

CHAPTER 1

Where Did All the Filial Sons Go?

In the year 73 BCE, the most powerful man in the Han empire, the General-in-Chief (*da jiangjun* 大將軍) Huo Guang 霍光 (d. 68 BCE), charged Liu He 劉賀 (ca. 92–59 BCE), the Imperial Heir Apparent, with ritual misconduct. The General called for Liu's removal from power as the result of a scandal involving sex, alcohol, and a man ostensibly in mourning. In a memorial to the empress dowager, Huo enumerated the crimes of the eighteen-year-old Liu. While in mourning for his imperial predecessor, the young man indulged in such pastimes as visiting zoos and bringing entertainers into the palace, when music and dance were not only in poor taste, but also strictly forbidden to mourners. He used public money for making gifts of concubines to his friends and imprisoned officials who tried to admonish him.¹ Worse still, Liu ate meat, drank spirits, and engaged in sexual activity (all forbidden to mourners). In fact, while traveling to the capital, he ordered his subordinates to seize women on the road and load them into screened carriages. Upon his arrival in the capital, the debauchery continued, as Liu and his followers took liberties with women from the dead emperor's harem. Acts such as these led Huo to conclude, not unreasonably, that the young man, though he wore the garments of deepest mourning, was "without sorrow or grief in his heart."² Such a lack of filial piety, Huo reminded the empress dowager, was the gravest of crimes, and thus called for severe punishment and removal from power.³ Huo's arguments met with imperial favor: not long afterwards, Liu's riotous followers were executed, and he was duly removed as heir apparent and sent back to the provinces.

The fact that an imperial heir was removed for improper conduct in mourning seems to reflect the dominance of filial piety as a social virtue. Indeed, there is other evidence for such a conclusion. As Michael Nylan puts it, the Han court claimed "to rule by the virtue of filial piety." Not surprisingly,

Han emperors adopted the posthumous title of “filial” (*xiao* 孝), as in the Filial Emperor Wen or the Filial Emperor Wu. Beginning with Emperor Hui 惠 (r. 195–188 BCE), emperors of the Western Han, operating on the assumption that filial sons made for loyal officials, issued proclamations calling for the “Filial,” the “Filial and Incorrupt,” the “Filial and Fraternal,” and the “Utmost Filial” to be recruited into the bureaucracy.⁴ The dominance of filial piety as a social virtue can be seen finally in certain legal statutes that called for the unfilial to be executed, with their remains cast off into the marketplace.⁵

But despite the importance of filial piety in Western Han society, few men observed the custom of three years mourning for their parents, a practice long assumed to have embodied filial devotion.⁶ According to extant records from the Western Han, only four officials and one imperial family member are known to have observed three years mourning (see table 1.1). If we apply a looser standard of evidence and include men known for their proper ritual conduct while wearing mourning, then two more cases may be added, bringing the total number of men who observed the custom to seven. The paucity of such accounts raises the following question: if mourning was indeed the ultimate measure of filial piety, why are so few men said to have worn extended mourning for their parents?

In this chapter, I attempt to explain this apparent paradox, one first noticed by two Qing historians, Zhang Shouchang 張壽常 (fl. 1750), and He Zhuo 何焯 (1661–1772).⁷ Examining the extant textual records, which include statements of court policy, excavated administrative documents, and memorials by leading statesmen, I argue that the striking paucity of accounts of Western Han men observing three years mourning reflects neither the biases of the Han chroniclers nor state policies explicitly forbidding the practice. Rather, the scarcity of such accounts is due to a variety of possible factors, ranging from official discouragement and elite indifference to classical mourning protocol, to the importance of rhetoric that called upon officials to transcend personal obligations and affinities—even to kin—in order to maintain the public order. Such rhetoric left its imprint on the beliefs entertained by some (but certainly not all) elite men about filial obligation: namely, that impartial public service, more so than mourning, represented the ultimate expression of filial piety.

A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ILLUSION?

Does the scarcity of accounts mean that only a few members of the Han political elite observed three years mourning? Certainly, it is very easy to imagine that elite men had the inclination to observe three years mourning for their parents, but historians Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–ca. 85 BCE), and Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE), our main sources for the period, fail to mention it. Perhaps there was a systematic bias against recording such information—or perhaps three years mourning was too common a practice to mention.

Table 1.1. Wearing Mourning for Parents during the Western Han and Xin Periods (206 BCE–25 CE)

NAME OF MOURNER	HIGHEST OFFICE ATTAINED	PERSON MOURNED	THREE YEARS MOURNING?
1. Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (ca. 200–121 BCE)	Chancellor (<i>xiang</i> 相)	Stepmother	Yes
2. Zhu Jian 朱建 (fl. 196 BCE)	Chancellor of Huainan 淮南	Mother	Unknown
3. Ju Meng 劇孟 (fl. 154 BCE)	None	Mother	Unknown
4. Chen Rong 陳融 (fl. 145–116 BCE)	Marquis (<i>bou</i> 侯) of Longlü 隆慮	Mother	No
5. Jin Midi 金日磾 (fl. 140–87 BCE)	Prince of the Xiongnu 匈奴 people (and Han hostage)	Mother	Maybe
6. Liu Bo 劉勃 (fl. 114 BCE)	King (<i>wang</i> 王) of Hejian 河間	Father	No
7. Wang Shang 王商 (fl. 46–25 BCE)	Prime Minister (<i>chengxiang</i> 丞相)	Father	Unknown
8. Yu Yong 于永 (fl. ca. 40–20 BCE)	Imperial Counselor (<i>yushi dafu</i> 御史大夫)	Father	Maybe
9. Zhai Fangjin 翟方進 (fl. 28–7 BCE)	Prime Minister	Stepmother	No
10. Lou Hu 樓護 (fl. 27 BCE–7 CE)	Grand Administrator (<i>taishou</i> 太守) of Guanghan 廣漢	Mother	Unknown
11. Xue Xiu 薛修 (fl. 7 BCE)	Governor of the Capital (<i>jingzhao yin</i> 京兆尹)	Stepmother	Yes
12. Liu Liang 劉良 (d. 5 BCE)	King of Hejian	Mother	Yes
13. Yuan She 原涉 (fl. 13–25 CE)	Magistrate (<i>ling</i> 令) of Gukou 谷口	Father	Yes
14. Yao Qi 姚期 (Xin Period)	Aide to the Officer of Thieves (<i>zeicaoyuan</i> 賊曹掾)	Father	Yes
15. Song 誦	Magistrate of Sui 燧	Mother	No
16. Zun 尊	Magistrate of Sui	Mother	No
17. Hua Qiao 華喬	Magistrate of Tan 鄰	Mother	Unknown
18. Er Xun 兒勛	Assistant (<i>cheng</i> 丞) of Licheng 利成	Father	Unknown

