

**"IT IS DIFFICULT FOR WIDOWS TO ENTRUST THEIR FINANCIAL
AFFAIRS TO OTHERS"**

By Yuan Cai

Introduction

Women's roles in imperial China varied with age, generational status, the bearing of sons, and with class. In both elite and commoner households, however, women were often in charge of managing the household — this involved the management and conservation of grain, cloth, and other goods, and the management of finances.

The following excerpts are taken from a book of advice for family heads by the Song dynasty scholar and official Yuan Cai (ca. 1140-ca. 1195).

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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"It is Difficult for Widows to Entrust Their Financial Affairs to Others"

By Yuan Cai

Some wives with stupid husbands are able to manage the family's finances, calculating the outlays and receipts of money and grain, without being cheated by anyone. Of those with degenerate husbands, there are also some who are able to manage the finances with the help of their sons without ending in bankruptcy. ... But the most remarkable are the women who manage a household after their husbands have died leaving them with young children. Such women could entrust their finances to their husband's kinsmen or their own kinsmen, but not all relatives are honorable, and the honorable ones are not necessarily willing to look after other people's business.

Questions:

1. How does the portrayal of women in this passage fit with your conceptions about women's family roles in imperial China?
2. Look at other texts concerning women's roles (such as those written by Ban Zhao and Empress Xu). Do you see evidence in these texts that would confirm the impression of women's roles that you see in this passage?
3. What qualities or characteristics would a woman need to have in order to successfully manage the family finances in the situations described?

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

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Some wives with stupid husbands are able to manage the family’s finances, calculating the outlays and receipts of money and grain, without being cheated by anyone. Of those with degenerate husbands, there are also some who are able to manage the finances with the help of their sons without ending in bankruptcy. Even among those whose husbands have died and whose sons are young, there are occasionally women able to raise and educate their sons, keep the affection of all their relatives, manage the family business, and even prosper. All of these are wise and worthy women. But the most remarkable are the women who manage a household after their husbands have died leaving them with young children. Such women could entrust their finances to their husband’s kinsmen or their own kinsmen, but not all relatives are honorable, and the honorable ones are not necessarily willing to look after other people’s business.

When wives themselves can read and do arithmetic, and those they entrust with their affairs have some sense of fairness and duty with regard to food, clothing, and support, then things will usually work out all right. But in most of the rest of the cases, bankruptcy is what happens.