

The Importance of Tang Dynasty Mothers to the Family Education

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Abstract: The importance of Tang Dynasty mothers to the family education was shown in the following aspects: studies and moral character. It was quite different from the other dynasties because the Tang Dynasty feminine learning quality was different from that both of the feature of close and stodgy in the preceding period and the character of conservative and ossificative in the later period. The Tang Dynasty mothers were filled with intelligence, competence and firmness and abundant in wisdom, thoughtfulness, rigorousness and love.

Key Words: Tang Dynasty, Mother, Family Education Importance

The mother once acted important roles to the family education for a long period of time in the Chinese history and this kind of situation lasted to the reign period of *Qi* in the Xia Dynasty. According to the history record, the leading roles in the family education were male. Until the period of the Wei and Jin Dynasty, the importance of the women in the family education was gradually becoming obvious. In the Tang Dynasty, women's roles in the family education was extremely important because the Tang regime was a quite opening society and women enjoyed more freedom. Besides, the ordinary social activities, the Tang Dynasty women also voluntarily undertook the responsibility of the family education due to their excellent educational background from their childhood. The success of the women to the family education was owing to their proper ideas of the family education--- both rigorousness and love were used in the course of the family education.

By retrieving the historical documents related with the Tang Dynasty history, the following conclusions are drawn on the success of the metrical education:

Learning Field

Different from the previous women's teaching the children by their examples according to the Confucian principles, the Tang Dynasty mothers paid more attention to official career direction to the son's education as well teaching personally because of their rich knowledge on the Confucian classics. The improvement of the social status of the Tang Dynasty women made them enjoy more rights in the family life and the difference from the later women's education, mothers of the Tang Dynasty showed the side of colorful aspect in the history. A very early

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Confucian slogan for education said that a good scholar can become an official; he who excels in study can follow an official career. Another saying is to study for the application. How to apply the knowledge got in the course of the study. The ancient popular idea is to become the officials. Imperial examination brought about hope to the ignoble intellectuals.

To the ignoble intellectuals, imperial examination could change their fate; wives and mothers showed heartfelt anticipation to sons and husbands since women could not take part in the examinations during the majority period of the China's feudal society. Many famous persons' achievements in the Tang Dynasty were directly related with the metrical guidance in their childhood, such as Bai Juyi; Yuan Zhen; Han Yu. Yuan Zhen's metrical education was very typical. Yuan Zhen's mother was the step wife of his father and she became a widow when Yuan Zhen was only 2 years old. At that time she was very young. A fact have been referred that the society of Tang Dynasty was quite open and it was not regarded as shameful that a married women remarried. But Yuan Zhen's mother was very thoughtful of Yuan Zhen and she no longer remarried after the father died. At the childhood, Yuan Zhen's brothers often bully the mother on purpose because she was the second wife of the father. But she did not care about it and never gave pressure on the son. She believed that if Yuan Zhen could be a promising person, their fate would be changed. She was born in a noble family, but she was willing to suffer a lot when Yuan Zhen was a child. She thought it was worthwhile, the suffering for the son. She encouraged Yuan Zhen a lot and infused a lot of Confucian classical for Yuan Zhen's imperial examination. Later Yuan Zhen did not let her down and achieved a lot in the official field and literature field.

Imperial examinations started from the Sui Dynasty and changed the ruling mode. From the Wei---Jin Dynasty to South---North Dynasty, the governmental officials' selection were conducted by the family origin. Some higher position was only owned by the persons of noble family. To the persons of lower status(even if they were very rich), they could hold some lower position in the government; except for only by huge military achievements could they enter the circle of higher position. Even so, they were despised by the noble persons. But imperial examination changed the intellectual life. Meng Jiao, a very famous poet of the Middle Tang Dynasty, passed the imperial examination at the age of 46, so he had the strong feeling of the importance of the imperial examination to the intellectuals of lower status. After he passed the imperial examination, he wrote a poem with the title as *Successful at the Civil Service Exam*: "Gone are all my past woes! What more I have to say! My body and my mind enjoy their fill today. Successful, faster my horse in vernal breeze, I've seen within one day all flowers on the trees."^①[p357] Here one point should be explained: that the Civil Service Examination was also called imperial examination, and the candidate of the highest level was the item of *Jinshi*. The poem above was just written after *Jinshi* examination. A fact should be acknowledged that women's family education to the sons (including to the husbands) played an important function to the society of the Tang Dynasty history.