On the one hand, evidence suggests that the scarcity of such accounts does not reflect a bias against making records of mourning. Both Sima and Ban mention mourning obligations in a handful of cases, which belies a systematic bias. For example, in one case Ban notes that a senior minister quit his post in order to wear mourning.⁸ On the other hand, other evidence indicates that three years mourning was not so common a practice that it would go unmentioned. In fact, records of a number of cases suggest that observing extended mourning was unusual enough to catch the attention of the mourner's contemporaries. Consider the case of Yu Yong 于永 (fl. ca. 40–20 BCE; table 1.1, no. 8), who had been a prodigal son. When his father died in 40 BCE, Yu distinguished himself through his mourning: “he dwelt in sorrow, as was prescribed by the rites, and his filial conduct became famous.” He became so well known, in fact, that he won appointment as the Palace Attendant (*shizhong* 侍中) and as the Leader of the Gentlemen of the Palace (*zhonglang jiang* 中郎將).⁹ The best evidence, however, that three years mourning was not widely observed by members of the political elite during the Western Han comes from comments made by Ban Gu in the first century of the Eastern Han. Reflecting on the rare case of the observant Yuan She 原涉 (fl. 13–25 CE; table 1.1, no. 13), who lived only a generation or two before him, Ban notes, “At that time, there were few who observed three years mourning.”¹⁰

IMPERIAL PROHIBITIONS?

If the paucity of accounts reflects the fact that Han elite men did not widely observe three years mourning, we are then left with explaining why this was the case. One explanation, first proposed by historian Yang Shuda (1885–1956), is that Han court policies strongly discouraged (if not explicitly forbade) officials from observing three years mourning. According to Yang, Han court policy only changed during the Xin period, when the imperial usurper Wang Mang began to encourage the practice. Indeed, if we believe Ban Gu, Wang encouraged the revival of classical institutions and learning. As regent, he reportedly observed three years mourning for the empress dowager. And Wang did more than set a personal example: he even required high-ranking officials to wear mourning for Emperor Ping 平 (r. 1 BCE–6 CE).¹¹

In many regards, Yang's thesis makes sense, despite its drawbacks (which will be examined presently). There are several reasons why the court, initially led by vigorous emperors, may have wanted to prevent officials from observing three years mourning. For one thing, the custom would have required officials to leave their posts for twenty-five to twenty-seven months. From the perspective of governance, this would have been disruptive.¹² Additionally, the first two Western Han emperors were born in social obscurity and reportedly did not like archaic customs and rituals, complaining that some had been rendered pointless by changing times. Citing this principle, Han emperors and their

advisors suggested dispensing with rituals that were cumbersome, expensive, or otherwise not to their liking.¹³

Clearly there are potential reasons why Han emperors would have discouraged officials from observing three years mourning, but does much evidence of either imperial discouragement or prohibition exist? Scholars (including Yang) point to the edict issued posthumously by Emperor Wen 文 (r. 180–157 BCE) in 157 BCE as evidence of imperial prohibition.¹⁴ In it, the emperor provides directions for his own mourning and burial rites. As transmitted in Ban Gu's *History of the Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書), the text reads,

其令天下吏民，令到出臨三日，皆釋服。無禁取婦嫁女祠飲酒食肉... 無發民哭臨宮殿中。殿中當臨者，皆以旦夕各十五舉音，禮畢罷。非旦夕臨時，禁無得擅哭。以下，服大紅十五日，小紅十四日，織七日，釋服。它不在令中者，皆以此令比類從事。布告天下，使明知朕意。

[It is thus ordered of all the officers and commoners under Heaven: When this order arrives, they are to wail over the course of three days, and then all are to remove their mourning garments. There will be no prohibitions against them taking wives or giving away their daughters in marriage, making sacrifices to gods or ancestors, drinking spirits, or eating meat... Do not send the commoners to wail over the body inside the hall of the palace [where the coffin is kept]. Those in the hall who wail over the body, each of them at dawn and dusk should raise their voices fifteen times [in wailing]. Once the rites are completed, they should desist. And except for the [fifteen] times that they wail over the body at dawn and dusk, it is prohibited that anyone should take it upon himself to wail. After the coffin is lowered into the grave, the mourners will wear mourning garments of roughly processed cloth for fifteen days, mourning garments of smoothly processed cloth for fourteen days, and thin mourning garments for seven days before removing their mourning garments. Those who are not mentioned in this order should deal with affairs along the same lines of the order. Notify all under Heaven and make them clear and aware of Our intentions.]¹⁵

Judging from this edict, the emperor did not wish his chief mourners (or anyone, for that matter) to observe three years mourning on his behalf. Instead he ordered his chief mourners to wear mourning for only forty-three days—seven days before and thirty-six days after burial—rather than twenty-five months; to wear hemp sashes and belts no more than three inches wide (as opposed to nine and seven inches, respectively); and to limit their wailing to dawn and dusk.¹⁶

In fairness to Yang Shuda and others, in this posthumous edict Emperor Wen did strongly discourage three years mourning. Like many critics of the late Warring States and Western Han, Wen thought that people observed the custom because they lacked perspective about death. He complained that his contemporaries prized life but hated death, and indulged in lavish burials and heavy mourning as a result.¹⁷

Although he certainly discouraged the practice of three years mourning, Emperor Wen did not prohibit it. For one thing, as Xu Gan 徐乾 (170–217 CE), an Eastern Han social critic (and later proponent of three years mourning), was quick to point out, the edict was very limited in scope: it applied only to mourning for Wen himself.¹⁸ Furthermore, the edict never mentions or criticizes the custom by name, only referring to “heavy mourning.” And indeed, while we may say that Wen opposed the practice, he certainly did not prohibit or prevent people from observing three years mourning for their own parents.

