

## [*THE TWENTY-FOUR PARAGONS OF FILIAL PIETY* [ERSHISI XIAO]]

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### TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Filial Conduct That Impressed The Gods: Shun The Great
2. Personally Checking His Mother's Prescriptions: The Learned Emperor Of Han
3. His Heart Was Pained When His Mother Bit Her Finger: Zeng Shen
4. Clad In A Threadbare Jacket, He Tolerated His Cruel Stepmother: Min Ziqian
5. Carrying Loads Of Rice On His Back To Feed His Parents: Zi Lu
6. Entering Servitude To Pay For His Father's Funeral: Dong Yong
7. Bringing Deers' Milk To His Ailing Parents: Young Master Tan
8. Taking On Menial Labor To Support His Mother: Jiang Ge
9. Stealing Oranges To Take Home For His Mother: Lu Ji
10. Never Tiring Of Feeding Milk To Her Mother-In-Law: Lady Tang
11. Attracting Mosquitos To Drink His Blood: Wu Meng
12. Lying Down On The Ice To Get Carp For His Stepmother: Wang Xiang
13. Burying His Son To Save His Mother: Guo Ju
14. Wrestling With A Tiger To Save His Father: Yang Xiang
15. Resigning Office To Search For His Mother: Zhu Shouchang
16. Deeply Concerned, He Tasted His Father's Stool: Yu Qianlou
17. Costumes And Pranks To Amuse His Parents: Lao Laizi
18. Picking Mulberries For His Mother: Cai Shun
19. He Fanned The Pillow And Warmed the Sheets: Huang Xiang
20. A Bubbling Spring And Leaping Carp: Jiang Shi
21. Crying By The Grave When Thunder Rolled: Wang Weiyuan
22. Serving Wooden Statues Of His Parents: Ding Lan
23. Tears That Brought Bamboo Shoots From The Frozen Earth: Meng Zong
24. Personally Scrubbing His Mother's Chamber Pot: Huang Tingjian.

Appendix: Excerpt from the *Nü ershisi xiao tushuo* (Illustrated Version of the Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety for Women; Wu Jiayou, ed. [fl. 1850-1910]; Ming dynasty original)

### Preface

The book entitled *The Twenty-four Paragons of Filial Piety* was written by the Yuan Dynasty scholar Guo Jujing. His pen-name was Yizi, and he was a native of Datian County, in Fujian Province, China. Guo was not only a well-known poet, he was also a reknowned filial son in his own right. After his father passed away, Guo personally experienced the truth of the maxim:

"The tree would prefer stillness, but the wind continues to blow.

The child wishes to practice filial devotion, but his parents are already gone,"

and he felt deep grief over his loss. His depth of feeling prompted him to comb the histories in search of true stories of the finest examples of filial respect, as practiced by devoted children throughout the centuries. He selected twenty-four such paragons, and penned a verse to eulogize each authentic account of filial practice. Then he told a story of the events that lead to each son or daughter's exemplary conduct. The book that resulted from his work was called *The Twenty-four Paragons of Filial Devotion*.

## THE TWENTY-FOUR PARAGONS OF FILIAL PIETY

### Number One

#### Filial Conduct That Moved the Heart/Mind of Heaven: Shun The Great

Great Yao was an Emperor both humane and virtuous. Under his rule, the citizens of China were both obedient and harmonious. They looked up to their Emperor and treated him as respectfully as they did their own parents. Yao, however, had grown old, and decided to request his military and civilian cabinet ministers to select a wise and worthy successor, so that he could hand down the duty of ruling all of China to him. The Emperor's advisors told him, "There is a devoted filial son at Li Mountain named Shun. Although his family does not get along, he still treats them with a proper attitude of respect and affection. His father, Gu Sou, is unreasonable, and harsh. His step-mother is petty by nature, and constantly abuses and scolds her son. Shun's step-brother, Xiang, is arrogant and lazy. He is jealous of his older brother and wants to do him in. Living in such a family, Shun manages to not resent them; he behaves as a devoted son and brother should."

The ministers told the Emperor, "When his family scolds or beats him, he doesn't bear a grudge or strike back. He simply runs out into the fields where no one can see him and cries to himself. You can find this boy plowing the fields every day, and doing the planting and weeding. His father and brother never lend a hand. Shun's devotion to filial respect does, however, inspire the heavens and the earth to respond. How do we know this is true? The elephants come down from the mountains to plow the furrows for this young man; in the Spring you can see them line up and use their tusks to dig the earth. In the Summer the crows and magpies flock down to pull up the weeds with their beaks. Nature itself approves of his righteous attitude, especially in the face of hardship, as in the case of his impossible family situation."

Hearing about Shun's filial conduct inspired Emperor Yao to dispatch nine of his sons to assist Shun with the farming work. He instructed his daughters, named E Huang and Nü Ying to serve Shun as his wives. The Emperor put the young man through years of training and testing, and when he felt satisfied with his capabilities, he bestowed the throne of Emperor on him, and retired from the duties of ruling China. Under Shun's guidance, the people of China prospered. Following his virtuous influence, all creatures enjoyed peace and happiness. Such were the manifold benefits of a proper attitude of filial respect.

A verse in his honor says,

Elephants in file plow the fields in spring.  
Little birds in flocks come weed the summer grass.  
Following Emperor Yau, he took the Dragon Throne.  
His filial conduct touched the hearts of creatures under heaven.

## **Number Two**

He Personally Tested His Mother's Prescriptions: The Learned Emperor Of Han

During the Western Han Dynasty in China, after its founding patriarch Liu Bang died, the throne came by succession to his son, "Liu the Constant". He earned the name Han Wendi, "The Learned Emperor of Han". As a ruler, he practiced vigorous, just government, and he loved the citizens, moving and inspiring them to self improvement through education. State business was extremely complex and demanding of time, nonetheless he still found time to serve his mother with respectful, filial devotion. He was neither careless nor tardy in his treatment of his mother.

Once the matron suffered a serious illness and Han Wendi, as soon as he had completed the various governmental matters, would immediately leave the state chambers and return to his mother's bedside to nurse her with tender concern. She was sick for a full three years, and his care was constant and untiring. He waited on her by night and day throughout her convalescence, without relaxing his vigilance in the least. He never grumbled or resented the toil and tedium.

