

**EXCERPTS FROM THE GREAT LEARNING FOR WOMEN (ONNA
DAIGAKU)**
by Kaibara Ekken

Introduction

Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714) was a neo-Confucian scholar and naturalist who served the Kuroda lords of Fukuoka domain on the southern island of Kyushu. Ekken was committed to popularizing Confucian ethics and was well-known for his accessible self-help guides — down-to-earth manuals of behavior written in vernacular Japanese rather than in difficult scholarly language. Ekken's treatises included volumes delineating proper conduct for lords, warriors, children, families, and, perhaps most famously, women. In *Onna daigaku* (The Great Learning for Women) Ekken promotes a strict code of behavior for mothers, wives, and daughters very much in harmony with the neo-Confucian intellectual orthodoxy of Tokugawa Japan.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions

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Excerpts from The Great Learning for Women (Onna Daigaku)
by Kaibara Ekken

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It is the duty of a girl living in her parents' house to practice filial piety toward her father and mother. But after marriage, her duty is to honor her father-in-law and mother-in-law, to honor them beyond her father and mother, to love and reverence them with all ardor, and to tend them with a practice of filial piety. While thou honorest thine own parents, think not lightly of thy father-in-law! Never should a woman fail, night and morning, to pay her respects to her father-in-law and mother-in-law. Never should she be remiss in performing any tasks they may require of her. With all reverence she must carry out, and never rebel against, her father-in-law's commands. On every point must she inquire of her father-in-law and mother-in-law and accommodate herself to their direction. Even if thy father-in-law and mother-in-law are disposed to hate and vilify thee, do not be angry with them, and murmur not. If thou carry piety toward them to its utmost limits and minister to them in all sincerity, it cannot be but that they will end by becoming friendly to thee.

A woman has no other lord; she must look to her husband as her lord and must serve him with all worship and reverence, not despising or thinking lightly of him. The Way of the woman is to obey her man. In her dealings with her husband, both the expression of her countenance and the style of her address should be courteous, humble, and conciliatory, never

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peevish and intractable, never rude and arrogant — that should be a woman's first and principal care. When the husband issues his instructions, the wife must never disobey them. In doubtful cases she should inquire of her husband and obediently follow his commands. If her husband ever asks her a question, she should answer to the point; to answer carelessly would be a mark of rudeness. If her husband becomes angry at any time, she must obey him with fear and trembling and not oppose him in anger and forwardness. A woman should look on her husband as if he were Heaven itself and never weary of thinking how she may yield to him and thus escape celestial castigation.

...

A woman must always be on the alert and keep a strict watch over her own conduct. In the morning she must rise early and at night go late to rest. Instead of sleeping in the middle of the day, she must be intent on the duties of her household; she must not grow tired of weaving, sewing, and spinning. She must not drink too much tea and wine, nor must she feed her eyes and ears on theatrical performances (kabuki, jōruri), ditties, and ballads. ...

...

In her capacity as a wife, she must keep her husband's household in proper order. If the wife is evil and profligate, the house will be ruined. In everything she must avoid extravagance, and in regard to both food and clothes, she must act according to her station in life and never give in to luxury and pride.

...

The five worst infirmities that afflict women are indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy, and silliness. Without any doubt, these five infirmities are found in seven or eight of every ten women, and it is they that cause women to be inferior to men. A woman should counteract them with self-inspection and self reproach. The worst of them all and the parent of the other four is silliness. A woman's nature is passive (yin). The yin nature comes from the darkness of night. Hence, as viewed from the standard of a man's nature, a woman's foolishness [means that she] fails to understand the duties that lie before her very eyes, does not recognize the actions that will bring blame on her own head, and does not comprehend even those things that will bring calamity to her husband and children. Nor when she blames and accuses and curses innocent persons or when, in her jealousy of others, she thinks only of herself, does she see that she is her own enemy, alienating others and incurring their hatred. Lamentable errors. Again, in the education of her children, her blind affection induces an erroneous system. Such is the stupidity of her character that it is incumbent on her, in every detail, to distrust herself and obey her husband.

["Onna daigaku," in *NST*, vol. 34, pp. 202–5; trans. adapted and revised from Chamberlain, "Educational Literature of Japanese Women," pp. 325-43; WTdB]

Questions:

1. What values does the author of this piece feel are most important for women to cultivate?

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2. Do you think Ekken advocated education for women? Why or why not?
3. What does Ekken mean by “silliness” in this passage?
4. Do you think most women in Tokugawa Japan followed codes of conduct like those outlined here?