The only other evidence I have found to support Yang’s claim that the Han court discouraged officials from observing three years mourning comes from administrative documents recently excavated at the Zhangjiashan 張家山 site (186 BCE). There, one administrative document discusses rules on mourning leave for local officials:

律曰：諸有縣官事，而父母若妻死者，歸寧卅日。大父母，同產十五日。敖悍，完為城旦春，鐵[?]其足，輸巴縣鹽。

[The statute observes: Those who are responsible for affairs in the county magistrate’s office, but whose father or mother or wife dies, are allowed a grace leave of thirty days. If their paternal grandfather or grandmother dies or their uterine siblings die, they are allowed fifteen days. Any who are remiss or act out of anger are to be shaved and made wall-builders or grain-pounders of the state. They are to be shackled at the feet and transported to the bureau of the salt mines in Ba commandery.]¹⁹

At first glance, there seems to be two reasons to interpret the document as evidence that officials were prohibited from observing extended mourning periods. First, the document mentions that officials are permitted thirty days’ leave for burying their parents or spouse, and fifteen days for grandparents or maternal siblings. This suggests, at the very least, that official policy would have discouraged three years mourning simply by not providing the requisite leave time. In many ways, this is expected of the court when we consider the administrative chaos that would have ensued if all officials had been allowed to take extended leaves of absence.²⁰ Second, and perhaps more important, the document seems to indicate that those who fail to abide by the rules, or who are remiss or act out of anger (*aoban* 敖悍), should be punished with hard labor.

A closer look at the Zhangjiashan case and other material, however, suggests that this administrative document does not provide strong evidence of a prohibition against three years mourning.²¹ The passage does not say that officials were forbidden from taking more than thirty days’ leave; it merely states that officials were allowed to take leaves of thirty days, leaving open the possibility that court statutes required officials to stay away from their posts for at least this period for the sake of propriety or due to concerns about death pollution.²² In addition, there is evidence that officials who took longer leaves for mourning were not punished. One of the Juyan 居延 or Edsin-gol

administrative documents (ca. 100 BCE–40 CE) mentions one official taking a sixty-two-day leave; several others mention officials taking leaves of three months for the death of parents.²³ Still another fragmentary document, as interpreted by historian Yan Buke, refers to an official taking a six-month leave of absence on the occasion of his wife's death.²⁴ Judging from what remains of these documents, none of the officials was punished for doing so.

The meaning of *aohan* (guilty of being remiss or acting out of anger) as used in the Zhangjiashan document also raises questions. *Aohan* is admittedly a difficult term to interpret; it is not clear whether it refers here to laxity in returning to an official post or in failing to fulfill mourning obligations. Although both readings are plausible, the larger context of the passage, which deals with punishments for the unfilial, favors the latter reading. Consider the following excerpt from subsequent portions of the document detailing the same case, which, besides being interesting for prurient reasons, also provides greater context:

妻之為後次夫父母。夫父母死，未葬，奸喪旁者，當不孝，不孝棄市。不孝之次，當黥為城旦舂，驚悍，完之。當之，妻尊夫，當次父母，而甲夫死，不悲哀，與男子和奸喪旁，致之不孝驚悍之律二章。

[The [property rights] of a wife are secondary with respect to the parents of her husband. If in [prior] cases in which a father or mother had died—and before he or she had been buried, the child had fornicating by the side of the deceased's [coffin]—the child would have been deemed unfilial. Being unfilial, [the child] would have been cast off in the marketplace. If his or her crime had been secondary in severity to being unfilial, then [the child] would have merited being tattooed and made a wall-builder or grain-pounder. Had he or she been lax or acted out of anger, then [the child] would have been shaved. Applying this principle to this case, the wife reveres the husband, and reveres him second only to her father and mother. Yet A's husband died, and she was not sorrowful or grieved. She fornicated with a man by the side of the deceased's [coffin], and thus her offense warrants the punishments as stipulated by the two regulations concerning the “unfilial” and “those guilty of being remiss or acting out of anger.”]²⁵

Judging from this passage, *aohan* does not refer to an official's failure to return to his post on time here (or, more generally, to laxness in carrying out official duties). Instead, *aohan* refers to the widow's ritual shortcomings, and therefore does not suggest the existence of statutes that punish officials for taking mourning leaves of more than thirty days.

In addition to the lack of strong evidence for discouraging three years mourning, there are reasons to doubt that the Western Han emperors and their advisors were in complete agreement in their dislike of the practice. As Yang Tianyu has recently suggested, long before Wang Mang promoted three years mourning, Emperor Wen's successors and their advisors began to

officially encourage it.²⁶ During the early part of the reign of Emperor Wu 武 (r. 141–87 BCE), Tian Fen 田蚡 (d. 131 BCE), and Dou Ying 竇嬰 (d. 131 BCE), two imperial uncles, attempted to reform mourning practice. According to Sima Qian and Ban Gu, the two advocated “use [of] the classical rites as the regulations for mourning in order to promote great peace.”²⁷ The policies foundered, though only because the political fortunes of Tian and Dou suddenly fell as a result of court factionalism.²⁸ The account of an imperial brother, Liu Liang 劉良 (d. 5 BCE; table 1.1, no. 12), provides further evidence that the Han court encouraged men to observe three years mourning. When his mother died, Liu Liang mourned her “according to the rites” for three years.²⁹ His conduct impressed Emperor Yuan 元 (r. 48–33 BCE), who rewarded Liu with more territory.

In fact, later courts made repeated efforts to ensure that at least certain officials had adequate leave time for fulfilling their mourning obligations, as seen in two edicts. In the first, issued in 66 BCE, Emperor Xuan 宣 (r. 74–48 BCE) expressed his concern that military officers³⁰ be allowed to return home and bury their parents:

導民以孝，則天下順。今百姓或遭衰經...而吏繇事，使不得葬，傷孝子之心，朕甚憐之。自今諸有大父母，父母喪者勿繇事，使得收斂送終，盡其子道。

[If one leads the commoners with filial piety, then all under Heaven will be obedient. Now, there are those among the hundred surnames who encounter unfortunate circumstances necessitating the wearing of mourning garments and sashes. . . . Yet the officers responsible for overseeing [laborers] are caused to be unable to bury their dead. This damages the heart of the filial son, and we sympathize greatly with such people. From this day on, those who suffer the loss of their grandparents or parents will not oversee labor, and will be allowed to go back to prepare the body for burial and “escort the dead to the end” in order to fulfill the way of the child.]³¹