The Emperor's care of his mother was thorough to the last detail. He would wait by her bedside without closing his eyes, often forgetting to change his robes for long periods afraid that he might be remiss in his nursing care. As soon as the servants had prepared any dose of medicine, the Emperor would first sample the mixture himself, to make sure it was neither too hot nor too weak. As soon as it was fit to drink, he would spoon-feed the mixture himself to his mother.

Many years passed, and the Learned Emperor nursed his mother throughout. He earned the praises of all the citizens. An outstanding leader, he was also a most unusual, filially-devoted son, and set the standards of behavior towards parents. The people of China respected him, and accepted his teaching. They were deeply influenced and transformed by his model of virtue. The people in their turn, practiced filial respect towards their parents, and treated them well. The Learned Emperor's name, Han Wendi, has passed down through a thousand ages to the present-- people still admire his model of virtuous, selfless conduct.

A verse in his honor says,

Both filial and humane, he was known throughout the land.  
Awesome as a leader, he ruled the Hundred Kings.  
For three long years he nursed his ailing mother, the Empress,  
Duty-bound, he tasted every medicine she took.

## **Number Three**

His Heart Was Pained When His Mother Bit Her Finger: Zeng Shen

During the Spring and Autumn Period of Chinese history, there lived a student of Confucius, Zeng Shen, who became well-known for his filial attitude of respect. His father passed away while Shen was still young. He was extremely respectful and obedient to his mother. Every day the young man would go into the mountains to cut firewood; his mother would stay home and weave cloth to sell. Mother and son had to work hard to earn enough to get by.

One day Zeng Shen set out early for the mountains. A guest who had traveled a long distance arrived at the Zeng household that very morning. The family being poor, there was nothing with which to entertain the guest, and no way to properly welcome him. As Zeng Shen was not at home, his mother did not know what to do, and she could only hope that her son would return soon from the mountains.

The boy did not show up, and Mrs. Zeng grew agitated. Without realizing what she was doing, she put her finger into her mouth and bit it. In her nervousness, she bit her finger so hard that it bled. Zeng Shen, in the mountains, suddenly felt a stinging pain in his heart, and knew there must be something amiss with his mother. He quickly bundled up the brush and kindling and ran back down the mountain.

Arriving before his mother, he knelt in the doorway and asked her what was the matter. Relieved and happy, she said, "A guest has come and I was so upset that I bit my finger. You must be a truly respectful child that you can know your mother's thoughts from a distance!"

A verse in his praise says,

His mother bit her finger, her son's heart felt the pain.  
He bundled up the firewood And ran home just in time.  
What age has ever witnessed deeper ties of filial love  
Than the depth of shared between this mother and her son?

#### **Number Four**

Clad In A Threadbare Jacket, He Tolerated His Cruel Stepmother: Min Ziqian

Confucius's disciple, Min Ziqian was foremost in filial respect. His mother died early, and his father remarried, but to a woman who mistreated her stepson. Because he was not her natural child, she gave him only cruel words and harsh treatment. Min Ziqian often went cold and hungry, and suffered from loneliness, as his stepmother gave all her love and attention to her own two sons.

When the weather turned cold, the second Mrs. Min made her two sons warm coats padded with warm cotton linings. She gave Min Ziqian a coat stuffed only with dry rushes. From the outside the two coats looked alike, but the one stuffed with reeds was not warm at all. It neither blocked the biting wind, nor kept out the stinging cold. His only jacket being so thin, Min Ziqian was always shivering and miserable in the cold.

One icy winter day, Min Ziqian's father had business in town, and told the boy to fetch the horse and cart from the stable. The evening air was frigid, the wind blew hard, and the young boy was so cold that his entire body trembled. His hands and feet were frozen to the point of immobility. His numb fingers dropped the cart reins, and his father scolded him for his clumsiness.

In his anger the man grabbed Ziqian's coat-sleeve and ripped it from the jacket, revealing the dried grass lining. He was shocked at the sight of the flimsy jacket that could not protect his son from the cold. Mr. Min suddenly recognized the pattern of cruel treatment his wife had given his boy. He understood at once the injustice of her harshness, and it infuriated him so that he flew into a rage.

He ran back into the house, yelling at the top of his lungs for his wife. She appeared and cowered before him on her knees. He angrily ordered her to leave the house and never return. Min Ziqian knelt beside his stepmother and begged his father to give her another chance. He pleaded for leniency. "When my mother is here only one boy has to suffer the cold. But if she goes, then three sons will have no one to care for them. Please, Father, let her stay!"

At this, his stepmother cried piteously in deep shame. She was so deeply touched that her attitude totally changed. She turned over a new leaf, and ever after treated Min Ziqian as lovingly as she did her own sons.

A verse in his honor says,

Mr. Min, the widower, has a worthy son;  
Who never grudged his second mother's hateful, wicked ways.  
"Keep her here at home!", he begged, while kneeling by the cart.  
"Or else three boys will suffer from the biting wind and frost."

Carrying Loads of Rice to Feed His Parents: Zi Lu

### **Number Five**

Confucius's disciple, Zi Lu, was born to the Jung family during the

Zhou Dynasty. His given name was You, and he was a most filial, devoted son. His family was poor, and the boy had to dig wild greens and roots from the fields in order to feed himself. Because he wished his parents to have adequate, suitable food, he had to travel long miles, out of the poverty-stricken neighborhood, where so many families were forced to forage for their meals, in order to find a wage-paying job.

You would rise long before dawn every week, and lay aside enough dried fruits, roots, and vegetables for his parents' table that week, and then make a lengthy, dangerous trip into the neighboring states, seeking work. He would often travel over one hundred miles, earning what money he could, in order to buy rice and staples for his household. Then shouldering the sack of provisions, he would run back the many miles, arriving in time to cook up a nourishing meal for the Jung elders. When the bag was empty, he would tie up his leggings and set off once more for

the market towns. While his parents remained on earth, Zi Lu would spare no effort to treat them with proper filial respect. Everyone considered him an unusually good-hearted example of true filial service.

After his parents died, the young man left his native land for the country of Chu in the south. The king of Chu was impressed with Jung You's learning, and with his righteous character, and offered him a post in the civil service. Zi Lu accepted, and soon grew quite wealthy, drawing a handsome salary and rich side benefits for his able leadership of state affairs. Whenever he went riding in his silk-lined carriage, a retinue of one hundred chariots flanked the royal coach on four sides. His personal storehouses of grains, cloth, books, and silver covered an acre of land. Woolen blankets and thick rugs adorned his personal quarters in luxury. His dinner table was set with fine and rare delicacies.

