 獻帝 granted his wet nurse Lü Guei 呂貴 the posthumous title of Countess Pingshi.¹⁰² All these honorary rewards provoked objections among Han officials, while the aristocratic sons' funeral mourning for their wet nurses was debated among scholars since the Wei-Jin period.

Coming from servitude, a wet nurse's social status would not be changed no matter how many material rewards were showered on her. Honorary rewards, however, such as noble titles and mourning tributes, could either uplift the wet nurse from slavery to nobility in the imperial government or elevate her from a maidservant to a certain kind of "mother" in an aristocratic household. This transgression of class boundaries was the main reason for contemporary criticism and the cause of negative evaluations of wet nurses.

2. *The Evaluation and Representation of Wet Nurses*

On one hand, while scholar-officials of the Han and the Six Dynasties made various remarks about wet nurses, none except Lu Kai stood up for the wet nurses' well-being. On the other hand, only three extant accounts of this period mention objections to wet nursing. The focus of these critiques was not on the possible inferiority of the wet nurses' milk or the well-being of the wet nurses' own children, but rather on the political consequences of having an imperial heir nursed by someone other than his birth mother.¹⁰³

The first critique was from an Eastern Han official. Concerned about Emperor Shun's lack of an heir, this official advised the Emperor not only to take fertile women from inferior origins as his consorts but also to allow mothers to nurse their own newborns. To avoid wet nurses, concubines, physicians, and shamans, he said, was to prevent the imperial offspring from being murdered by jealous

¹⁰⁰ *Hou Hanshu*, 5.242.

¹⁰¹ *Hou Hanshu*, 61.2021.

¹⁰² Zhao Rao's reward was recorded in Yuan Songshan 袁松山, *Hou Hanshu 後漢書* (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1981), 1.625. Lü Guei's reward was recorded in Yuan Hong 袁宏 (328-376), *Hou Hanji 後漢紀* (Tianjin: Guji chubanshe, 1992), 28.787. Both were recorded as Countess Pingshi; one wonders whether there was a mistake in the accounts.

¹⁰³ Song scholars, such as Cheng Hao 程颢, did oppose wet nursing out of humanitarian concerns. See Hsiung Ping-chen, "To Nurse the Young," 223.

palace women.¹⁰⁴ Emperor Ming of the Liu-Song Dynasty was the second figure in extant documents to express opposition to wet nursing. In one account, the Emperor accused one of the royal consorts of indulging in luxurious living and depriving her children of food and clothing, leaving all such matters to the wet nurses.¹⁰⁵ His criticism was, however, directed not so much at wet nurses, as the lavish lifestyle of the consort.¹⁰⁶ The third figure to object to wet nursing was a palace official during Emperor Xuanwu's reign of the Northern Wei. As mentioned above, Emperor Xuanwu lost several sons before the future Emperor Xiaoming was born. Xiaoming was therefore carefully protected and raised in a separate residence where only the wet nurses had access to him. This worried officials who were concerned about the heir-apparent's formal education. As in the second account, however, wet nursing was brought up in passing instead of being rejected outright.¹⁰⁷

What disturbed scholar-officials most was the influence a wet nurse exerted on her nursling because of their intimacy. This influence was often given as the reason imperial and aristocratic offspring went astray. One royal prince of the Eastern Han who was accused of sedition sent a plea for forgiveness to the emperor, saying that he could not know better since he had been living in isolation in the

¹⁰⁴ This account was made by Li Gu 李固. See *Hou Hanshu*, 63.2078. The notion that the imperial family should choose fertile women of inferior origins to enhance procreation was also proposed by an aristocratic physician, Chu Cheng 褚澄, in the Southern Qi. For discussion on this notion, see Jen-der Lee, "Han-Tang zhijian qiuzi yifang shitan—jianlun fuke lanshang yu xingbie lunshu," 295-296.

¹⁰⁵ This is the story of Lady Xie, mother of Liu Chang 劉昶, Duke of Zhengbei 征北公. She was sent back to her natal family after the Emperor's reproach. See *Songshu*, 72.1870.

