



The Interpretation of Duke Zhuang *Wu Sheng* in *Zuo Zhuan* and the Superstition Behind It

Shuoyao Ni¹ and Wenting Zhao²(✉)

¹ Chinese Literature, Soochow University, Taipei, Taiwan 111002, China

² School of History and Civilization, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an 710000, Shaanxi, China
wtzhao@snnu.edu.cn

Abstract. Because of the age and the abbreviated records, *wu sheng* (寤生), which first appeared in *Zuo Zhuan* (左传), still has unclear interpretations and different way of saying. *Sheng* (生) means birth or giving birth to in Chinese, while the meaning of *wu* (寤) is controversial. This paper compiles the main views on the interpretation of *wu sheng*, which include the following hypotheses: parturition in one's sleep hypothesis, giving birth easily hypothesis, dystocia hypothesis, eye-opened or eye-closed hypothesis, and no breath or suffocation hypothesis. By considering the interpretation from the perspective of folklore and superstition, the parturition in one's sleep hypothesis and giving birth easily hypothesis are the most reliable. In addition, taking into account the social and cultural thinking of the time, superstitious ideas influenced Wu Jiang's (武姜) attitude towards Duke Zhuang of Zheng (郑庄公). Wu Jiang, Duke Zhuang of Zheng's mother disliked him and attempted to suppress and limit his power to govern the country, causing the negative impact on the psychology and behavior of Duke Zhuang of Zheng and even on the politics of the country. Moreover, this paper further shows that Wu Jiang's superstition was not a mindless irrational act, but rather a pragmatic ideology driven by interest. Thus, this paper offers new theoretical ideas about Wu Jiang's eccentricity and the conduct of Duke Zhuang of Zheng.

Keywords: Wu Sheng · superstition · interpretation · *Zuo Zhuan* · Zhengbo defeated Duan in Yan

1 Introduction

In *Zuo Zhuan-The Year of Yin A.D.*, it is recorded that long ago the Duke Wu of Zheng married a woman, whose name was Wu Jiang in the state of Shen. Wu Jiang gave birth to two children, namely, the later Duke Zhuang of Zheng (郑庄公, in the following paper, the authors use Duke Zhuang instead), who was the elder child and the younger child Gong Shu Duan (共叔段, in the following paper, the authors use Duan instead). When Duke Zhuang was born, Wu Jiang was so surprised and frightened, so that she disliked Duke Zhuang and named him *Wusheng*, in the way he was born. Contrarily, she preferred

S. Ni and W. Zhao—Contributed equally.

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the younger child Duan and wanted him to inherit the throne instead of Duke Zhuang [1].

However, Because of the age and the brevity of the records, although many scholars, both ancient and modern, have expressed many opinions about the circumstances of the birth of Duke Zhuang, interpreting what *wu sheng* actually is. However, there is still no unified view. What is more, with the changing time period, various hypotheses have evolved as well. Meanwhile, this is why the term *wu sheng* has been the subject of so much discussion and is not yet definitive. Furthermore, in ancient times the ideology of childbirth was often associated with a superstitious mindset. The fact that Wu Jiang disliked Duke Zhuang because his birth way was also attributable to her being influenced to some extent by folk superstition.

The aim of this paper is to explore which of the many interpretations of *wu sheng* is more reliable, and to demonstrate this from the point of view of superstition. Therefore, the paper begins by collating the many interpretations of the word *wu sheng* that have been used throughout history and offering a more fitting interpretation. This is followed by an analysis of the influence of superstitious ideas on the personal psychology and behavior of Duke Zhuang, and even on the politics of the state, in order to illustrate the status and importance of superstitious ideas in society at the time.

2 The Hypotheses About the Meaning of *Wu Sheng*

The term *wu sheng*, as mentioned in *Zuo Zhuan*, has been the subject of Many debates and uncertainty among scholars throughout the ages. In Chinese, this word is constituted by two words *wu* and *sheng*. The latter means birth or giving birth to in Chinese. The differences in the interpretation of the word *wu sheng* are mainly due to divergences in the interpretation of the word *wu*, among which there are the parturition in one's sleep hypothesis, giving birth easily hypothesis, dystocia hypothesis, eye-opened or eye-closed hypothesis, and no breath or suffocation hypothesis. All of the hypotheses have some basis and a long history.