Despite the life of affluent comfort, Zi Lu in his heart constantly pined for the days of his youth, when he was able to serve his mother and father. He would often sigh, "This wealth and honor is flavorless, and depressing. How I wish I could return to the old days, when I ate field-greens and carried rice on my back for Mom and Dad. How happy I was in those days!. Now that my parents have left this world I can no longer fulfill my duty as a filial son ...."

A verse in his honor says,

The rice bag on his back holds a rare treat for his parents;  
Without a murmur of fatigue he ran those many miles.  
Glory, wealth, and honor, once his parents had passed on,  
Meant nothing: he only thought of the happy days gone by.

## **Number Six**

Entering Servitude To Pay For Father's Funeral: Dong Yong

Dong Yong lived during the Han Dynasty, and as his mother had passed away years ago, he scratched out a meager living to support his ailing father. Dong Yong found work as a farm laborer, and earned barely enough to keep his father in medicine. The old man was an invalid, so Dong Yong would carry him to a cart and tenderly wheel the eider to the shade of a tall tree beside the field where he was working. In this way he was able to keep his job and also nurse his father at the same time. Several years passed in this fashion, but then the senior Dong died, and Dong Yong, having spent the last penny for last-minute medical care, found himself unable to pay for a proper funeral. All he could do to scrape together sufficient funds for a coffin and mourners was to sell himself into bondage as indentured servant, with the promise to repay the bond-moneys in the future.

Having sent off the coffin, the young man headed for his owner's house. A pretty girl met him on the road, and told him her story, how both her parents had passed away, and how she couldn't locate her relatives in the area. She said she hoped that Dong Yong would be kind enough to take her in, so that she could have some security and reliance. He found no objection and the two of them asked Heaven and Earth to be witnesses as they pledged their troth then and there.

Together they entered the home of Dong Yong's indentured Master, an extremely miserly weaver. He read the labor contract to the couple, and demanded three hundred bolts of perfect cloth to redeem the freedom of Dong Yong. The young man was not afraid of hard work, but figured out that if man and wife co-operated and joined their strength, it would take at least three years of labor before the task could be completed. To Dong Yong's complete surprise, the new bride wove all three hundred bolts of cloth in less than one month! The weaving boss was even more astonished when the young couple handed over the perfect fabric and, contract in hand, gaily walked out the door to freedom.

They strolled past the tree where they had first met, and his wife suddenly fell silent. Her countenance glowed with an uncanny light, and Dong Yong asked her to explain her demeanor. "I now have my freedom, you should be happy!" Tears ran down her face as she said, "I am an Immortal from the heavens. Your heart of filial respect is so noble that I was touched, and came down to this world to assist you in your task. But now I must return, I am not able to stay with you. Take good care of yourself."

Dong Yong couldn't bear to part with her, but how could he prevent an Immortal from the heavens from returning when the time was up? Helplessly he watched his wife slowly ascend into the sky and fly away.

A verse in his honor says,

His father's funeral sent him into servitude,  
A maiden charming and immortal, met him on the way.  
They wove the cloth that ransomed back his freedom,  
His filial conduct touched even Heaven.

## **Number Seven**

### **Bringing Deer's Milk To His Ailing Parents: Young Master Tan**

During China's Spring and Autumn Period, there was a filial son in the Tan family whose name has not been recorded. People simply referred to him as Young Master Tan, or Tanzi. While he was quite young, both his parents came down with an eye disease that the doctors said could only be cured by giving them deer's milk to drink. As the family was very poor, and milk was both rare and expensive, the young lad was upset and worried that he would be unable to provide the medicine that could cure his mother and father. Wandering out in the mountains, he pondered the situation, but couldn't come up with a solution. There in the meadow before him, a herd of deer grazed. The does stood patiently while the spring's crop of young fawns frolicked and ran, then returned to their mothers to nurse on milk.

"That's it!" exclaimed Master Tan. "I'll get my folks deer's milk!" The next morning, dressed in a deer's skin, with head, tail and fur, Tanzi set off for the mountain meadow, bucket in hand. When the young deer ran, Tanzi ran beside them. When they grazed, he stood and grazed. When they came to the does for milk, Tanzi nursed too, only the milk went into his bucket, not into his stomach.

When the day was over, Tanzi carefully walked back down the mountain, carrying a full bucket of milk, delighted with the success of his plan. His parents were overjoyed to have deer's milk to drink, and praised their clever, considerate, and resourceful boy. The next day, Young Master Tan returned to the meadow and again played with the fawns, and again returned home at sunset with a bucket of milk. So it continued for weeks, and his parents began to recover their sight, thanks to their filial son's dutiful sacrifice on the mountainside.

One day as Tanzi was playing amid the young deer, the herd leaders suddenly bleated, picked up their white tails, and ran for the trees. The herd followed in fear, leaving Tan Dz alone in the middle of the meadow. He looked towards the path and saw why the deer had fled. A fierce-looking hunter, bow in hand, stood in the shade, prepared to shoot some venison.

Arrows began to zip past Tanzi's ears, their deadly whistle much too close for comfort. The boy quickly stood up, threw back his deer-skin cloak and loudly shouted, "I'm a person, not a deer. Don't shoot!" The hunter was shocked. "Hey, Boy, what are you doing here in the woods! I nearly killed you! Why are you dressed up like that?"

Tanzi answered, "My parents are sick and need deer's milk to drink in order to recover. I come here to milk the does, disguised as a deer." Deeply impressed, the hunter said softly, "You are certainly a rare child, to go to so much trouble for your parents. But this is dangerous! If you had waited one minute longer to reveal your identity, I would have shot you down. Be more careful in the future!" After this warning, the hunter escorted Young Master Tan safely out of the forest and back home.

A verse in his honor says,

His parents needed milk, their eyes to cure,  
He robed his body in a suit of fur.  
If he had failed to shout aloud, "Don't shoot!"  
The hunter would have killed him for a deer.

## **Number Eight**

Laboring For His Mother: Jiang Ge

During the Later Han Dynasty, a filial son named Jiang Ge supported his widowed mother. As his father had passed on years ago, the son and mother got along as best they could. Bandit gangs roamed the countryside nearby, and Jiang Ge resolved to take his mother to safety, far from the chaos and trouble of his home. Having no cart or horse, the young man simply carried his mother on his back along the highway, escaping the onslaught of the brigands. As luck would have it they promptly ran into first one, then another group of rebels. When the leaders demanded that Jiang Ge join their number, the young filial son knelt down and pleaded for mercy, crying, "If I run off with you, my old mother will starve. She needs me to take care of her; please let us travel on in peace."