¹⁰⁶ It should be noted, however, that Emperor Ming of the Liu-Song was notorious for his misogyny. It is said that he used to gather palace women, undress them, and force other people, including the Empress, to watch. When the Empress covered her eyes to protest, the Emperor was outraged. Emperor Ming also decreed that an official's wife be killed for her jealous behavior; he then asked one of his subordinates to write a book on jealous women, presumably to ridicule them. He also reproached the imperial princesses for their jealousy by asking an aristocrat to decline their marriage proposals. Whether Lady Xie was truly neglecting her children is unclear. But it is obvious that Emperor Ming tended to interfere into his subjects' family affairs with imperial power. Although wet nursing was practiced throughout the Han and the Six Dynasties among the aristocracy, it was still used as a reason for Lady Xie to be accused and sent back to her natal family. For more on Emperor Ming's misogynist actions, see *Songshu*, 41.1290-92, 41.1295.

¹⁰⁷ *Weishu*, 58.1292-93.

inner palace and was “raised by wet nurses.”¹⁰⁸ As discussed earlier, when Emperor Ming of the Liu-Song reproached his sisters and daughters for being shrewish, he blamed wet nurses and nuns for exerting a bad influence on them, saying, “Nannies and nursemaids, daring to rely on age and intimacy, praise only jealousy; nuns and crones, claiming to be knowledgeable, emphasize clever speech.”¹⁰⁹ Out of private relations and through unofficial channels, the influence of wet nurses was often considered sinister. Diviners who explained floods, earthquakes, and solar and lunar eclipses in the reign of Emperor Ai of the Eastern Han cautioned that the Emperor should keep away from both the gestures of mischievous officials and the “tender words of the wet nurses.”¹¹⁰ Historians who explained the drought of the winter of 392 also blamed “the relatives of Buddhist monks and nuns and [imperial] wet nurses” for taking official posts through the emperor’s favor.¹¹¹

All in all, the scholar-officials’ criticism of the wet nurse did not address the quality of her milk nor the style of her care, that is, the substance of wet nursing. Instead, it was mainly about her breaking of class and gender boundaries. Yang Zheng 楊震, a high official of Emperor An’s court, protested the bestowal of a noble title on Wang Sheng by pointing out the social background and limitations of an imperial wet nurse.

Imperial wet nurse Wang Sheng, who came originally from slavery, had the precious opportunity to nurse the holy body. Though diligent in her care, she has been rewarded so many times that her rewards have surpassed her contributions. But her greed knows no limits, and she disturbs the world through her social networks...The Classics warn against women as rulers and insist that they restrict their activities to food-preparation. This is to restrain women from intervening in politics. [The Emperor] should oust the wet nurse at once, telling her as well as [her daughter] Borong 伯榮 to stay out of the palace.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ *Hou Hanshu*, 50.1676.

¹⁰⁹ *Songshu*, 41.1290-91. For discussion of comment and reproach over these old women’s influence on imperial princesses, see Jen-der Lee, “*Querelle des femmes? Jealous Women and their Discipline in the Six Dynasties*,” presented at the “Conference of Education and Instruction in China,” held by the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales, June 29-July 2, 1999, Paris.

¹¹⁰ *Hanshu*, 75.3184. As mentioned above, Emperor Ai once granted palace soldiers and weaponry to his confidante and wet nurse.

¹¹¹ This was in the reign of Emperor Xiaowu of the Eastern Jin. Xiaowu, as mentioned above, was said to have spent much time in the company of Buddhist monks and nuns and indulged the requests of the wet nurses. See *Songshu*, 31.911.

¹¹² *Hou Hanshu*, 54.1761.