Moral character

Not only the mothers taught the Confucian knowledge to the sons, but also the moral character. The Confucian conception of *Zhong* (in Chinese, it means loyal, devoted) and *Xiao* (in Chinese, it means filial piety). Generally speaking, *Zhong* meant officials and the common people should be completely loyal and obedient to the emperors/kings or their superiors and owners, and *Xiao* meant the younger generation showed their filial obedience to the old

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generation unconditionally whether the old ones were right or not. Wang Wei, a very famous poet, musician and painter, was very filial to his mother when he grew up and very famous for his filial obedience to his mother even though he held very high position in the government. Of course their identical Buddhist belief was one reason of Wang Wei's filial obedience; the more important fact was his family education in his childhood. During the daily education, mother not only taught knowledge, but also virtue and in the course of the education the feeling between mothers and sons gradually deepens. Thus we can understand why Wang Wei felt greatly sorrow, even almost died, after his mother's death.

Xiao also were embodied in the literature works, sometimes the comments of *Xiao* were filled with the sincere love between mothers and sons like the following poem written by Meng Jiao: "From the threads a mother's hand weaves/A gown for parting is made, Sewn stitch by stitch before he leaves/For fear his return be delayed. Such kindness as young grass receives/From the warm sun can be repaid?"^{©[P353]}

In the social life, the conflicts between *Zhong* and *Xiao* sometimes became very radical and usually mothers encouraged their sons to choose *Zhong* as the first choice. Of course, *Zhong* and *Xiao* are things filled with special historical meaning, so things positive and negative exist simultaneously. Mothers' education of the relation between *Zhong* and *Xiao* influenced the sons deeply, especially when the government suffered a disaster or faced the war. At just that moment mothers often encouraged the sons to devote themselves to the country, but not be concerned about the safety of the family. Liu Jun and his family were driven away from the imperial capital to the country because he resisted the fact that Wu Zetian--the only female empress in China's history--changed the country's name from Tang to Zhou. His wife warned sons to remember they were the officials of the Tang government. Before her death, she told the families her face should be covered after her death because she thought it was a shame to be the subjects of Wu Zetian's regime.

The ancient Chinese also emphasize making friends. The Chinese proverb says: "He who stays near vermilion gets stained red, and he who stays near ink gets stained black (The expression like "*jinzhuzhechi, jinmozhehei*")." Mothers in the Tang Dynasty also held this kind of opinion. They often judged the growth tendency by the types of the friends that sons made. It was a long tradition in Chinese history. Because fathers went outside for the official career or business etc., mothers had the burden of the task of educating sons naturally. Mothers remembered the founder of the Confucian's achievement connected with his mother very closely. She had a story called *Mengmusanqian*; it means when Mencius (Mengzi) was a small child, the mother moved on three times. The first two times Mencius made some improper friends in the mother's eyes because of the poor environment, so she moved to a place next to the school. Even in the education of the crown prince, mothers were very strict with sons, though the successful example was not quite many to the crown prince, but it was also very important to the country's future prosperity.

The third point of the mother's education was to train the sons to have the idea of being honest in performing one's official duties. In China, officials usually own extra great rights and it was very easy to be corrupting for the officials; even today corruption is almost becoming the incurable disease of the Mainland government. The Tang Dynasty advocated industry and thrift and the mothers realized the truth *Shuimanzeyi* (in Chinese, means water will overflow when the oven is full). It gave the official some warning that one cannot be greedy for wealth. A Chinese proverb says *Fubuguoandai*-- its meaning is that a family's richness cannot last for three generations. This taught the mothers that wealth corruption was the big enemy for the officials.

They knew it was very important to train a person's honesty from his childhood.

Finally, mother's education to sons was to train their fairness to be officials. It is referred above that officials hold great rights. For an official, it is very important to be fair in their official career, especially to judge some legal cases. It was related with the official's fame whether you were fair or not. This is one point, the other point is the love for the ordinary people (in China, it is called *Baixing*, it means hundreds of family names). Namely, in ancient China, the relation between officials and the ordinary people was just as parents and sons. According to the Confucian thought, parents should be benevolent to their children and only so children will be filial to parents. Many of the Tang Dynasty mothers were very familiar with the Confucian thought, so it was very natural for them to teach sons to be fair in social affairs.

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