Touched by his sincere plea, the bandits would always let them go. Traveling in this way, the two eventually reached the county of Xiabi in Jiangsu province. They had spent all their money, and their clothing had grown tattered and torn beyond repair. Lacking relatives in Jiangsu to support them, mother and son could only fashion a lean-to of grass and camp out with the other refugees from the civil war to the North.

Jiang Ge would go out each morning in search of odd jobs. Whatever bits of cash he earned would go to supporting his mother in the style she was accustomed to before her husband had passed on. Jiang Ge wore ragged clothes and went barefoot, he ate wild greens and broken rice himself, but the clothing and food he provided for his mother was the finest he could afford. He was not the least bit remiss in the care of his mother. Their neighbors praised his selflessness in service to his mother, and urged him to relax the ascetic hardship he imposed upon himself. Jiang Ge would only smile, and say, "A son's duty is to care for his parents."

At long last he found a secure, salary-paying job that promised a comfortable living for his mother. Peace had returned to their home-land by this time, and his mother wished to return. The ride in a horse-drawn cart would have proved too strenuous for her, so Jiang Ge passed over the good job that could have brought him a luxurious life. Instead he found a sturdy cart, settled his mother comfortably within, and pulled it himself all the way back home. Good people all along the way praised his devotion as a genuine model of filial compliance.

A verse in his praise says,

Bearing mother on his back, he fled the troubled land.  
Evil bandits caught them on the road.  
A plea for mercy saved their lives, as always,  
He labored hard to treat his mother well.

## **Number Nine**

Stealing Oranges To Take Home For His Mother: Lu Ji

In the Later Han Period, a young boy of only six years old showed a deep filial regard for his mother. He traveled with his father to visit the Chief Minister of Nan Yang, named Yuan Shu. Elder Yuan Shu saw how precocious the young boy was, and ordered his butler to bring a dish of oranges to offer to young Lu Ji. The boy saw the delicious, large fruit, and immediately ate two. He waited until nobody was looking, and secreted three oranges away in the sleeve of his robe. When it was time to say good-bye, along with his father, little Lu Ji raised his hands up in salute. Unexpectedly, the three oranges came rolling out, and fell to the floor in front of Lu Ji.

Yuan Shu saw the oranges and laughed: "Little Brother, you're my guest today. How come you stole your host's oranges?" The little boy replied, "Pardon me, my mother likes oranges best of all. Because we don't have any money, it's hard to provide oranges for her. Today I enjoyed two of these ripe, sweet, oranges, and I could not resist taking a few of them back for Mother. She likes them so much."

Minister Yuan Shu was impressed by the six-year-old's concern for his mother's happiness. He told his staff to give the entire plate of fruit to Lu Ji for his family.

A verse in his honor says:

Filial love and brotherhood made nature "Heaven-True",  
Most rare in a boy just six years old.  
He hid three oranges in his sleeve, as a gift for his Mom,  
Just a token to repay her kindness without end.

### **Number Ten**

Never Tiring of Feeding Her Mother-in-law Milk: Lady Tang

In the Tang Dynasty, an official named Cui Nanshan, had in his family the Grand Dame Zhang Sun, Mr. Cui's great-grandmother. She was quite elderly, and had lost all her teeth, thus she could not chew even soft rice. Eating was a big problem. Mr. Tswei's grandmother, the Lady Tang, realized the difficulty her mother-in-law had in chewing food, and thus hit upon a solution to keep the Grand Dame alive and in good health. The Lady Tang would wake up each morning, perform her daily toilet of washing her face and combing her hair, then she would enter her mother-in-law's chambers and proceed to feed her breast-milk from her own body. The elderly matron had no trouble digesting this nutriment, and thus thanks to her daughter-in-law, even though she could not eat normal food, her body stayed strong and healthy.

One day she fell ill, and knowing that her life was about to reach its natural end, she summoned all her generations of descendants into her room and told them, "All these years I have been looked after by my daughter-in-law. She has treated me most kindly, and I am deeply grateful to her. I only hope that the wives of all my children and grandchildren will be as considerate and proper in their filial devotion as she has been towards me."

When the family heard her final words, they were deeply impressed, and ever after, used the Grand Dame Jang Sun's advice as the motto of the household. The teaching was passed down and cherished through the many generations of the Tswei family.

A verse in her honor says,

Out of deep respect for the Tswei Family's matron,  
After morning toilet she would feed the Grand Dame milk.  
Kindness such as this is difficult to repay;  
May every generation of descendants be so kind!

### **Number Eleven**

Attracting Mosquitoes To Drink His Blood: Wu Meng

In the Jin Dynasty, a filial eight-year-old boy named Wu Meng served his parents with devoted compliance. His family was extremely poor and could not afford mosquito netting. On hot summer nights the mosquitoes would come swarming in as thick as smoke. The little boy would remove his shirt and let the insects land on his bare skin. He would watch them drink their fill of his blood, and fly away; he wouldn't raise a hand to shoo them off, no matter how painfully they stung him. Wu Meng wasn't a fool, so why didn't he brush the bugs away?

He knew that his parents had no netting at their bedside. If he drove the mosquitoes away from his body, they would surely fly over and wake up his mother and father with their stinging. So the devoted son simply let the mosquitoes drink his blood instead. So that his parents wouldn't know about his sacrifice and demand that he stop, the boy would wake up earlier than they, slip his shirt over his swollen torso, and return to his own bed. But one morning, being tired from loss of sleep, he forgot to wake up and pull on his shirt. His father arose and found his son asleep by his bed. He looked at the boy's pathetic, mosquito-bitten skin that was covered with red welts, and understood immediately what Wu Meng had done. Mr. Wu woke up his wife and told her the story. The two parents, deeply moved by their son's unselfish concern for them, began to cry. They were so touched, their sounds of sobbing could be heard by the neighbors. From all sides the neighbors gathered to investigate the matter, and learned about Wu Meng's sacrifice on behalf of his parents.

Everyone thought that the boy's attitude of filial respect was most remarkable, especially for one only eight years old. Someone reported the incident to the local magistrate, who wrote a memorandum to the Dragon Throne, to inform the imperial court. The matter thus came to the attention of the Emperor, who rewarded Wu Meng with a scholarship to the academy. Further, he gave the family a set of mosquito nets and a stipend, so that they never again lacked the necessities of life.