Borong was the daughter of Wang Sheng, who married her lover which allowed him to inherit his paternal cousin's noble title. Yang Zheng denounced this succession as illegitimate, saying that since the brother of the deceased noble was still alive, there was no way for this upstart to assume the title simply because he was the imperial wet nurse's son-in-law.¹¹³

The example of Wang Sheng's case and Yang Zheng's criticism was cited by Zuo Xiong 左雄, a high official of Emperor Shun's court, when he denounced Song Er's bestowal. Zuo Xiong claimed that the founding emperor of the Han had made it a rule that "only the imperial Liu family members could be kings, and only those with military merit could be nobles." Since an earthquake occurred right after Emperor An bestowed noble titles on Wang Sheng, it would not be a good idea, said Zuo Xiong, for Emperor Shun to ennoble his wet nurse Song Er. Zuo Xiong advised the Emperor "to [restrict yourself to] providing the wet nurse with several thousands in cash annually so that you can fulfill the grace of your intimacy in private, but not raise doubts among officials and the populace in public."¹¹⁴

Immediately after Zuo Xiong sent his memorial to the throne, an earthquake and an avalanche occurred. He therefore sent another memorial in which he reiterated his argument and warnings:

Now the capital has suffered from an earthquake immediately after the ennoblement of Countess Shanyang. The disaster is always particularly enormous when females become involved in politics. Your subject has repeatedly said that the bestowal of noble titles is a most serious matter. A ruler can grant people money but not officialdom. It is better to rescind the bestowal on the wet nurse and put an immediate end to these disasters.¹¹⁵

Both Yang Zheng and Zuo Xiong evoked rules laid down by the founding emperor of the Han to denounce the bestowing of noble titles on women. However, in fact many women in the Han were ennobled. It was a Han government rule that a woman without an imperial surname but who was ennobled by virtue of imperial favor should be addressed as *jun* 君 (countess), just as if she were a grand princess. Accordingly, in the Western Han, both an empress' mother and an empress dowager's daughter by her ex-husband were invested with the title of countess. During Wang Mang's reign (9-23),

¹¹³ *Hou Hanshu*, 54.1761-62.

¹¹⁴ *Hou Hanshu*, 61.2021-22.

¹¹⁵ *Hou Hanshu*, 61.2021-22.

a scholar's great-grandmother was ennobled for her knowledge of the Classics. In the Eastern Han, an empress dowager's mother and two high officials' wives were invested with the title of countess either when they were alive or posthumously.¹¹⁶ None of these investments provoked criticism.

In view of these historical precedents, the main arguments of Yang Zheng and Zuo Xiong turn out to be not simply against the ennoblement of women but in fact against the wet nurses who transgressed class and gender boundaries. Their first argument was that the wet nurses came from inferior social backgrounds and should not be granted any noble title, though a monetary reward was fine. Their second argument was that women should not be involved in politics. Yang Zheng supported his argument with quotes from the Classics while Zuo Xiong pointed to current natural disasters. Both were concerned with "politics run by females." It is clear that wet nurses who moved upward from slavery to nobility and outward from private service to public honor evoked anxiety and revulsion among male bureaucrats.

The bestowing of noble titles on wet nurses encountered resistance again in the Eastern Jin when Emperor Cheng (r. 326-42) rewarded his wet nurse. All of the officials except one agreed with the decree of investment. One official, however, sent a memorial to the throne in which, following Yang Zheng's argument, he requested the Emperor to give his wet nurse land and houses instead of a noble title, and also pronounced Emperor Ling's ennoblement of his wet nurse Zhao Rao to be illegitimate.¹¹⁷ After this, there were hardly any cases of ennoblement of wet nurses in early imperial courts.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ The two Western Han examples were Empress Wang as Countess Pingyuan 平原君 and Emperor Wu's half sister as Countess Xiucheng 修成君. The one under Wang Mang's rule was Ms. Shi 師氏 as Mistress Yicheng 儀成夫人. The three cases in the Eastern Han were Empress Dowager Deng's mother as Countess Xinye 新野君 while she was alive and as Grand Princess and Countess Jing 敬君 after she died; high official Liang Ji's 梁冀 wife Sun Shou 孫壽 as Countess Xiangcheng 襄城君 and Liang Shang's 梁商 wife Ms. Yin 陰氏 as Countess Kaifeng 開封君 posthumously. For the government prescription and the investments, see Cai Yong 蔡邕 (133-92), *Du duan* 獨斷, cited in *Tongdian*, 34.948-949.