2.1 The Parturition in One's Sleep Hypothesis and Giving Birth Easily Hypothesis

The parturition in one's sleep hypothesis, which interprets *wu sheng* as to give birth to a child in sleep, is of very early origin. In the Western Jin Dynasty, the scholar Du Yu holds this opinion and remarked: "Because Duke Zhuang was born while Wu Jiang was sleeping, she was surprised and disgusted by him" [1]. Regarding the etymological meaning of the word *wu*, it is stated in the *Shuowenjiezi* (说文解字): "Talking in sleep is called *wu* (寤)" [2]. Zhang Yuwei explains that the word *wu mei* (寤寐) does not mean waking up but rather having perceptions while sleeping [3]. Moreover, in the Song Dynasty, the scholar Yao Lingwei commented on Duyu's opinion, "It refers to the fact that Wu Jiang was particularly susceptible to giving birth to children" [4].

This statement interprets *wu* as *wu mei*, referring to the birth of a child in mother's sleep. As giving birth in sleep means that there is less perception, pain and efforts during childbirth, the giving birth easily hypothesis developed. However, the idea of an easy

birth was considered to be a sign of misfortune at the time. Therefore, the birth of the Duke Zhuang frightened Wu Jiang, and made her displeased.

2.2 The Dystocia Hypothesis

Another theory is that *wu sheng* is dystocia, which means the position of the fetus when it is born is opposite to the normal fetus, or refers to a difficult birth. Also in the *Shiji-Zheng Shijia*, Sima Qian interprets *wu sheng* as meaning difficult to give birth [5]. Lei Xueqi notes: “The difficulty of birth means disobedience” [6]. The reason for the interpretation of *wu sheng* as difficult childbirth is closely related to the linguistic phenomenon in Chinese language, *jiajie* (whose literal meaning is borrowing, which means to use a word with the same pronunciation to replace the original word) of *wu*. The main common using words are 迺 (pronounced *wu*), 𠄎 (pronounced *wu*), 牯 (pronounced *wu*) and 𠄎 (pronounced *wu*). In the *Jiao Shi Bi Sheng* (焦氏笔乘), it is mentioned that “*wu* (寤) is the same as *wu* (迺), the same sound but a different character, and *wu* (迺) refers to the reverse” [7]. Zhang Zilie says: “*wu* (迺) is what now called the position of the fetus when it is born is opposite to the normal fetus” [8]. Huang Sheng suggests: “I think *wu* (寤) should be connected with *wu* (牯), which also means opposite” [9]. According to Wang Li, the word *wu* (寤) is the same as *wu* (牯) which has the same pronunciation with different forms meaning ‘backwards’, which means to be born upside down [10]. Although it is not yet possible to determine which of these words is used, they all have the meaning of *opposite*. In this aspect, the birth position of Duke Zhuang was different and in the opposite to the normal fetus, with his feet coming out first and his head coming out afterwards, which brought a great risk to his mother, and therefore frightened Wu Jiang.

2.3 The Eye-Opened and Eye-Closed Hypotheses

There are also the eye-opened and eye-closed hypotheses. Both of these sayings can be traced back to the *Fengsutongyi* (风俗通义) and can therefore be grouped together. According to what later generations cited, it is clear that there are records of customs related to the children who were *wu sheng* in the *Fengsutongyi*. However, later generations put forward different or even opposite viewpoints of this story, making it difficult to examine the original form of this word.

The eye-closed hypotheses can be divided into two categories: those who can see with their eyes closed, and those who cannot see with their eyes closed. According to Yao Kuan’s view, in *Fengsutongyi*, parents are warned of the risk of bringing up the children who were *wu sheng*, because it is commonly believed that the children who can see before the eyes opened after they are born bring bad luck to parents. Born with eyes closed but can see things is call *wu sheng* [4]. Therefore, Yao Kuan believes that the meaning of *wu sheng* is being able to see with the eyes closed. However, those who hold the view that the *wu sheng* means born with eyes closed and incapable to see, such as Li Fang of the Song Dynasty, believe that *wu sheng* refers to unable to open the eyes to see after birth [11].

Gu Yanwu of the Qing Dynasty represented the eye-opened hypothesis and held the opinion that “born with eyes opened and can see is *wu sheng*” [12]. That means *wu sheng* refers to being able to open the eyes and see after birth.

2.4 The No Breath and Suffocation Hypotheses

The no breath hypothesis, also known as suffocation hypothesis, first appeared in the Ming and Qing Dynasty. Wan Quan of the Ming Dynasty believed that born with no breath and no cry is called *wu sheng* [13]. Contemporary scholar Zhang Zedu also remarked, “*Wu sheng* means to be born smothered and silent with eyes closed, which is also known as today’s neonatal asphyxia” [14]. Today, various medical books also contain suffocation hypothesis.