A verse in his honor says,

Summer nights and no mosquito netting!  
Insects by the thousands, yet he wouldn't raise a hand.  
"Let them drink my blood and fill their bellies,  
Just don't disturb my parents while they sleep!"

## **Number Twelve**

Lying Down On The Ice to Fetch Carp For His Stepmother: Wang Xiang

During the Jin Dynasty, a young boy named Wang Xiang (Wang the Lucky) lost his mother to illness. His father took another wife so that the boy would have maternal care. His stepmother, however, was a bad-tempered, evil-natured woman, who took a dislike to her stepson, and often berated him in front of his father. This went on incessantly, and eventually, she managed to turn Lucky Wang's father against the boy. Despite this hardship, Lucky Wang remained devoted in his filial regard for them both.

One winter it was unusually cold, and snow fell for many days. The snow piled up on all sides of the house, and the small creek nearby froze solid with ice. The severe weather forced the family indoors, and all the animals found shelter wherever they could. The world outdoors was a broad blanket of white. Wang Xiang's stepmother took sick. She craved medicine, and her thoughts fixed on the image of fresh fish. She demanded fresh carp as medicine to cure her illness. As it was still snowing, and everywhere the rivers had long since frozen solid, where could fresh fish be found? Lucky Wang was a dutiful son, however, and could not bear seeing his parents unhappy.

He forced his way out into the cold and walked to the creek side to see what he could do. The snow was piled deep, and the boy shivered in the cold. He looked and looked, but found no access to running water. Tired and disappointed, he sat down on the ice and lamented his failure to find fish to cure his mother. Having no way to solve the problem, he simply let his tears flow. An idea came to him as he cried, and having no recourse, in his desperation, he removed his coat and shirt, and lay down on the ice amid his hot tears. The more he cried, the more upset he got. The more upset he got, the more his tears flowed. Before long, his body heat and the avidly expanding puddle of tears melted a hole in the ice. Two carp that had been frozen into the river-water suddenly leaped up out of the crack in the ice and flopped onto the bank. Amazed and delighted, Wang Xiang scooped them up and carried them home to his ailing mother.

Seeing the two live fish, Wang Xiang's stepmother felt thoroughly ashamed of her selfishness. Afterwards, she changed her attitude towards her stepson, and became a kind and caring person. Many people said that Wang Xiang's response came from his sincere filial devotion. His noble attitude moved Nature into giving him a reward.

A verse in his honor says,

Stepmothers abound on this earth,  
But rare are sons like Lucky Wang.  
Even now when the river freezes over,  
We recall his icy sacrifice for Mother.

### **Number Thirteen**

Burying His Son To Save His Mother: Guo Ju

Guo Ju lived during the Han Dynasty with his wife, his aging mother, and their three-year-old son. The household was extremely poor, and the four of them often found it difficult to make ends meet. There was rarely enough food to go around. The grandmother, being fond of the baby, would often take her scanty portion of food and feed it to her grandson. She never got enough nutrition and frequently went hungry. As the baby grew, the elderly woman's health deteriorated, and before long, she fell sick.

Since Guo Ju could afford neither nutritious food nor medicine to heal his mother, his heart felt great consternation. He discussed the situation with his wife, saying, "We are unfilial children. We can't feed our mother properly, and now she is sick! What are we going to do?" His wife had no solution. Guo Ju couldn't sleep at night, wrestling with his problem. His heart was agitated and upset.

In desperation, finally he resolved to part with his own son, in order to serve his first allegiance, his mother, in proper fashion, during the final days of her life. "Perhaps we can have more children in the future," he told his wife, "but mother in her old age deserves our best offerings and care. Don't you agree?"

Guo Ju's wife, although she loved her infant son, was also a devoted filial daughter. Nodding her head and weeping with grief, she agreed to go along with the heart-rending solution to their problem. The two of them carried the infant into the back yard, and with a planter's hoe, Guo Ju dug a hole in the earth. Before he had dug down three feet, he heard a loud thunk! and felt something solid beneath the hoe-blade. He dug more carefully, and unearthed a sturdy metal chest. Opening the cover, to their astonishment, they discovered a pile of golden coins and silver bars, worth a king's ransom. "Oh, look!" the husband and wife exclaimed. Written on top of the casket was a sentence: "A gift to the filial son Guo Ju."

The couple took the fortune in gold to the local magistrate, but owing to the inscription on the lid, and the unusual circumstances surrounding its appearance, the government officials returned the money to the husband and wife. Guo Ju promptly found a doctor and medicine for his mother, and was able to keep his son alive. The family ever after had sufficient supply of life's necessities and enjoyed the blessings due to filial children.

A verse in his honor says,

Guo Ju wished to serve his aging mother;  
He buried his son, so that she might live,  
The gods rewarded him with golden coins;  
Their brilliant gleam lit up his humble hut.

## **Number Fourteen**

Wrestling With A Tiger To Save His Father: Yang Xiang

In the time of the Jin Dynasty, a boy of fourteen years, named Yang Xiang used to follow his father to work in the fields each day. One morning as they climbed down to the paddies to harvest rice, from out of nowhere a large, striped tiger appeared before them. The tiger scooped up Yang Xiang's father in its mouth and headed back to the forest. "Save me! Save me!" cried the boy's father. Hearing his pathetic wails, Yang Xiang anxiously looked for his Father. He saw the big cat carrying the old man away. With no thought but to rescue his father from mortal danger, and completely forgetting about his own safety, the boy ran headlong after the tiger. He leapt up on the tiger's back and using every ounce of strength, he choked the animal tightly by the throat.. Throttled in a death-grip by Yang Xiang, the tiger fought for its breath. He had to

drop the man he carried in his fangs. Frightened by the ferocity of the young boy's attack, the tiger put its tail between its legs and ran for its life.

Saved from death's door, Yang Xiang's father was in shock, but otherwise unhurt. Yang Xiang watched the tiger disappear into the forest, and then carried his father back home to recover. When news of the incident reached the neighbors, they heaped praise on the boy, calling him a heroic, filial child.

A verse in his praise says,

In the wilds they met the fierce white jaws.  
Yang Xiang punched hard, and choked the smelly beast.  
Delivered to safety were father and devoted son:  
Snatched back alive from the tiger's mouth.