¹¹⁷ The official who rejected the ennoblement was Gu He 顧和. Emperor Cheng did not insist on the investment, and the issue stopped at that point. See *Jinshu*, 83.2164.

¹¹⁸ Upper-class women in the Six Dynasties period were, however, still invested with noble titles. For instance, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, Jia Chong's wife Guo Huai was invested as Countess Yicheng. Others were Yang Hu's wife, who was invested as Countess Wansuixiang 萬歲鄉君, and Ms. Song of

In addition to noble titles, scholar-officials also objected to the mourning rites carried out for the wet nurse by her aristocratic nursling. According to the “Mourning” chapter of the *Yili*, one should undergo three months’ mourning for one’s “milk mother” (wet nurse) when she dies. In annotating this passage, Zheng Xuan defined milk mother as “someone inferior who nursed me in place of the one who could not raise me due to other reasons.” Jia Gongyan, while interpreting Zheng Xuan’s explanation, claimed that “among the three mothers [that is, the child-instructor, the foster mother, and the protecting mother of an aristocratic newborn], if the foster mother was ill or dead, an inferior woman would be assigned as a substitute to nurse the child, and this was why this woman was called the milk mother.”¹¹⁹

One might conclude that what Zheng Xuan meant by “the one who could not raise me owing to other reasons” was simply the child’s blood mother. But clearly Jia Gongyan felt that what Zheng Xuan was referring to was not the child’s blood mother but another woman, that is, the foster mother, perhaps a concubine, who was asked by the child’s father to nurse the child, and only if this concubine was unable to nurse due to other reasons could the maidservant who nursed in her place be addressed as the wet nurse.

As we noted above, the Classics indicate that a noble newborn could be nursed either by a noble woman of inferior status (for example, the feudal lord’s son could be nursed by the serviceman’s wife), or by his father’s concubines or maidservants (if he was the grand master’s son), if not nursed by his own mother (in the case of the serviceman’s son). Zheng Xuan could have been referring to all of these women with the term “milk mother” (wet nurse). But Jia Gongyan read it differently. Based on our examination of the social background of early imperial wet nurses, it is most likely that Jia’s convoluted reading was because of the fact that early imperial aristocrats, selecting their wet nurses mainly from female slaves, hesitated to address these women as “mothers” because of their inferior origins.¹²⁰

the Former Qin (310-94) who was invested as Countess Xuanwen 宣文君 for her contribution on teaching the *Zhouli*. See *Tongdian*, 34.949.

¹¹⁹ For the mourning period paid to one’s wet nurse and the commentaries of both Zheng Xuan and Jia Gongyan, see *Yili*, 33.8b.

¹²⁰ *Yili* defines a “foster mother” as “a barren concubine who is assigned by her master to raise his son whose blood mother, also a concubine, is dead.” See *Yili*, 30.3a.

Such hesitation can be detected in the debates over mourning paid to a wet nurse. Those who supported such mourning rites gave several reasons for doing so. The "Mourning" chapter in the *Yili* clarified that it was "due to the name of milk mother" that one should pay mourning to her. The Han scholar Ma Rong 馬融 further explained by saying that "she acquired the name of a mother by nursing me." Some other Han scholars suggested that it was to repay her "righteousness" that one mourned for her.¹²¹ A Jin scholar claimed that "one, be he a serviceman or a grand master, should pay three months mourning to his milk mother and should not dismiss her contribution because of concerns of superiority and inferiority."¹²² Another scholar explained the "contribution of the wet nurse," saying that "one would not survive after the death of one's mother if it were not for the milk of one's milk mother."¹²³ In view of this, scholars who insisted on mourning for one's wet nurse focused on her righteousness and contribution; one such scholar, Ma Rong, confirmed that nursing did in fact make a woman a mother of a kind.