This edict raises the question of how long a mourning leave these officers were allowed to take. I believe that the language is intentionally vague: officers should go as long as required “to fulfill the way of the child.” In theory, this statement could be interpreted as a regulation that allowed officers to observe the full twenty-five months of mourning. Yet in practical terms, if we can believe one Eastern Han interpreter, this edict provided officers with considerably longer mourning leaves. A second edict, also from the late Western Han, clearly encouraged the custom of three years mourning, but was somewhat limited in scope. Upon his accession in 7 BCE, Emperor Ai 哀 (r. 7–1 BCE) granted all court erudites (*boshi* 博士) and students of the classics (*dizi* 弟子) three years of mourning leave.³²

Yet despite such official encouragement, members of the Western Han political elite seem to have paid little attention to whether their contemporaries fulfilled their mourning obligations to parents. This is obvious from the case

of Xue Xuan 薛宣 (fl. 20 BCE–3 CE), a former Chancellor and lord of Gaoyang (*Gaoyang hou* 高陽侯). His younger brother, Xue Xiu 薛修 (fl. 7 BCE; table 1.1, no. 11), was the Governor of the Capital.³³ When their stepmother died, Xiu decided to quit his official post and observe three years mourning.³⁴ Xuan not only refused to do so himself, but also strongly advised his younger brother against observing the custom.³⁵ The dispute led to bad feelings between the brothers, but it attracted little attention at the time. Years later, during the reign of Emperor Ai, a court erudite named Shen Xian 申咸 took the younger brother's side in the dispute.³⁶ He voiced his opinion that because Xuan had not observed three years mourning for his stepmother, he was unworthy of his post as Lord of Gaoyang. Xuan's son, himself an official, overheard these rumors and bribed another man to wound and mutilate Shen. Subsequently men at court debated what punishment Xuan and his son deserved. Interestingly, they observed that the son's anger was entirely understandable, and decided he should be punished with four years of hard labor (but not death or mutilation) for "disrespectful conduct" (*bujing* 不敬). As for Shen Xian, one official noted that "the rumors he spread were inappropriate and could not be called righteous."³⁷ As this case illustrates, Xue Xuan's contemporaries by and large saw nothing irregular about his failure to observe three years mourning; instead, they thought it was Shen Xian who deserved censure, for making it an issue in the first place!

Further evidence suggests that many members of the Western Han political elite did not regard fulfilling the obligation of three years mourning as the ultimate test of character, because a man's career might not be adversely affected even if he was punished for neglecting his mourning obligations entirely. For example, Ban Gu mentions the case of Chen Tang 陳湯 (fl. 47 BCE), who did not return home to bury his father.³⁸ Chen was punished for this, along with the person who recommended him as an Abundant Talent. Though he lost the post, Chen's fortunes were soon revived when he was recommended as a Gentleman Cadet and then subsequently as Lieutenant Colonel (*fu xiaowei* 副校尉) of the Western Regions. Later, he won the support of Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BCE), the famed author, and was ennobled. After he died, he was even honored by Wang Mang with the posthumous title of Lord of Pohuzhuang 破胡莊, in return for his own earlier suggestion that Wang be ennobled.

DID FILIAL SONS HAVE TO MOURN?

The fact that many members of the Western Han political elite were indifferent to mourning obligations raises the possibility that they were not entirely "Confucianized." Such an argument has surfaced in previous discussions of Han mourning practice, especially in the works of Kamiya Noriko, Keith Knapp, and Yang Tianyu.³⁹ Kamiya's arguments in particular merit our attention. Examining the practice of "exceeding the rites" (*guoli* 過禮) in the Eastern Han, Kamiya argues that there were gaps between actual practice and

mourning prescription through the end of the period, an indication that the “Confucianization” of the elite was still incomplete. The arguments of Kamiya and others admittedly make sense. After all, filial piety was a central component of “Confucianism,” and observing three years mourning was presumably an important expression of a son’s filial obligation to his parents. As a result, one would expect to be able to gauge whether the Han elite was “Confucianized” by the extent to which they observed extended mourning.⁴⁰

Before commenting on the merits of the “Confucianization” thesis, a brief digression about terminology is in order. The term “Han Confucianism” is often treated as synonymous with classical orthodoxy or imperial ideology.⁴¹ Recently, Michael Nylan, Kidder Smith, and Mark Csikszentmihalyi have challenged the existence of any kind of imperial orthodoxy in the Han. For one thing, there were no organized schools of thought responsible for transmitting a body of texts or coherent doctrines attributed to Confucius. In addition, there was nothing approximating an imperial orthodoxy based on the classics. As Nylan shows, the court never exclusively sponsored any single interpretation of the classics, let alone any one group of organized thinkers. Nor can we say that members of the educated elite—including those who called themselves classicists (*ru*)—professed allegiance to any core set of beliefs or doctrines.⁴²

Putting aside the issue of terminology, another problem with the “Confucianization” thesis is that it assumes that classical authors articulated a consistent position on mourning. To be sure, some classical authors insisted that filial sons had to wear three years mourning for parents. For example, in a famous anecdote from the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), Confucius (551–479 BCE) himself underscores the importance of three years mourning. There, in fact, the Master reportedly goes so far as to condemn his incorrigible disciple, Zai Wo 宰我, for suggesting that a son could mourn his parents for less than the required twenty-five months. “Yu [Zai Wo] is not humane,” Confucius said. “Only at three years is a child no longer held by his father and mother. Now, three years is the mourning custom that pervades all under Heaven. Did not Yu receive three years of affection from his father and mother?” Equally unambiguous pronouncements appear in other texts attributed to Warring States masters. The *Mencius* 孟子 (fourth–third century BCE) declares three years mourning the obligation of all sons “from the Son of Heaven down to the commoner.”⁴³ That said, we must not assume that the *Analects* and *Mencius* were representative of classical texts. In fact, as will be shown presently, classical authors held different views about the relationship between three years mourning and filial obligation.