### **Number Fifteen**

Resigning Office to Search For His Mother: Zhu Shouchang

A man of the Song Dynasty named Zhu Shouchang lost his mother at age seven in this way: His mother was a concubine, and his father's first wife, consumed by jealousy over the concubine's favor with her husband, drove the woman out of the house, thereby cutting off contact between Shouchang and his mother. The boy went to live with his father and step-mother from age seven on.

Zhu Shouchang grew up and served the Song Dynasty's "Celestial Ruler" (Shenzong) as an official. Suddenly one day he felt an overwhelming impulse to find his real mother and take care of her in proper style. This impulse continued to grow, until he had to quit his post in the civil service and set off in search of her. His filial quest lead him through torrential rains and gale winds, as he traveled on, asking everybody he met for news of his mother. Although he found no trace of her, meeting nothing but mis information or ignorance, the young man never gave up hope, but only deepened the sincerity of his single-minded quest.

One day a man told him that his mother lived nearby, in Tongzhou, on the banks of the Unity River in modern-day Shanxi province. Delighted with the news, Shouchang hurried on to Unity River, and arrived after enduring great toil and suffering. Having traveled so fast, he fainted by the roadside near the outskirts of town. A crowd soon gathered, and someone handed the man a cup of ginger tea, to revive him. The townspeople asked, "Where are you from?" "What is your business that you overexerted this way?"

He told the whole story to the crowd, and related all that he had experienced in search of his mother. From the midst of the throng stepped an old woman. "You are my son! I haven't seen you for fifty years!" cried the lady, her voice choked with tears of joy. The weary traveler, having realized his heart's desire, happily embraced his mother and shortly thereafter, took her home to care for her properly.

A verse in his honor says,

He said good-bye to Mama at age seven,  
He served the land with skill for fifty years.  
One day he wished to see his long-lost mother,  
His journey done, they both wept joyful tears.

### **Number Sixteen**

With Deep Concern, Tasting His Father's Stool: Yu Qianlou [NB: In some versions of the *Ershisi xiao* Yu is credited with cutting flesh from his own body to give to his father as a kind of filial medicine.]

Qianlou lived during the Period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, in the state of Qi. He rose to office and served as the governor of Jianling for only ten days, when for no apparent reason, as he worked in the capital, he broke out in a cold sweat, and his heart palpitated, and would not stop.

"Do you suppose there is a problem at home?" he wondered. Being devoted son, the duties at home always sat foremost on his mind. Immediately he resigned his office and hurried home. After arriving he discovered that as he had feared, his father had suddenly been stricken with a strange illness that the doctors could not diagnose. "If you want to know your father's prognosis and chances of recovering, you must test his stool. If it is sweet-tasting, then the malady is serious, and chronic. If it tastes bitter, then the problem is acute, and short-term," said the doctor. Lacking any sophisticated testing procedure, the physician advised Yu Qianlou that he would have to taste the old man's excrement to determine whether he could quickly recover from the disease. Qianlou promptly sampled the stool and to his dismay, found it sweet-tasting.

That night, in desperation, he lit a stick of incense and knelt before the family altar, and prayed to Polaris, the Pole Star. "If my father can recover his health, I will offer up my life in exchange for his. Take me and let him live," he vowed. After news of Yu Qianlou's courageous oath got around, the family and neighbors all praised him as a truly extraordinary, filial child.

A verse in his honor says:

He served in office but a few brief days,  
When father caught a strange and awful disease.  
Qianlou looked North, and bowed to star Polaris,  
"Take me instead!," he vowed from bended knees.

### **Number Seventeen**

Costumes and Pranks To Amuse His Parents: Lao Laizi

During the Spring and Autumn Period there lived a filial son named Old Master Lai (Lao Laizi). From his youth he had always been most respectful and obedient towards his parents. He obeyed

their wishes, and even took special care of their innermost thoughts, so concerned was his heart in serving them as a dutiful son. At age seventy he still earnestly made offerings to the elderly couple, who had reached such a lengthy life span due to his filial devotion. He kept them warm in winter, cool in summer, and fed them soft foods, that were easy to digest in their toothless mouths. Old Master Lai, wanting to keep his parents' spirits high, never mentioned the word "old" in their hearing. When he overheard the old friends lamenting one day, "Look at our son, he's already in his dotage! Surely our own days must be drawing to a close!", his heart could not endure the helpless feelings that arose. "I must find a way to lighten their hearts!" he vowed. Determined to keep his parents from lamenting over their increasing years, he hit upon a plan.

Old Master Lai dressed up in the costume of a young child at the circus, or imitate the walk and manner of a mischievous boy at play. He would paint on comic opera make-up and carry a flower drum, horse-playing and cutting comic antics in front of his delighted parents' eyes. To tickle their funny-bone he would take a toy in hand and mimic a child's nonsense prattle, singing and dancing, and falling in a heap. Sometimes he would carry a pole into the sitting room that balanced two full buckets of water. Singing a silly tune he would trip up on purpose, sending water showering over the floor and soaking his foolish-looking wig and face-powder. His ridiculous show never failed to send the old folks into gales of laughter. Playing the fool always dispelled his elders' Periods of melancholy, and made them happy for days. Even though he was not a youngster, he was able to dutifully care for the physical health and mental well-being of his seniors. This was his first priority in life.

Lao Laizi's filial devotion impressed all who heard of it, and he received unreserved praise as an unusual example of perfect respect and proper affection.

A verse in his honor says,

He cut a comic caper, and played the merry fool,  
The Spring breeze fluttered his flower-drum gown.  
The old folks laughed with toothless glee;  
The sounds of their delight filled the air with joy.

## **Number Eighteen**

Picking Mulberries For His Mother: Cai Shun

During the Han Dynasty, there lived a devoted son named Cai Shun, whose father passed away when the boy was quite young. He and his mother relied on each other to survive the days and years. Wang Mang had just usurped the throne at that time, and the entire country was in great commotion, suffering a famine, a drought, and a civil war in progress all at once. The people suffered from these dire calamities, many families starved, and those who could manage to do so, were forced into the fields to forage wild plants and roots for food. Often, decent men turned to banditry and robbery, just to pass this time of hardship. The roads were infested with gangs of thieves; the forests were havens for the homeless and the desperate.



One day Cai Shun took two wicker baskets out into the woods to gather mulberries for his mother. Beneath the trees he ran into two wicked looking robbers. They were carrying long sharp swords and their faces were cruel and dark.