Other scholars, however, insisted that the person Zheng Xuan referred to as "someone inferior who nursed me" could not be a maidservant but should be a concubine; if she was a maidservant, then one should not pay mourning to her. To these scholars, the criteria for determining whether or not a woman should be addressed as a certain kind of "mother" and be honored posthumously were not her diligence in nursing, caring for, and instructing the child but predominantly her social origin.¹²⁴

Interestingly, however, neither the noble titles bestowed on wet nurses nor the mourning rites paid to her raised any debate among rulers and officials in the Northern Wei. Moreover, the Xianbei emperors, as mentioned above, respected their wet nurses as empress dowagers and granted not only material but also honorary rewards to them and their families. For instance, Emperor Wen-cheng regarded his wet nurse Ms. Chang as an empress dowager,

¹²¹ *Tongdian*, 92.2512.

¹²² This opinion was offered by He Xun 賀循. See *Tongdian*, 92.2512.

¹²³ This opinion was offered by Master Liang 梁氏. See *Tongdian*, 92.2512.

¹²⁴ These arguments were put forward by Tian Qong of the Cao-Wei and Yuan Zun of the Jin; see discussions above on social backgrounds of wet nurses. For debates over an aristocratic nursing's mourning for the wet nurse, including reasons proposed and oppositions raised by scholars of the Han and the Six Dynasties, see *Tongdian*, 92.2512.

bestowed noble titles on her mother and sisters, assigned official posts to her half brothers and brother-in-laws, and granted titular honor to her father and grandfather posthumously.¹²⁵

According to the *Weishu*, all the Xianbei rulers after Emperor Daowu 道武 (r. 386-408), following the precedent of Emperor Wu of the Han, executed the mother of the heir-apparent in order to prevent the growing power of the Empress Dowager and her natal family. This practice was carried out seriously in the early Northern Wei and still had some impact when Emperor Xuanwu reigned in the sixth century.¹²⁶ It could be because of this vacuum of power in the inner palace that imperial wet nurses became so important during the Northern Wei. Both Emperor Taiwu's wet nurse Ms. Dou and Emperor Wencheng's wet nurse Ms. Chang were raised from servitude to positions as imperial wet nurses. Their inferior background, which would have caused rejection of honorary rewards in the Han and the southern dynasties, may have actually protected them from imperial suspicion, which focused on the heir-apparent's blood mother. However, in his *Nan Qi shu*, Xiao Zixian ignored the fact that Emperor Taiwu was basing his practice on a Han emperor, and portrayed him as a "barbarian" who "killed his heir-apparent's blood mother in order to honor the wet nurse as empress dowager."¹²⁷ Thus, the respect paid to wet nurses by the northern emperors was described by a southern historian as barbarian.

IV. Conclusion

The study of wet nurses involves women's occupation and social mobility, contemporary conceptions on mothering and women's bodies, as well as the development of gynecology. Previous studies have described and analyzed the practices and meanings of wet nursing in late imperial China. This article extends our knowledge

¹²⁵ *Weishu*, 83 .1817; also see *Beishi*, 80.2675.

¹²⁶ The *Weishu* indicates that the reason Emperor Xuanwu lost his sons before Xiaoming was born to Lady Hu was precisely this practice. Imperial consorts may have killed their sons for fear of their own executions, and Lady Hu was recorded in *Weishu* as having claimed that she would rather sacrifice her life in order to give birth to a son for Xuanwu so that the imperial line could be preserved. For this practice and its related influence on infanticide, see Jen-der Lee, "Han Sui zhijian de shengzi buju wenti," 750.

¹²⁷ *Nan Qi shu*, 57.986.

and understanding of this significant institution back to early imperial China. Historical records, medical texts, and iconography help us to reconstruct the selection, tasks, and treatment of the wet nurses in imperial and aristocratic households; legal documents and stelae provide glimpses of both the opportunities and the limits of female power and influence during this time.

In contrast to the medieval European custom whereby newborns were sent away into the countryside to live with contracted wet nurses, early modern Chinese brought wet nurses into their homes where they were closely supervised. Some scholars suggest that this may have reduced infant mortality in China to a certain extent.¹²⁸ However, these live-in wet nurses may also have caused unexpected problems for their masters' families. Research on ancient Rome shows both the sexual restrictions on wet nurses and a slave-made-nurse's quiet decision to keep her milk for the baby slaves.¹²⁹ This practice, similar to that of early imperial China, makes for interesting comparison.