Some classical authors clearly thought that sons should not observe extended mourning for their parents in circumstances in which the custom interfered with more important state obligations. The “Questions of Zengzi” chapter of the *Book of Rites* neatly explains an official’s mourning obligations as follows:

曾子問曰：大夫士有私喪，可以除之矣，而有君服焉，其除之也。如之何？孔子曰：有君喪。服於身，不敢私服，又何除焉？

[Zengzi [ca. 505–443 BCE] asked, “If a noble or an officer has an occasion [to which he would wear] personal mourning [i.e., for a parent], he can put off wearing mourning. If, however, a lord is mourned, under what conditions can [mourning] be removed?” Confucius said, “If a lord is mourned, then one wears mourning for the lord and does not venture to wear the garments of personal mourning. How can there be conditions under which mourning worn for a lord is removed?”]⁴⁴

The dialogue reveals three things. First, it reveals that the authors considered mourning for a parent a personal affair (*si 私*). Though the authors do not go so far as to say that wearing mourning for a lord is public, nor do they equate it with official duty (*gong 公*), we can infer these views from the context of the passage. Second, the dialogue shows that the obligation to mourn a lord takes precedence over the obligation to mourn a parent.⁴⁵ Third, it is Zengzi 曾子, the figure most associated with filial conduct, who raises the issue. The fact that Zengzi would insist on the priority of official duty over the obligation to mourn parents is noteworthy, especially in a chapter that discusses the minutiae of mourning protocol. It suggests that at least some ritualists did not regard the obligation to wear three years mourning for parents as a duty of unsurpassable importance.

Similarly, *Gongyang's Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* discusses why it might be appropriate for an official not to wear mourning for parents under certain circumstances.⁴⁶ To return to a passage mentioned in the introduction, this commentary ponders the question of whether it was appropriate for Min Sun to serve his lord during his period of mourning. In contrast to the *Book of Rites*, *Gongyang's Commentary* rejects the idea that lords should call their ministers into service while those ministers are wearing mourning. “In antiquity when ministers encountered an occasion of great loss,” the *Commentary* states by way of criticism, “their lords did not call at their gates for three years,” as such requests “do not conform with the dictates of the human heart.” Surprisingly, *Gongyang's Commentary* also maintains that it was appropriate for Min Sun to have answered his lord's call to service, although it does not provide much justification for this stance. “Although it was wrong for the lord to have commissioned the minister under the circumstances,” the text remarks, “for the minister to have carried out his duties—this was in accord with ritual propriety.”⁴⁷

Later texts, such as *Luxuriant Dew of the Annals* (*Chunqiu fanlu 春秋繁露*), elaborate on the appropriate reasons for officials to remove mourning under certain circumstances. In one chapter, its putative author, the Han statesman and thinker Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (ca. 179–ca. 104 BCE), explored the question of whether Min should have completed his official mission. Dong concurred with *Gongyang's Commentary* that Min had done the right thing.

But whereas the *Commentary's* authors emphasized that it was wrong for the lord to have asked Min to serve, *Luxuriant Dew of the Annals* is silent on this matter. Instead, the focus here is on the obligations of the minister to his lord, which took priority over the obligation to wear mourning for parents. Dong thought that ministers, even in times of peace, were not free to act in ways that ran contrary to dynastic prerogatives. To do so would be to “abase” (*bei* 卑) one’s lord—and to threaten the very hierarchies that served as the foundations of the political order. According to Dong, the right course of action was for the minister to proceed on his mission unless recalled. But instead of considering this a necessary but unfortunate duty, Dong gave it a positive spin: “This was what is meant by not harming the venerated one [i.e., the lord] on account of an intimate, and not impeding the public good on account of the personal.”⁴⁸

Like *Luxuriant Dew of the Annals*, the *Garden of Persuasions* (*Shuoyuan* 說苑; ca. first century BCE) also defends the view that there were circumstances under which officials should not wear mourning for parents.⁴⁹ Once again, discussion revolves around the figure of Min Sun, who is also depicted elsewhere in the document as a filial exemplar.⁵⁰ Commenting on the incident involving Min, the author of the *Garden* largely concurred with Dong Zhongshu and the author of *Gongyang's Commentary*: it was indeed right for Min (and other ministers) to continue serving in office during their periods of mourning. As is the case with *Luxuriant Dew of the Annals*, the discussion in the *Garden of Persuasions* sidesteps the issue of whether it was inappropriate for lords to deny their ministers leaves of mourning. Instead, the text emphasizes that ministers were to act in ways that showed their respect, above all, for dynastic authority; not doing so would jeopardize not only larger principles, but also the health of the state. “To act without authorization in situations in which there is no danger,” the text remarks, “is not to be a minister.”⁵¹

OFFICIAL SERVICE AND FILIAL OBLIGATION

The foregoing discussion raises a question: how could classical authors argue that filial piety was a cardinal social virtue if they defended officials who chose not to wear mourning for parents? To answer this question, we must first ask if classical authors had uniform views on the relationship between filial obligation and mourning. As will be shown presently, they certainly did not. In fact, some classical texts are vague about whether observing extended mourning was considered the most important expression of filial obligation, and others even go so far as to emphasize state service, rather than mourning, as a component of filial duty.

Of course, some canonical texts (in particular, the *Classic of Filial Piety*) would seem to assert that three years mourning was the most important component of filial obligation. The following passage, for example, would seem to be unambiguous, at least at first glance:⁵²

子曰：孝子之喪親也，哭不偯，禮無容，言不文，服美不安，聞樂不樂，食旨不甘，此哀戚之情也。三日而食，教民無以死傷生，毀不滅性，此聖人之政也。喪不過三年，示民有終也。... 生事愛敬，死事哀感，生民之本盡矣，死生之義備矣，孝子之事親終矣。

[The Master said, "In mourning his parents, the wailing of a filial son should not be prolonged; his handling of ritual matters should lack department, and his speech should be without embellishment. He does not find comfort in wearing fine garments, does not take pleasure in hearing music, and does not relish the taste of delicacies. All of these are characteristics of sorrow. After three days, the son in mourning eats to instruct the commoners that he does not harm the living on account of the dead and does not extinguish his nature though wracked with grief. These are the regulations of the sages. Mourning does not extend beyond three years in order to show the commoners that there is a conclusion . . . If in life he serves his parents with love and reverence, and in death serves them with sorrow and grief, then the basis for generating the people will be completed, the duties to the living and the dead fulfilled, and the filial son's service to his parents exhausted.]"⁵³