"Hey kid, don't you want to live? How do you dare invade the big Boss's territory?" shouted the biggest of the bandits. Little Cai Shun was scared speechless. The smaller bandit looked closely at the boy's work, planning to eat anything of value. "Child, why are you tossing that fruit into two baskets?" Cai Shun answered in a trembling voice: "The black mulberries are riper and sweeter. I give those to my mother. The red ones are not ripe, but sour. Those I eat myself, sir. I hope you two gentlemen will not kill me or else my mother won't have anybody to look after her."

The boy's earnest simplicity and honest answer touched the two thugs' heart of compassion. Remembering their own parents' suffering, they decided not to harm Cai Shun. Instead they supplied him with food and drink, and released him back to his mother.

A verse in his praise says:

The black mulberries went to feed his mother,  
Whose blouse was stained with tears from hunger's pain;  
The red-browed thugs heard his filial thoughts:  
Then gave him meat and rice and set him free.

## **Number Nineteen**

He Fanned the Pillows and Warmed the Sheets: Huang Xiang

During the Han Dynasty, a nine-year-old boy named Huang Xiang became famous as a model of filial service to his father. His mother had just died, and the young boy noticed that his father was wasting away with grief and loneliness. He resolved to make it his business to cheer up his father. After making that decision, there was no job in the house too troublesome for him, and he performed his chores with vigorous, positive energy. His only concern was to spare his father worry and anxiety. While the elder Hwang read by the light of a candle, Huang Xiang, in the sticky heat of the summer's evening would fan the pillows, so that they would be cool when his father went to sleep.

In wintertime, when the freezing winds and drifting snow turned the world to ice, the little boy would first hop into his father's bed to warm up the blankets. Then he would call his father in to come sleep in the cozy nest he had made. Mr. Huang was deeply touched by his son's considerate treatment, and his mind was greatly calmed. To have such a rare person as his son, who spared no details in serving as a dutiful child, was certainly a blessing. The story of Huang Xiang's behavior spread far and wide. Eventually his reputation as an exemplary filial son reached everyone in the land. "There's no one to compare with Huang Xiang anywhere", was a verse that could be heard throughout China.

The magistrate of Jiangxia, named Liu Hu, heard of a nine-year-old filial child in his district who understood the principles of filial respect, and made a special petition to the Imperial Court for recognition of Huang Xiang. How glorious and noteworthy was Huang Xiang's filial regard!

A verse in his honor says,

In winter months he warmed the sheets just right;  
And fanned the pillows on hot summer nights.  
In knowing how to be a filial son,  
In all these years, Huang Xiang's still number one.

### **Number Twenty**

A Bubbling Spring and Leaping Carp: Jiang Shi and His Wife

Jiang Shi was a filial son who lived during China's Han Dynasty. He and his wife were both devoted to serving his aged mother. The elder woman had a curious habit in that she didn't like to drink well-water. She preferred river-water, because the rapid current of the river produced cleaner water, and the flavor was much improved over well-water.

The nearest river was over six miles from the family home. Jiang Shi's wife volunteered to travel the distance every day with bucket in hand to carry back fresh river-water for her mother-in law. No one ever heard her complain of the trouble involved; she was glad to serve the mother of her husband.

Jiang Shi's mother also enjoyed eating fresh fish. On order to comply with her wishes, the husband and wife would bring back fresh fish from the river as well, and then prepare it the way she liked it. Further, they would invite in all the elderly women from the neighborhood to enjoy the meal, so that their mother would have company with her dinner.

The two filial children passed many years in this way, and they never expressed dislike or resentment over the toil. One day a spring gushed up right behind the house, and its flavor was just like that of running river-water. Strange as it may seem, two carp would leap out of the spring each day, as if waiting for Jiang Shi's wife to gather them in for the meal. Ever after, the couple did not have to travel so far to serve their mother, and without as much tiring effort, they could still bring her river-water and fresh fish.

A verse in their honor says,

The son delights in his filial regard;  
The daughter, too, finds service not too hard;  
Every morning carp came leaping out  
Of the sweet-dew spring in their back yard.

### **Number Twenty-one**

## Crying By the Grave When Thunder Rolled: Wang Pu

Wang Pu (Wang Weiyuan) was a filial son who lived during the Three Kingdoms Period. His mother dreaded the sound of thunder-claps. Every time the sky filled with dark clouds and rain was on the way, Wang Pu would run to his mother's side to comfort her and to calm her fears. If her son was not at her side, the old woman felt unbearable alarm.

After his mother passed on, Wang Pu buried her in a neighboring graveyard. Even though the old lady was no longer alive, every time a storm approached, and it appeared that lightning was coming, he would run to the graveside and kneel by his mother's tombstone with tears running down his cheeks. "Don't cry Mother, your son is nearby!", he would call, just as if his mother was alive. As long as the storm lasted, the man remained near the grave, circling around it countless times, to protect his mother's spirits and keep her from fear.

Later when he taught school, every time he read a passage that mentioned the emotion felt by devoted sons and daughters for their departed parents, Wang Pu's own feelings would overflow, and he would cry with deep longing. Seeing this behavior, his students would carefully remove any texts that talked about the tender feelings of children for their parents. Wang Pu always emphasized in his lessons the necessity of repaying the kindness of one's parents while they are still alive. He was considered a model of filial behavior, and his constant regard for his departed mother moved the hearts of all those who witnessed it.

A verse in his honor says:

His mother dreaded most the sound of thunder-claps;  
He knelt beside the bed to calm her fears;  
Still he hurries to her grave and circles 'round,  
Each time a rumbling thunder-storm appears.

## Number Twenty-two

### Serving Wooden Statues Of His Parents: Ding Lan

During the Han Dynasty a young man named Ding Lan lost both his parents at an early age, before he knew how to serve them properly. After growing to adulthood, he longed to pay proper filial regard to mother and father, but as they had left the world, he could not get his wish. He hit upon a plan that would allow him to fulfill his filial duties: he gave a large piece of fine-quality wood to a craftsman and asked him to carve it into the images of his parents. The artisan fashioned two statues that satisfactorily captured the likeness of Ting's mother and father.

When the images were done, Ding Lan reverently placed them in the living-room altar. Every day, morning and evening without fail, he would offer up incense, bow, and ask after the well-being of the statues. After he married, Ding Lan would lead his wife before the altar twice each day and perform the same ceremony of offerings to his departed elders.

His wife grew weary of the tedious ritual, and one day, out of boredom, when Ding Lan was not home, pricked the hand of one of the small wooden carvings, just to play a joke. Who could have guessed that the statue's hand would bleed! The sight of real blood dripping from the image on the altar frightened his wife out of her wits.