In the aristocratic society of the Han and the Six Dynasties, most wet nurses were chosen from household slaves based on their physical and psychological characteristics. A wet nurse would be asked to be careful of her diet and behavior, with special restrictions on sex and alcohol. Her duties, besides breastfeeding, often consisted of caring for and sometimes providing preliminary instruction for the newborn. Originally a maidservant, she might still continue to serve in her master's family after her nursling was grown. Indolent wet nurses were whipped, and distrusted ones were sometimes executed. However, most wet nurses became famous for their loyalty to and intimacy with their nurslings, which brought them and their families both material and honorary rewards. It was these rewards that provoked criticism from their contemporaries.

Early imperial moralists and intellectuals criticized wet-nursing not because upper-class women disregarded breastfeeding as the obligation of motherhood and not because lower-class women car-

¹²⁸ Hsiung Ping-chen, "To Nurse the Young," 217-38.

¹²⁹ See K. R. Bradley, "Sexual Regulations in Wet-nursing Contracts from Roman Egypt," 321-25. Bradley also discusses the impact of wet nursing in Roman social relations in "Wet-nursing at Rome," 201-09. Sandra R. Joshel explores 19th century American documents of female slaves' nursing decisions to argue a similar case in ancient Rome; see her "Nurturing the Master's Child: Slavery and the Roman Child-nurse," 3-22.

ried inferior milk and emotions that might corrupt their charges. The principal reason for scholar-officials, especially those of the Han and the Southern Dynasties, to object to the institution was in fact the shattering of conventional gender and status boundaries which resulted if a former wet nurse was enfeoffed with an aristocratic title or if her former nursling carried out official mourning rituals for her. Court bureaucrats detested the idea that political dangers could arise if powerful men confided in and were influenced by these women to whom they considered they owed the debt of life. Debates arose among intellectuals over whether milk and caring could have exalted a lower-class woman to the name of “mother” of an upper-class infant.

Defining the status of different women in a patriarchal household was an important issue in the Confucianization of early imperial China. In this regard, the North sometimes appears to have moved less rapidly than the South. Research shows that in codifying classical family ethics during this period, Confucian scholars felt that a woman’s status should be determined solely on the basis of her relation to the master of the house. This assertion, though in many cases followed by Southern ruling houses, caused serious debates and sometimes denunciation in the Northern imperial courts.¹³⁰ This study has shown the difficulties that early imperial scholars encountered in deciding the status of a wet nurse. Although a wet nurse was often considered important to the survival of the aristocratic newborn and enjoyed a special intimacy with him or her, she was nonetheless always the maidservant of her master. The prospect of being honored, though realized in the Xianbei northern court, was thus sometimes obstructed in the Han and the Southern Dynasties.

Although the bond between a wet nurse and her charges was often

¹³⁰ In cases of marital violence, for instance, the Southern dynasties penalized offending wives more severely than offenders in regular violence cases, and children who did not report such violence would also be executed both for the reason that the status of wives was inferior to that of husbands. However, the Northern dynasties, after fierce debates, allowed a son to conceal his mother’s violence against his father because “a person receives flesh and care from both parents and has the same affection for both of them.” This ignoring of the status difference between husbands and wives was denounced by some scholars as “holding an attitude of wild men and behavior close to that of a beast.” These two remarks were made by Feng Yunyi 封君嶺 and Dou Yuan 竇瑗, respectively, of the Northern Qi. For their different opinions and discussions on related issues, see Jen-der Lee, “The Death of a Princess: Codifying Classical Family Ethics in Early Medieval China.”

depicted as a kind of mutual devotion, the reality was perhaps more complicated in view of the frequent political struggles in early imperial courts. Once a woman, slave or servant, was selected as a wet nurse of an aristocratic newborn, she was forced to ignore her own children in the interests of her master's. However, she was given the opportunity to promote her family and herself by means of her female dispositions of milk and mothering care. Since history was never written by lower-class women, however, the true emotions and thoughts of the wet nurses are probably forever beyond our grasp.