A closer look at the *Classic of Filial Piety*, however, does not explicitly reveal if the authors would demand that all sons wear three years mourning. Comments about the effects of three years mourning on governance suggest that the authors were speaking of the filial obligations of men at the top of the state hierarchy, those who set examples for commoners. One advantage of this interpretation is that it is consistent with the larger pattern established in the text of clarifying the filial obligations of men of different stations. For example, the authors claim that the Son of Heaven should express his filial regard for his parents by exhausting his feelings of love and reverence for them, thus educating the population. In contrast, nobles should express their filial regard by modeling their words and conduct on those of ancient kings, thus protecting their ancestral temples from ruin; commoners, in turn, should take care to be moderate in their expenditures so that they can support their parents. Quite notably, for *shi* 士, or officers—the men who would find themselves choosing between the demands of state service and familial obligation—the observation of three years mourning is not stressed. In fact, the *Classic of Filial Piety* advocates conscientious state service for these men: "If in his loyalty and obedience, he misses nothing in serving his superiors, he will in the end be able to preserve his official stipend and position. He will be able to guard his ancestral sacrifices: this is the filial piety of an officer."⁵⁴

The authors of the *Classic of Filial Piety* also emphasized earning fame through exemplary official service. In one passage, the key components of filial obligation are summarized as follows:

身體髮膚，受之父母，不敢毀傷，孝之始也。立身行道，揚名於後世，以顯父母，孝之終也。夫孝，始於事親，中於事君，終於立身。

[The body and the form, the skin and the hair all come from one's father and mother, and thus one does not venture to destroy them: this is the beginning of filial piety. To establish oneself and carry out the Way, to make one's name known to later generations, thereby extolling one's father and mother: this is the end of filial piety. In the beginning, filial piety lies in serving one's parents; in the middle, it entails serving one's lord; and in the end, it involves establishing oneself.]⁵⁵

The passage raises two points of interest: first, it deals specifically with the filial obligations of those in official service; and second, it emphasizes the multifaceted nature of filial obligation. For the authors, it was not enough for a son to merely serve his parents. A filial son was also someone who made his fame through exemplary public service. In fact, fame—and not the wearing of mourning—is described as the end (i.e., the ultimate expression) of filial regard. Although the emphasis here on fame in no way suggests that the authors discounted the importance of wearing mourning, it raises a question not addressed in the text: if an official had to choose between leaving office to wear mourning and making his name through exemplary public service, which of the two was more important?

Like the *Classic of Filial Piety*, the *Annals of Lü* (*Lüshi chungiu* 吕氏春秋; ca. 239 BCE) emphasizes expressions of filial obligation other than extended mourning, in particular a man's public conduct. In fact, while other aspects of filial obligation are mentioned, the authors fail to bring up three years mourning at all. The text places great importance on keeping one's body intact, for example, since "the body is the form left behind by one's father and mother."⁵⁶ But above all, a filial son is to distinguish himself through his public conduct. A son must be "dignified" in his daily interactions with others; he must "serve his lord conscientiously"; and he must be "attentive with respect to his official duties," "trustworthy with his friends and associates," and "valorous" when serving in the lines of battle. Such conduct, furthermore, should not be taken as something above and beyond the basic obligations of the filial son; sons who fail to conduct themselves in this manner, the *Annals of Lü* declares, are not filial (*feixiao* 非孝).⁵⁷

The most extensive discussion of the relationship between state service and filial obligation is found in the *Odes by Han* (*Hanshi waizhuan* 韩氏外传; ca. 150 BCE). Like the *Classic of Filial Piety* and the *Annals of Lü*, the *Odes by Han* reiterates that exemplary public service is an important component of filial obligation. Compared with earlier treatments of the problem, the *Odes by Han* goes a step further to explore challenges to the idea that official service should be a seamless extension of filial obligation. As we will see below, filial sons who entered the official service not only had to put aside more personal expressions of devotion to parents, but also had to become impartial officials.

Like earlier texts, the *Odes by Han* does endorse the view that sons serve their fathers best by being exemplary officials. In anecdotes about Zengzi, the aforementioned Warring States paragon of filial piety, the authors suggest that

filial sons provide support for their parents by earning official stipends. Furthermore, those who refrain from public service while their parents live “cannot be counted among the filial.”⁵⁸ We find a similar understanding of filial obligation in a dialogue recounted in the *Odes by Han*. The dialogue between Tian Guo 田過 and King Xuan 宣 of Qi 齊 (fourth century BCE) attempts to explain away any apparent contradictions between state service and filial obligation. It opens with the king reiterating the analogy between lord and father, and asking whether a father is more important than a lord. Tian answers the king’s queries by asserting that “a lord is most likely not as important as a father.” This answer prompts the king to speculate angrily about the inconsistency of being an official when such service would require leaving one’s father, and therefore not attending to his everyday needs. In defense of his answer, Tian Guo reportedly said,

非君之土地無以處吾親，非君之祿無以養吾親，非君之爵[位]無以尊顯吾親。受之於君，致之於親。凡事君，[所]以為親也。宣王悒然無以應之。詩曰：王事靡盬，不遑將父。

[“If it were not for the land and soil of the lord, there would be no way to provide residence for my parents. If it were not for the stipend of my lord, there would be no way to support my parents. If it were not for the titled ranks of my lord, there would be no way to venerate and extol the name of my parents. All of these things I receive from my lord, and I provide them to my parents. When I serve my lord, I am thereby serving my parents.” King Xuan looked gloomy and had no response. The *Odes* observes, “There is no respite from the business of serving my king, and there is no time to support my father.”]⁵⁹

In effect, the dialogue contrasts two understandings of filial obligation. The first, for which the king of Qi serves as a mouthpiece, emphasizes the importance of children, not only for tending personally to their parents’ needs, but also for providing them with love and respect. The second, expressed by Tian Guo, asserts that parents can also be served through illustrious service. Certainly this second perspective is hardly unique to the *Odes by Han*, but the priority placed on official service was perhaps new. The best way to express filial piety was not by staying home and attending to the everyday needs of parents, but through exemplary public service (“There is no respite from the business of serving my king”). In other words, an official served his father best by putting aside certain personal expressions of filial piety and affection in order to better redirect his energies toward official service.

Other sections of the *Odes by Han* push the logic of exemplary service further, arguing that official service was not simply a seamless extension of filial obligation, but that filial obligation ultimately required sons to become impartial officials. In one episode, the mother of Zhuang Zhishan 壯之善 rebuked her son as he prepared to go off to battle. “Is it right,” she asked, “to abandon a mother and die for a lord?” In response, Zhuang reminded his mother that the stipend he received from his lord was used to support her. Later, on the road, Zhuang fell off his chariot, prompting his attendant to suggest turning

back. But Zhuang replied, "Fear is my personal emotion [*si*]. To die for my lord would for me be in accordance with public duty [*gong*]. I have heard that the gentleman does not damage the public because of the personal."⁶⁰ In many regards, Zhuang was emblematic of certain attitudes about filial piety: in serving his parents he put impartial public service before all else.

