

EXCERPTS FROM INSTRUCTIONS TO MY DAUGHTER
By Song Siyŏl

Introduction

Song Siyŏl (1607-1689) was a prominent scholar and official. This piece was written for his oldest daughter on the occasion of her marriage and subsequently became an important tutelary text that circulated among elite families. By the time this text was written, the patterns of patrilocal residence and patrilineal descent advocated by Neo-Confucian reformers early in the Chosŏn dynasty had become well established.

Document Excerpt with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from Instructions to My Daughter
By Song Siyŏl

How to Serve Your Husband

A woman's hundred-year hopes and aspirations rest with her husband. Serving your husband lies in not going against his wishes. Respect and support his wishes completely, not going against even one word or decision except on those occasions when he is about to make a completely unacceptable mistake. ...

[Translated by JaHyun Kim Haboush]

Question:

1. For the daughter and for Song himself, what might be at stake in her successful adherence to these precepts?

Longer Selection

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How to Serve Your Husband

A woman's hundred-year hopes and aspirations rest with her husband. Serving your husband lies in not going against his wishes. Respect and support his wishes completely, not going against even one word or decision except on those occasions when he is about to make a completely unacceptable mistake. Not being jealous is the first thing in serving one's husband. Even if he acquires a hundred concubines, accept them with equanimity. No matter how much he loves a concubine, do not get angry with him; instead show him more respect. Your husband is a serious scholar and will not indulge in women. Nor are you the type of woman who will be jealous. However, I am still warning you of the danger. Not only should you pay heed but when you have daughters, instruct them also on this matter. Many families have been ruined by women's jealousy. Jealousy nullifies all other beautiful conduct. Despite intimacy, husband and wife should always be respectful of each other. Speaking of all other matters of daily life, you should not be too loose, and you should treat him as a respected guest. Then your husband will treat you with respect in return. Please pay heed to this.

How to Instruct Children

It is said that mothers instruct daughters and fathers sons, but sons are also taught by mothers before they learn to read. Teach them not to lie; do not urge them to study too often, but only three times a day. Forbid them to engage in silly games and do not let them lie down in view of other people. Have them wash early in the morning, and if they say that they promised something to their friends, make certain that they carry out promises so that they will not betray the trust of others. Prevent them from associating with unseemly groups and make them attend the family ancestral rites. In his conduct, a son should model himself after the worthies of previous generations. After his fifteenth year, let your husband take over his instruction. If you take care, he will naturally grow up to be a proper and good-hearted scholar.

If you do not teach him when he is young and you begin late, it will be impossible to teach him. Early instruction will lead to the preservation of the family and will spare dishonor to oneself. This is really up to the mother, so do not blame the father. In pregnancy, you should not eat unclean food or lie down on crooked bedding. If you always maintain proper conduct, the child will naturally be well behaved. Children take after their mother in many ways: they are in the mother's womb for ten months, and before thirteen years of age, they are taught by

their mother. If you do not instruct them, children will not become good. It is the same with teaching daughters. Making it too easy for your sons and daughters for fear that might get ill, or being concerned only with their comfort, amounts to nothing less than cheating them. Instruct them well.

How to Be Careful in Your Words

There is a saying that a bride spends three years as if blind, three years as if deaf, and three years as if dumb. What this means is that you do not speak when you see things or hear things and speak only when it is absolutely necessary. It is best to be careful in your words. If you are not careful, disputes and fights will ensue even when you are right, not to mention when you are wrong. If you speak of the faults of other people, it will cause resentment, and fights and curses will follow. Your parents-in-law and other relatives will regard you as a beast; slaves and neighbors will look at you with disdain. With my own tongue I am harming my own body. There is nothing more pitiable and pathetic. In all hundred matters of conduct, being careful with words comes first. Please pay heed so that you will have nothing to regret on this score.

How to Look After Property

While property is limited, spending can be limitless. If you spend with no regard [to the consequences], you will have no money to marry children off, and they will become commoners. Is this not a fearful thing? Even the emperor will bring ruin to his country if he does not regulate his spending. If an ordinary family does not economize, where will the money come from? In times of good or bad harvest, one must estimate the total yields against the number of ancestral sacrifices and the number of family members. Though one should perform the sacrifices with sincerity, do not prepare excessively or waste things. Do not spend too much on luxurious clothes or food. On those occasions when you must spend, do not be abstemious but spend nothing on unnecessary things. If you adjust expenses on food and clothing according to your financial situation, and if you incur no foolish expenses, you will have enough. If there is any left over, then you can use it for medicine when someone gets ill or to pay for other emergencies. If there is no need for that, then buy rice fields and vegetable fields to leave to your children. In managing a household, there is no better way than frugal spending.

Other Essential Advice

When you are deciding on your child's marriage, be sure to look into the moral behavior of his or her prospective in-laws, but not their wealth. This is an important affair in life, and everything concerning the bride or groom should be investigated. But you should leave things to your husband, and if you are not informed of certain matters, do not pretend that you are, making decisions on the basis of superficial knowledge. If you get a daughter-in-law from a

family a little less well off than you, then she will be careful. If you send your daughter to a family a little better off than you, then she will be careful.

There are no virtues greater than loyalty, generosity, and kindness. If you happen to become involved in matters of great consequence, be as firm and precise as a sharp knife in executing your decision. Do not listen to others but rely on your own judgment.

It is best not to demean yourself. The ancients did not demean themselves when they met great predicaments. Why should one demean oneself over small matters? Seeking something from others when there is no need, accepting food under undesirable circumstances, or, urged by someone else, doing something against your will — all can be constituted as demeaning. Please take it to your heart to live courageously and with principle.

[Translated by JaHyun Kim Haboush]

Questions:

1. For the daughter and for Song himself, what might be at stake in her successful adherence to these precepts?
2. What sorts of behaviors in marriage does Song recommend to his daughter? What does he admonish her against? What is the portrait of an ideal wife that emerges?
3. Song's advice is also littered with "exceptions." Under what sorts of circumstances do these appear, and what significance do they lend to the overall portrait of ideal female conduct that emerges?