

Figures Responsible for the Education of the Crown Prince — Mentors to Han Dynasty Heirs

By Sachiko Saitoh

In ancient times, the crown princes destined for the throne were kept separate from the other princes and spent their time preparing for their future role as emperor. This paper examines the figures behind the education of the crown princes to better understand their education during the Han dynasty.

In principle, during the Han dynasty, the eldest son of the empress would assume the imperial throne, although this was not always the case. Prior to the investiture of the crown prince, all imperial princes were raised within the inner palace, where they were cared for by specialist nurses known as “three mothers” (tutor, compassionate mother, and dry nurse). The tutor would teach the young crown prince etiquettes and provide basic education, the compassionate mother would provide moral guidance, and the dry nurse would look after their health. A wet nurse was also stationed in the palace for breastfeeding duties. These women operated under the supervision of the empress or empress dowager. Of these women, imperial princes tended to be most drawn to their wet nurses, and during the Eastern Han, there were often cases where former wet nurses were involved in succession matters.

Following their investiture, the crown princes would be provided with their own palace and officials, and their true education would begin. Their initial education comprised learning the six arts (rites, music, archery, chariot racing, calligraphy, and mathematics) and the six rituals (etiquettes concerning important family-related ceremonial occasions), during which mastering etiquettes (appearance and demeanor) was particularly emphasized. For academic studies, the crown princes would first learn about the “Analects of Confucius” and the “Book of Filial Piety,” followed by classics such as the “Book of Documents,” “Classic of Poetry,” “Book of Rites,” and “Spring and Autumn Annals.”

The *taizi taifu* and *taizi shaofu* were positions assigned to help develop the qualities of a ruler in the crown prince, such as political acumen, good judgments, and other character-based skills, and not to provide academic learning and refinement. In this paper, a comprehensive sampling and analysis of these two positions is conducted to explore the specific roles they played. Mentors were required to have served as either prefectural governors or ministers and were often older men in their sixties or seventies. The type of mentors that served differed greatly between the period prior to the reign of Emperor Wu and after the reign of Emperor Xuan. Prior to the reign of Emperor Wu, “elder” figures of respectfulness, conscientiousness, and sincerity tended to hold the position, rather than those of a scholarly background, acting as guardians to protect and raise the crown princes. Following the reign of Emperor Xuan, Confucian scholars began to be appointed to the positions and directly tutored the crown princes on Confucianism. During the reigns of Emperor Xuan and Emperor Yuan, however, the objectives behind the selection process varied drastically. Emperor Xuan, recognizing the

increasing prevalence of Confucianism within powerful families and the bureaucratic class, sought to lead it in a direction that would suit his political aims. The intention behind appointing Confucian scholars as mentors was to express coexistence with Confucianism to society. Therefore, he carefully selected mentors and avoided classicist and dogmatic Confucian scholars.

As a devotee of Confucianism, Emperor Yuan adopted a different approach and actively pursued dogmatic Confucian scholars who were adherents of ancient rites for the roles. These mentors instigated reforms to the traditions and rituals of the Han dynasty. This diminished imperial power and weakened the imperial family's standing in society. During the Eastern Han dynasty, which was founded upon Confucian ideology, the two mentors were required to be dignified and well-versed in political affairs in addition to being followers of Confucianism. This often resulted in the appointment of mature Confucian scholars with no radical reformist tendencies. These mentors propagated Confucianism-based politics and unwavering respect for imperial power to ensure that the heir apparent would be able to reign as the monarch of a Confucian nation.

The changes throughout both Han periods elucidate that the role of the two mentors went from being that of a "mentor" to that of a "teacher," although in both cases, it is clear that those in the position played an influential role in government both before and after the princes' enthronement.

In addition to the two mentors, many other officials were assigned to assist in the protection and carrying out of duties of the crown prince. This system was reinforced during the reign of Emperor Xuan, when maternal relatives and the children of top officials would be appointed at a young age to advise and assist the crown prince. These persons formed relationships of mutual trust with the prince over many years of service and continued to serve in important roles for the new emperor following his succession to the throne.