As other episodes recorded in the *Odes by Han* make clear, the notion that filial sons served their parents best by becoming impartial public servants also had its detractors. A certain degree of ambivalence toward the idea that impartial public officials always made for filial sons is detected in a few episodes. In one chapter, we hear of a certain mythical gentleman of the South, a Shen Ming 申鳴, whose filial piety became known to his king.⁶¹ The king summoned Shen with the aim of appointing him to office, but Shen was reluctant to go, realizing that he would have to "give up being a son in order to become a minister." Shen's father, however, urged him to go to the king, observing, "If you receive a stipend from the country and hold a position at court, you will be happy and I will have no worries. I wish you to serve." Ever the obedient son, Shen went and received the king's command, becoming a military official. A year later, Shen led a campaign against a revolt. Facing defeat, the insurgents took Shen's father hostage. "If you join us," the leader of the insurgents told Shen, "I will divide with you the state of Chu. If you do not join us, your father will die." The situation presented Shen with a terrible dilemma. "At first I was my father's son," he said. "Now I am the minister of my lord. Since I am no longer in a position to be a filial son, how can I not be a conscientious minister?" Shen thereupon pursued the insurgents, killing them, but his father was also slain. After the campaign, Shen was rewarded by the king, but he lamented the fact that he had failed to be either a conscientious official or a filial son, and so took his own life.⁶²

To return to the question raised at the beginning of this section, was it necessarily inconsistent for classical authors to extol the virtues of filial piety but not to insist upon officials' observance of three years mourning? Certainly, a few classical texts, like the *Mencius*, emphasized three years mourning as a crucial component of filial obligation. But classical authors also diverged in their understandings of filial obligation. By some accounts, observing extended mourning was not necessarily considered the most important way to express filial obligation. Other accounts de-emphasized mourning altogether for officials, arguing that a son served his parents best by earning a lasting reputation and a stipend through exemplary public service.

FILIAL OBLIGATION AND LARGER DISCOURSES ON OFFICIAL SERVICE

Having argued above that classical authors held divergent views of filial obligation, we now ask why notions of filial obligation that emphasized official service had any appeal for the political elite, especially if these notions were

controversial. Surely such an interpretation of filial obligation allowed men in office to forego observance of three years mourning, a practice some must have regarded as not only inconvenient, but also disruptive to a career. But there was also another reason: this view of filial obligation was appealing because it complemented the dominant rhetoric in the Western Han court. This rhetoric of impartiality was a political rhetoric that called upon officials, as well as rulers, to transcend their personal interests, biases, and obligations for the sake of impartially maintaining the public order.

The rhetoric of impartiality reached as far back as the Warring States period, and its earliest incarnation can be found in the *Mozi* 墨子 (ca. fifth–fourth century BCE), a text that often pits personal obligations (sometimes associated with familial interests) against the public good.⁶³ In the document, the thinker Mozi called upon his contemporaries, especially rulers, to express “impartial concern” (*jian'ai* 兼愛) for “all under Heaven,” rather than partisanship.⁶⁴ In one especially acrimonious passage, Mozi reportedly complained that one major reason why governance was ineffective was that rulers employed only those to whom they were partial—such as their kin or their male lovers—and thus failed to elevate “worthies” like Mozi himself.⁶⁵

By the reign of Emperor Wen, the rhetoric of impartiality had become ubiquitous at the Western Han court, as ministers attempted to curb the influence and power of imperial relatives and favorites.⁶⁶ For example, in his indictment of the Qin, the Senior Tutor (*taifu* 太傅) Jia Yi 賈誼 (201–169 BCE) criticized the First Emperor for “dispensing with the Way of Kings and establishing in official positions those for whom he had personal concern.”⁶⁷ According to Jia, the objects of the First Emperor’s “personal concern” included his own kin. Jia also leveled the same charge at the early Han emperors. In a sharply worded memorial to Emperor Wen, he observed,

若此諸王，雖名為臣，實皆有布衣昆弟之心。慮亡不帝制而天子自為者。擅爵人，赦死罪，甚者或戴黃屋，漢法令非行也。雖行不軌如厲王者，令之不肯聽，召之安可致乎！幸而來至，法安可得加！

[Now, though they are in name your subjects, the various kings have really regarded you just as an untitled brother or cousin. They fancy themselves outside the imperial system of rule, acting as the Sons of Heaven, presumptuously conferring titles of nobility upon others and exempting criminals from the death penalty. There are even some who use the yellow-silk covers for chariots [reserved for the Son of Heaven]. Hence, the Han regulations and codes fail to prevail. Regarding those who have not submitted to the rules, such as King Li [Liu Chang], if you allow them not to listen, how will they be made to come when summoned? Even in the event that they do come [to court for summons], how is the court to apply the laws to them?]⁶⁸

Here, Jia Yi alluded to Emperor Wen’s reluctance to charge his wayward brother, Liu Chang 劉長 (ca. 199–174 BCE), with treason. Liu had violated

sumptuary rules, committed murder, and participated in a rebellion against his brother. Nevertheless, Wen had been unwilling to punish him because Liu was his last surviving brother.⁶⁹ The well-known Liu Chang incident epitomized the difficulties of making subjects out of imperial brothers when affection for kin came into conflict with the demands of governance. Jia urged the emperor to discipline his feelings for his kin and make the impartial public order his priority. Acceding to pressure from the senior tutor, Wen sent Liu into exile in 174 BCE, where the imperial brother subsequently died in a rage over his perceived mistreatment, according to Sima Qian's account. Unhappy about this turn of events and the criticism he received over his handling of the affair, Wen wryly remarked: "Yao and Shun banished their own flesh-and-bone kin. The Duke of Zhou killed Guan and Cai. All under Heaven praise them as sages. Why is this so? It is because they did not harm the public on account of the personal."⁷⁰ Here, Emperor Wen was alluding to the story of two sage kings and the virtuous Duke of Zhou, who transcended their personal feelings and severely punished their own kin in order to preserve the public order.⁷¹