Ding Lan returned home and bowed before the images as usual, and noticed the eyes of one of the statues were filled with tears. Marveling at this state, he looked closer and saw a trickle of blood running down the tiny hand. He demanded an explanation from his wife. She shamefully admitted her little joke, and how she had pricked the statue's hand with a needle. Ding Lan blew up in anger, and calling his wife an unfilial wretch, he threw her out of the house and, got a divorce!

A verse in his honor says,

Wooden statues of his parents,  
Carved to look as if alive.  
Pay heed, all good sons and daughters:  
Serve your parents while you can!

### **Number Twenty-three**

Tears That Brought Bamboo-shoots From the Frozen Earth: Meng Zong

Meng Zong lived during the Three Kingdoms Period of China's past. His father died when he was young, and he and his mother struggled to survive. One winter his mother was stricken with a serious illness, and craved some bamboo-shoot broth as medicine. But in the depths of winter, with snow and ice blanketing the ground, where was anyone to find fresh bamboo shoots, shoots that emerge only in the warm months? Nonetheless, Meng Zong, to avoid disappointing his mother, bravely fetched his shovel and went out into the white landscape in search of bamboo shoots. In the thicket he found only frosted leaves and green stalks coated with snowflakes and ice. Look as he might, there were simply no fresh shoots growing in the winter. The thought of his poor mother lying sick on her bed, waiting for bamboo-broth medicine, made his heartache. Uncontrollably, tears began to fall in rivers to the ground beneath the tall, emerald canes. Even now, as his tears flowed down, he kept a light of faith in his heart. If he was truly sincere in his search, perhaps....

Just then Meng Zong nearly tripped and fell over a sharply protruding lump of earth. He quickly knelt down and knocked aside the dirt with his trembling fingers. How uncanny! Underneath his frozen hands he discovered a bed of fresh, tender bamboo shoots! Overjoyed, he gathered up a coatful and carried them back home. The broth that he quickly set stewing in the pot soon cured his mother's illness.

The neighbors, hearing the story, exclaimed that it was the strength of his sincere, unselfish, filial resolve that inspired heaven and earth to respond, and to bring up, out of season, the fresh shoots that cured his mother's disease. Before Meng Zong's prayers generated this miracle, it was normally considered impossible for bamboo shoots to grow in the winter. After the miracle took

place, however, people were able to gather and to eat bamboo shoots all year round. The winter variety that existed hereafter became known as "winter shoots."

The villagers were deeply influenced by Meng Zong's courage and devotion. They renamed the spot where the event took place, "Meng Zong's Bamboo Grove". We can now enjoy bamboo sprouts during the winter as well, and as we do so, it is fitting to recollect Meng Zong's outstanding example of filial respect, and reflect on our conduct as sons and daughter of our parents.

A verse in his honor says,

His teardrops transformed winter at the roots;  
Up from the ice crept tender bamboo shoots.  
Instantly, the winter-sprouts matured;  
Heaven's will: a happy, peaceful world.

### **Number Twenty-four**

Personally Scrubbing His Mother's Chamber-pot: Huang Tingjian.

Huang Tingjian was a well-known calligrapher, poet, and filial son who lived during the Song Dynasty. His pseudonym was Huang Shangu. As a man of letters, his fame was well-established during his lifetime. No matter the style of poetry, essays, or calligraphy, his work met with popular acclaim. Su Dongpo was his colleague, and the two men were known as "The Poets Su and Huang."

During the Yuanyou reign Period of the Song Zhezong Emperor, Huang Tingjian served China as "Chief Historian." His duty was to chronicle the astronomical events of the Period, and to regulate the calendars of the Empire. Despite his high status, he was not arrogant, or haughty. His nature, on the contrary, was respectful and compliant, especially in his filial regard for his mother. Although he had a houseful of servants, when it came to serving his mother, regardless of the chore, he insisted on performing it himself. He never required a servant or family staff person to wait on his mother. Every night he personally scrubbed out the chamber-pot his mother had used during the previous day.

His reason for seeing to this business himself was that since parents raise children to adulthood, sparing no efforts in accomplishing this difficult and often troublesome task, the children in turn, by rights should personally see to the care of their parents. They should not pass the job on to others.

A verse in his honor says;

His noble virtue; known both far and near;  
His life-long joy: service to his kin.  
He never asked the hired staff to share  
The jobs that rightly, filial sons should bear.

**Appendix:** Excerpt from the *Nü ershisi xiao tushuo* (Illustrated Version of the Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety for Women; Wu Jiayou, ed. [fl. 1850-1910]; Ming dynasty original)

[The Tale of the Woman Who] Cut Out Her Liver to Save Her Mother-in-Law

[There was once] in Xincheng, Jiangxi province, a woman of the Chen family married to Wang Zongluo. Once, while her husband was serving in an official capacity in another province, her mother-in-law became gravely ill with a disease of old age. The wife burned incense day and night, appealing to Heaven. She vowed to shorten the destined years of her own life to augment her mother's lifespan.

A physician said, "This old-age malady is difficult [if not impossible] to cure. Only the liver of a dragon and the marrow of a phoenix can save her." The wife believed him, and she said to herself, "Dragon's liver is impossible to come by. Why not use my own liver in its place?" Thereupon, praying for blessings from the Kitchen God, she took up a knife and sliced into her belly, extracting a slice of her liver. Of this she made a broth, which she served to her mother. Her mother ate it, and she declared it delicious.

She asked, "What is this?" The wife lied, saying, "It is the liver of a sheep." When her mother finished eating, her illness was immediately cured. Even though the wife felt no pain, the blood of her wound flowed unceasingly. All of this was observed by her husband's younger sister, and the story spread quickly throughout the whole family. When the mother-in-law learned that the wife had sliced her own liver, she cried bitterly and soothed her. The mother lived another twelve years before she died. When the provincial governor, Duke Zhou heard this, he presented a placard for the Wang family gate. It read, "Such marvelous filiality reaches all the way to Heaven!"

Subsequently, the wife enjoyed [the extension of] her lifespan to 108 years. [During her life,] her sons and grandsons numbered five generations under the same roof. On the day of her death, she gathered the family together, saying, "I am about to ascend into the heavens [as an immortal]. The Golden Boy (*jintong*) and Jade Girl (*yunu*) have come to welcome me!" Thus speaking, she departed.