Nevertheless, this hypothesis mainly came from the Chinese medical texts after the Jin and Yuan Dynasty (1115 to 1368 A.D.). During the pre-Qin period (before 121 B.C.) people’s cognitive level of nature and social is limited. Such scientific awareness is not formed. Therefore, this statement is unlikely to come out at that time. Moreover, there is no definite evidence and difficult to conclude. Hence, this hypothesis is less likely to be true.

2.5 Analysis of the Interpretations

From a Folk Studies point of view, the idea of the parturition in one’s sleep and giving birth easily are more in line with forbidden folklore ideas. In ancient times, it was common for women to have difficult births. Because of the backwardness of ancient medicine, women often took great risks in giving birth. Although difficult births were painful, they were a common occurrence and therefore not considered to be an ominous sign. On the contrary, the ancients considered an excessively smooth birth to be an inauspicious sign, giving rise to taboo superstitions [17]. Compared to a woman experiencing the pain of a difficult birth, giving birth in her sleep without perceiving is much rarer. Therefore, it is more likely to cause taboos and panic among people than the difficult births. Although there was no pain during the birth, the woman woke up feeling more frightened and scared, which is similar to Wu Jiang’s terror. Hence, the parturition in one’s sleep and giving birth easily hypotheses are more plausible. Liu Wenqiang also supports this view, arguing that the incidence of difficult births is well known and the dangers to a mother are known. Therefore, it is questionable that the risk of dystocia is the highest terror for a mother. On the contrary, it is much more unusual for a baby to be delivered very smoothly, and the likelihood of scared by an easy birth is higher than a difficult birth [18]. Thus, the idea that Wu Jiang unknowingly gave birth to Duke Zhuang in her sleep, causing her scares and displeased with him, is even more reasonable.

In the above four main views, parturition in one’s sleep hypothesis and giving birth easily hypothesis are combined with the actual birth of a child, on the basis of the meaning of the word, contributing to more convincing; the dystocia hypothesis explains from the perspective of *jiajie*, and is intended to justify Sima Qian’s claim, difficult birth, which has a sense of forced analogy. The eye-opened hypothesis and eye-closed hypothesis are both based on the lost *Fengsutongyi*, which are far-fetched in fact. The stop-breathing hypothesis and suffocation hypothesis are from the medical point of view, whereas it

appeared much later than Qin Dynasty, and not quite in line with the cognitive level of the people before Qin Dynasty. Regardless of which hypothesis is true, it is certain that *wu sheng* refers to a kind of abnormal parturition, so that the birth of Duke Zhuang scared Wu Jiang, leading to the disgust of Wu Jiang on Duke Zhuang.

3 The Superstition of *Wu Sheng* and Its Implications

3.1 Superstition and Pragmatism in Childbirth

Wu Jiang's dislike of Duke Zhuang because of the unconventional circumstances of his birth was influenced to some extent by superstition. In ancient China, superstition was often associated with the tradition of giving birth to a child. Moreover, the way a child was born can be used to predict its fate. Superstition refers to blind worship and belief, specifically belief in fairies and ghosts [19]. In the pre-Qin period, people believed in the existence and power of ghosts and gods and held them in high esteem [15]. Moreover, People interpreted unexplained phenomena in nature or in productive life through the belief in superstition. The beliefs shaped people's thinking and led to a distorted understanding of the causality of events, with a great deal of blindness [11]. In ancient China, for example, there were many superstitious ideas about childbirth. Ancient people believed that the power of gods and ghosts could control the human fertility. Consequently, they used the way of divination and sacrifices to pray for a child [16]. They divine the sex of the child, as well as predicting the fortunate timing of the birth. All of these activities reflect that people in the pre-Qin period associated the tradition of childbirth with superstitious beliefs.

Wu Jiang received a fright during childbirth also due to the influence of superstitious beliefs. As mentioned above, giving birth without pain and even easily in her sleep was a highly uncommon and unbelievable event in ancient times. Therefore, it triggered superstitious imaginings of strange events, which involved superstitious beliefs. It was believed that a child born in the way of *wu sheng* carried an ominous sign that frightened Wu Jiang and in turn generated her dislike of Duke Zhuang.

