

PREFACE TO MODELS FOR THE INNER QUARTERS
By Lü Kun

Introduction

Lü Kun (1536-1618), a scholar-official of the Ming dynasty, wrote on education from a number of perspectives. The following document on the education of women is an example.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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The early kings valued the instruction of women. Therefore women had female teachers, who would explicate the sayings of old and cite examples from ancient worthies so that [the women] would carefully adhere to the principle of “thrice obeying (*sancong*) [i.e., to obey one’s father when young, one’s husband when married, and one’s son when old] and to revere the four virtues [i.e., proper behavior, speech, demeanor, and employment] so as to bring glory on their husbands and not bring down shame on their parents. With the decline of education today, women in the inner quarters have really ceased to be governed by rites and laws. ...

... Alas, [moral sentiments of] filiality, prudence, chastity, and martyrdom [in choosing death over remarrying] are inherent in one’s Heaven-given nature. To have a fine reputation that lasts for generations, one need not be literate, but it is rare that someone who learns to recite orally [accounts about] those with fine lasting reputations, fails to follow their good example.

Questions:

1. As you read these lines, what do you conclude are the author’s thoughts on the purpose of female education?
2. Are the purposes of female education as indicated here fundamentally different from the purposes of the education of males at the same time?

Longer Selection

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The early kings valued the instruction of women. Therefore women had female teachers, who would explicate the sayings of old and cite examples from ancient worthies so that [the women] would carefully adhere to the principle of “thrice obeying” (*sancong*) [i.e., to obey one’s father when young, one’s husband when married, and one’s son when old] and to revere the four virtues [i.e., proper behavior, speech, demeanor, and employment] so as to bring glory on their husbands and not bring down shame on their parents. With the decline of education today, women in the inner quarters have really ceased to be governed by rites and laws. Those born in villages are accustomed to hearing coarse words and those [born] in rich households have loose, proud, and extravagant natures. Their heads are covered with gold and pearls and their entire bodies with fine silks. They affect lightheartedness in behavior and cleverness in speech, but they mouth no beneficial words and perform no good deeds. Their parents and sisters-in-law will not be able to pass on reputations for worthiness or filiality, and neighbors and relatives will hear only of their obstinacy — all because they are uneducated.

At the high end are those [women] who wield their writing brushes and aspire to [develop] their talents in *sao* poetry so as to brag that they are superb scholars. At the low end are those who strum vulgar [tunes] on their stringed instruments and sing lascivious words, almost like prostitutes — all because of the spread of depraved instruction. If in its myriad forms, education for the women’s quarters is like this, then how might the governance of the inner [quarters] be rectified?

Various books for the instruction of women have been prepared by the ancients. But being numerous, they are difficult to master; being abstruse, they are difficult to understand; being diverse, their quality cannot be clearly differentiated; and being dull and flavorless, they cannot move others to feel awe. ... Alas, [moral sentiments of] filiality, prudence, chastity, and martyrdom [in choosing death over remarrying] are inherent in one’s Heaven-given nature. To have a fine reputation that lasts for generations, one need not be literate, but it is rare that someone who learns to recite orally [accounts about] those with fine lasting reputations, fails to follow their good example.