Appeals to the rhetoric of impartiality reached their zenith with complaints about the influence of emperors' maternal kin.⁷² This, of course, comes as little surprise, since imperial relatives must have been resented by other officials. In some cases in the Western Han, these complaints met with an emperor's favor, as certain emperors were eager to eliminate powerful uncles who had become nuisances. For example, in 136 BCE, the aforementioned statesman Dong Zhongshu, Counselor of the Palace (*zhong dafu* 中大夫), urged Emperor Wu to execute his many "brothers, relatives, and those kin with flesh-and-bone ties," because they were creating serious political instability. In particular, he was attacking the immense influence of Emperor Wu's maternal uncle, Tian Fen.⁷³ Dong claimed that the emperor's kin damaged the greater peace (*taiping zhi gong* 太平之公) and could not be controlled.⁷⁴ His views were shared by the court jester, Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (fl. ca. 138–129 BCE), who also submitted a memorial to the emperor, inveighing against favoritism for imperial kin. In particular, the jester urged the emperor to resist the urge to shield an offending nephew from punishment.⁷⁵ The Prime Minister Zhai Fangjin 翟方進 (fl. 28–7 BCE; table 1.1, no. 9) issued similar calls to a later emperor.⁷⁶ And if we can believe the account given by Ban Gu, imperial relatives also deployed the rhetoric of impartiality on occasion, when it was in their best interests. Imperial usurper Wang Mang, for example, also submitted memorials, complaining about the special favors that the empress dowager showered on some of her own kin. (Wang, needless to say, was in the habit of claiming to be virtuous in all possible ways.) Although he was also the empress dowager's kin, he claimed that the favors she showed to other relatives (but not to him) were an expression of partiality, and came at the cost of political cohesion.⁷⁷

In short, it was perhaps no coincidence that certain interpretations of filial obligation emphasized impartial public service over more personal acts of devotion to parents. In fact, these interpretations of filial obligation may be seen as

nothing more than a subset of a larger political rhetoric that flourished during the Warring States and Western Han periods. Furthermore, such rhetoric was constantly deployed in court struggles during the Western Han, mostly by ministers who sought to curb the power and privilege of imperial relatives.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Why did so few officials choose to observe three years mourning in the Western Han, an age that glorified filial piety? Or, to put the question in more positive terms, why did Western Han officials and imperial family members observe mourning periods that were shorter than those prescribed by the ritual classics? No doubt, any answer to this question will have to be tentative, given the limited nature and number of sources for the period. That said, the reasons for observance of shorter mourning periods cannot be chalked up to Western Han court policy. Emperor Wen did indeed discourage others from observing three years mourning for himself, but Han rulers even before Wang Mang appear to have encouraged the practice, and even punished members of the ruling elite who disregarded their mourning obligations or violated ritual taboos. Nor can we interpret shorter mourning periods simply as a sign that few members of the political elite were “Confucianized.” Certainly, some members of the elite may have been ignorant of or indifferent to classical mourning protocol. Yet familiarity with classical prescriptions alone would not have been enough to goad members of the Han political elite into wearing extended mourning, because classical authors failed to articulate a consistent position on the relationship between mourning and filial obligation. In fact, some classical authors regarded impartial public service, more than the observance of extended mourning, as the ultimate expression of filial obligation. This understanding of filial obligation, furthermore, was consistent with the dominant court rhetoric at the time. Such rhetoric called upon men, especially rulers, to transcend their personal feelings and affinities in order to bring about an impartial public order.

Two accounts of Western Han officials in mourning, provided by Ban Gu, offer material for further reflection. The first is about the aforementioned Yuan She, who was famous for observing three years mourning. When his father died, Yuan lived in a lean-to by the side of the tomb for three years. He won great fame for this, in part because he was one of the few men of his age who observed three years mourning. Unfortunately, Yuan left behind no documents explaining his actions, but looking at subsequent events in his life, his decision to observe three years mourning fits a larger pattern. Yuan became famous for spending large sums of money to build an extravagant tomb for his father but little for other things. More tellingly, he quit his post as the Magistrate of Gukou 谷口 and spent a year as a fugitive in order to avenge his uncle’s murder.⁷⁸ Yuan’s choices, particularly his decision to avenge his uncle, suggest that he put personal obligations above official duty (and, for that matter, above

the law). In contrast, Prime Minister Zhai Fangjin, an older contemporary of Yuan's, had been one of the most powerful men in the empire. Yet when his stepmother died, Zhai refused to observe three years mourning and removed his mourning garments after only thirty-six days. According to Ban, this was not a sign that Zhai lacked filial piety; on the contrary, he had been a good son who loved his stepmother and treated her well. He did not mourn her for long because, as the most senior minister in the empire, Zhai felt that he should not turn his back on the precedent set by Emperor Wen.⁷⁹ Zhai's conduct in mourning was thus consistent with his priorities. For him, fulfilling his official duties in an impartial manner came before personal obligations, and he urged the Han emperors to do the same.⁸⁰

The two accounts of Yuan She and Zhai Fangjin, I would argue, provide us with contrasting understandings of filial piety. The first view, epitomized by Yuan, maintains that a man expressed his filial obligations to kin through various acts of personal devotion, such as mourning, building lavish tombs, and even leaving an official post to avenge their deaths, if necessary. This is perhaps the understanding of filial piety that Huo Guang promoted in his prosecution of the heir apparent, as detailed at the beginning of this chapter. It is also an understanding of filial piety that Max Weber noticed years ago—that is, a view of filial obligation as primarily a personal obligation between a man and his father, or between a subject and his lord. In contrast, the second understanding of filial piety, epitomized by Zhai, provides a very different view. Although this understanding also regards filial piety as the basis for political relations, it maintains that a son served his father best not by fulfilling all of his personal obligations to his father, or attending to his father's needs, but through impartial public service. In essence, this understanding required sons to do more than extend or transfer their feelings for their fathers to their lords. Rather, it required sons to transcend their personal feelings and motivations, transforming them into impartial public-mindedness.

The fact that competing understandings of filial piety existed raises the question of which of these views was dominant during the Western Han. Certainly it is tempting to argue that the understanding epitomized by Yuan She was dominant. After all, this was the understanding of filial piety that the great masters of the Warring States purportedly endorsed. But the fact that so few members of the political elite appear to have chosen to observe three years mourning suggests the contrary: it hints that views of filial piety that took impartial state service to be an important expression of filial obligation were more significant during the Western Han. Yet this understanding of filial piety did not hold sway for long, if it ever did. As the next chapter will show, another interpretation of filial obligation was soon to emerge in force.