In addition, Wu Jiang's superstitious beliefs, which were originally only a personal dislike towards Duke Zhuang, further influenced the political situation of the state Zheng. Hence, it is an evidence that Wu Jiang also had a pragmatic mindset of using superstition for political benefits. During the development of society in ancient times, the mindless worship of ghosts and gods diminished, and the status of people gradually improved. People focused more on harnessing faith in the service of people [12]. The change of the relationship between gods and humans also led to the gradual development of pragmatism in the society. Instead of mindlessly adoring ghosts and gods, people used their faith to achieve certain personal or national interests. In the Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu then used the concept of heavenly beings to limit the power of the emperor and thus stabilize politics. Thus, under such superstitious ideas, Wu Jiang disliked Duke Zhuang and wanted to install Duan as the ruler, namely, the Duke. On the surface, her behavior is a personal preference caused by her superstitious thoughts. However, her actions have had a major impact on national politics. It is a choice of interests accomplished under the influence of superstitious ideas. Wu Jiang's dislike of Duke Zhuang because of his superstitious ideology was in fact a choice made by Wu Jiang for her own benefit. Wu

Jiang disliked Duke Zhuang and favored Duan so she asked her husband to claim Duan as the successor, and later asked for cities Zhi and Jing for Duan. This was not only a choice of preference based on personal psychology, but it also evolved into an influence on national politics and monarchical power due to interest and pragmatic psychology.

3.2 The Implications of Superstition Behind the Concept *Wu Sheng*

As mentioned before, the unified theocracy in the Spring and Autumn period had begun to be overturned, folk beliefs were developing toward pragmatism and utilitarianism and gradually becoming a tool of politics [18]. However, people had not yet developed a scientific knowledge of the world, and the superstitious thinking based on the Confucian perspective on providence, ghost and gods still prevailed and penetrated into many directions of social life. Sima Qian said the chaos of the Spring and Autumn Period in *The Autobiography of the Grand Historian*: “If you observe the ancient kings, you will know that the reason for the collapse of the country is that the kings failed in the execution of their duty and lost their conscience” [5]. He attributed the root cause of the chaos of the Spring and Autumn period, such as the disorder of rulers and ministers, the collapse of rituals and the destruction of music, to “lost their duty and conscience”. Duke Zhuang was a lord of the early Spring and Autumn Period. However, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* records the events, such as *Zhengbo (Duke Zhuang) defeated Duan in Yan* and *Zhengbo (Duke Zhuang) using a piece of jade to borrow Xutian (land of the ancient country Lu, a village in today’s Henan province)*, to satirize his unkindness and unrighteousness. That is because the *Spring and Autumn Annals* values human decency and distinguishes right from wrong. The recording of these events reveals the Duke Zhuang’s loss of conscience and the duty as a ruler, despite his great deeds [20]. This loss is actually related to his unique birth. Because his unusual way of birth, which is recorded as *wu sheng*, is considered a bad omen according to the superstitious thoughts, his mother Wu Jiang disgust him extremely and name him after the way he was born. Afterwards, Wu Jiang, guided by pragmatism, used this superstition to achieve her political intentions, which had a certain influence on Duke Zhuang himself and his political style after he became the Duke of the duchy of Zheng, and then on the fate of the ducky of Zheng.

The case of *Zhengbo (Duke Zhuang) defeated Duan in Yan* is a famous article in *Zuo Zhuan*, and has been the subject of much litigation in academic circles, so it is worthwhile to start from this point to see the impact of the superstition involved in *Wu Sheng*. According to comments of *Zuo Zhuan*: “Duke Zhuang defeated Duan in Yan”. For Duke Zhuang, Duan is a competitor rather than a brother. Therefore, he is not addressed as Duke Zhuang’s brother. These two fought for the throne of the country Zheng. Hence, the word defeat is used here. Duke Zhuang is called Zhengbo here to ridicule his dereliction of educating his younger brother Duan. Also, to blame Duke Zhuang’s ruthless, it is said to be Duke Zhuang’s will to drive Duan away instead of indicating that Duan took refuge on his own will... As the gentlemen in ancient China said: “Ying Kao Shu is filial. He is not only filial to his mother, but also led Duke Zhuang to be filial to Duke Zhuang’s mother”. Just as the *Book of Poetry* says: “The filial piety of a filial son is reveals. He always shares his filial piety with his peers” [1]. Du Yu also expressed the similar opinion: “It is Duke Zhuang’s fault not to stop Duan’s evil deeds earlier but to indulge him. In the text, Duan is described as escape to other countries

but not go to. The word defeat is used to describe the ending of the conflict between the two brothers. In this way the author wants to reveal Duke Zhuang's intension to kill his younger brother and Duan's terrible ending" [9]. According to Du Yu, because of *wu sheng*, for one thing, Duke Zhuang failed in disciplining and guiding his younger brother, conniving at Duan's crime. His connivance finally led to a big mistake made by Duan. For another, when Duan made the big mistake, Duke Zhuang had no regard for brotherly love. On the contrary, he brutally hunted down and killed his younger brother Duan. The Spring and Autumn Annals summarizes this event, which lasted for about forty years, in one sentence Zhengbo defeated Duan in Yan, which seems to focus on the conflict between Duke Zhuang and his brother Duan on the surface. In contrast, *Zuo Zhuan* ends the matter in the context of the meeting between Duke Zhuang and Wu Jiang at the netherworld, which is call *huangquan* (literally the Yellow Spring) in Chinese, and comments on it with the words "books remarked" and "gentlemen said", shifting the focus of the conflict from the regime confrontation to the choice between reasons and emotions [21]. It is generally believed that the "books remarked" and "gentlemen said" in *Zuo Zhuan* closely link the monarch's personal character formation with the state's political decision, seeking the possibility of overlapping political morality and family ethics [10]. The moral choice of human behind political disputes is the focus of scriptures of the Spring and Autumn Annals. In the case of Duke Zhuang, this viewpoint is true. This incident took place in the year of 722 A.D. Combined with the historical background, the collapse of rituals and the destruction of music should not be so bad at this time. However, Wu Jiang's superstitious psychology has led to this event. Its external manifestation was the disgust for Duke Zhuang, so much so that she repeatedly asked Duke Zhuang's father to claim Duan as the heir to the throne. After the reign of Duke Zhuang, she also repeatedly asked Duke Zhuang for excellent fiefdom to Duan, where the preference is overflowing. According to Adler's psychoanalytic principle: "When a child in a family is particularly favored, we will find that the other children have an inferiority complex and have to fight for superiority complex" [22]. It is not difficult to imagine that Wu Jiang's superstition caused Duke Zhuang to develop an inferiority complex and fall into self-doubt. His name Wusheng was a shadow and a pain throughout Duke Zhuang's life.

When Ji Zhong reminded Duke Zhuang that he should not give the Jing region to Duan, he said, "If Wu Jiang wants it, how can I prevent scourge?" Some scholars interpreted this as *filial piety*, which was a misinterpretation of the relationship between Duke Zhuang and his mother Wu Jiang. Here is more of a reflection of the fact that Wu Jiang's will was one of the most feared obstacles to Duke Zhuang's behavior. Besides, from the historical materials, it can be seen that Duke Zhuang's subsequent tolerance of Duan was also out of fear of Wu Jiang. The recent publication of the Warring States Bamboo Sketch (VI) in the Tsinghua University Collection, the chapter of Zheng Wu's wife (Wu Jiang) regulates Ru Zi (refers to Duke Zhuang), also made a strong addition to the relevant historical facts: "Ru Zi does obeisance, all people were present. From this date to the day of burial, Ru Zi did not dare to know, and senior officials and the hundred deacons who followed them were all afraid and each was respectful of their duties." This shows that Wu Jiang had great ambition and authority over the regime. The name Ru Zi in ancient Chinese language often refers to underage children, while

many scholars believe this word here does not specially emphasize that Duke Zhuang is underage. Moreover, Duke Zhuang's concessions to Wu Jiang were not due to his young age and be under the control of his mother [23]. Therefore, the only explanation is the persistent trauma of superstitious psychology, which Wu Jiang used to press Duke Zhuang since he was young, making him timid and inferior, so as to achieve the effect of giving up his power.

Nevertheless, it turns out that Duke Zhuang was far less vulnerable than Wu Jiang thought. Despite backing down, he never conceded power and did not hesitate to deliver a fatal blow to Duan when he was strong enough and the situation was favorable. At this moment, he overcame his demons and transcended his superstition of *wu sheng*. Although Wu Jiang's superstitious behavior did not ultimately achieve her goal, the ethical choices and political decisions made by Duke Zhuang were more or less influenced by the superstitious thought of *wu sheng*. From which we can see the hidden and lasting influence of the superstitious concept on individuals and the state in the pre-Qin period and the development of the superstitious concept at this time.

4 Conclusion

The interpretation of Duke Zhuang's name *Wusheng* has been widely discussed, but the parturition in one's sleep hypothesis is more in line with the actual birth of a child, the folklore and the superstitious ideas at that time. At the same time, Wu Jiang's superstitious idea of giving birth to a child is not simply irrational superstition, but also contains the color of superstitious pragmatism. However, in general, the superstitious thinking based on the concept of ghosts and gods still prevailed, and Wu Jiang had influenced Duke Zhuang with her superstitious thinking since he was young, which had a great influence on his personal character and the choices he made. As the ruler of a country, Duke Zhuang's ethical choices and political decisions had a hidden and lasting influence on the fate and development of the state of Zheng at that time, from which the dynamic relationship between folk superstition, the ruler and the fate of the state can be seen.

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