

EXCERPTS FROM EMPRESS XU'S INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE INNER QUARTERS

Introduction

Empress Xu (d. 1407) was the third wife of the Ming Yongle emperor (r. 1402-1424). She was the daughter of General Xu Da, who had played an important part in the campaigns of the Ming dynasty's founder, Zhu Yuanzhang, the Hongwu emperor. Empress Xu, who was well read and of strong character, wanted to write a guide for the cultivation of women. In doing so, she was inspired by the instruction that she received from her mother-in-law, Empress Ma. Empress Ma was a fine role model: a self-educated, well-read woman, a humane and supportive mother-in-law, she viewed herself as sharing her husband Hongwu's responsibilities as ruler and did not back off from offering her advice and criticism to her famously short-tempered husband.

What follows are excerpts from Empress Xu's *Instructions for the Inner Quarters*.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from Empress Xu's Instructions for the Inner Quarters

The Moral Nature

Being upright and modest, reserved and quiet, correct and dignified, sincere and honest: these constitute the moral nature of a woman. Being filial and respectful, humane and perspicacious, loving and warm, meek and gentle: these represent the complete development of the moral nature. The moral nature being innate in our endowment, it becomes transformed and fulfilled through practice. It is not something that comes from the outside but is actually rooted in our very selves.

Cultivation of the Self

... Now if the self is not cultivated, then virtue will not be established. If one's virtue is not established, rarely can one be an influence for good in the family -- how much less in the wider world. Therefore the wife is one who follows her husband. The way of husband and wife is the principle of the strong and the weak. In the past, the reason why enlightened monarchs were careful about establishing marriage was that they valued the way of procreation and perpetuation. The prosperity or decline of the family, the rise and fall of the state are intimately linked to this. ...

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Frugality

... Each strand of silk comes from the labor of some working woman; each grain of rice comes from the hard work of a farmer. The efforts that went into the final product were not made easily. To use these without some sense of limits is to do violence to what comes from Heaven -- there is no greater fault. ...

Looking Up to Virtuous Exemplars [of the Past]

... If, in taking the ancient sages as models and trying to emulate them, you equal them, you can be a sage. Short of this, you can be a worthy; and if you are not this [successful], you still will not have failed to follow what is good.

Pearls and jade are not what is precious [to a woman]; to emulate sageliness is.

Questions:

1. What aspects of Empress Xu's advice to women are gender-specific?
2. What aspects transcend the boundaries of gender?
3. What are your reactions to Empress Xu's description of the nature of marriage?
4. Compare Empress Xu's advice to women to that of Ban Zhao. What differences and similarities do you find? Do you see any evidence of change over time?

Longer Selection

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Excerpts from Empress Xu's Instructions for the Inner Quarters

Preface

As a child, I was well instructed by my parents, reciting such classics as the *Classic of Odes* and the *Classic of Documents* and carrying out the details of women's work. On account of the accumulated goodness and blessings of our ancestors, I by chance was chosen to enter the imperial harem. Morning and night, I served at court. The Empress Ma instructed all the wives of her sons, especially in the area of proper decorum and ritual. I respectfully accepted and tried to carry out her orders. Every day I received instructions from her, respectfully obeyed them, not daring to transgress even one of her rules.

I have respectfully served the present [Yongle] Emperor for thirty-some years. In doing so, I have tried to carry out completely my predecessor's [Empress Ma's] wishes by putting into practice her teachings on governance of the inner palace. ...

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I often read accounts in the histories, searching for virtuous wives and chaste women of the past. Although they are all praised for the greatness of their [innate] moral nature, still none among them has succeeded without having had some instruction. With the ancients, education had to have some method to it. [According to the *Record of Rites*,] boys at the age of eight entered elementary school and girls at ten received instruction from a governess. But no textbooks for elementary learning were passed down until Zhu Xi compiled and edited a text for this level [the *Elementary Learning*]. It is only in the area of elementary education for girls that there still remains no comprehensive text. ...

There has been a recent increase in publications of female instructions but ... better than any of these are the words of our illustrious Empress Ma's instructions, which stand above anything written before and which are well worth being passed down to future generations. I listened to them avidly and stored them in my heart. ...

For a person to master sagehood, nothing is more crucial than nourishing one's moral nature so that one is able to cultivate one's self. Therefore I begin the text with "The Moral Nature" followed by "Cultivation of the Self." ...

The Moral Nature

Being upright and modest, reserved and quiet, correct and dignified, sincere and honest: these constitute the moral nature of a woman. Being filial and respectful, humane and perspicacious, loving and warm, meek and gentle: these represent the complete development of the moral nature. The moral nature being innate in our endowment, it becomes transformed and fulfilled through practice. It is not something that comes from the outside but is actually rooted in our very selves.

Of old, upright women ordered their feelings and nature based on moral principle (*li*), kept control over the workings of their mind, and honored the Way and its virtue. Therefore they were able to complement their gentlemen [husbands] in fulfilling the teachings of the Way. This is the reason they took humaneness to be their abode, rightness as their path of action, wisdom as their guide, trustworthiness as their defense, and ritual decorum as the embodiment of it. ...

The accumulation of small faults will mount up to great harm to one's virtue. Therefore a great house will topple over if the foundation is not solid. One's moral nature will have deficiencies if the self is not restrained.

Beautiful jade with no flaws can be made into a precious jewel. An upright woman of pure character can be made the wife of a great family. If you constantly examine your actions to see if they are correct, you can be a model mother. If you are hardworking and frugal without a trace of jealousy, you are fit to be an exemplar for the women's quarters. ...

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Cultivation of the Self

... In the Way of the ancients, if the eye looks at evil sights, then one becomes confused inside; if the ear listens to lewd music, one disturbs one's innate virtue; if the mouth utters boastful talk, arrogance takes over the mind. These are all dangers to the self. Therefore, the wife, while at rest, will certainly be correct so as to guard against harm; and when active in household affairs, will show no partialities so that she can fulfill her moral character.

... Now if the self is not cultivated, then virtue will not be established. If one's virtue is not established, rarely can one be an influence for good in the family -- how much less in the wider world. Therefore the wife is one who follows her husband. The way of husband and wife is the principle of the strong and the weak. In the past, the reason why enlightened monarchs were careful about establishing marriage was that they valued the way of procreation and perpetuation. The prosperity or decline of the family, the rise and fall of the state are intimately linked to this. ...

Diligence and Hard Work

Laziness and licentiousness are disasters to the self, while diligence and hard work without any letup are morally beneficial to the self. Therefore, farmers labor hard at their crops, scholars at their studies, and women at their work. ...

The *Classic of Odes* says, "A woman shall have nothing to do with public affairs [yet] she discards her silkworms and weaving [for this]." This is a defect that comes from laziness. For persons in low and mean positions, it is easy not to be lazy; it is persons of wealth, in high positions, who find it hard not to be lazy. You must exert yourself with respect to this difficulty. Do not be remiss in your ease.

Frugality

... The *Zuozhuan* says, "Frugality is the precious jewel of the sage." It also says, "Frugality is the fullness of virtue. Extravagance is the greatest of evils." Each strand of silk comes from the labor of some working woman; each grain of rice comes from the hard work of a farmer. The efforts that went into the final product were not made easily. To use these without some sense of limits is to do violence to what comes from Heaven -- there is no greater fault. ... Now those above lead those below, the inner [quarters of the palace are] a gauge for the outer [world of other women]. Therefore, the empress must value frugality in order to lead the rest of the palace women. The wives of princes all the way down to those of scholars and commoners must honor the value of frugality in running their households. If this happens, then not one person will go cold or starve to death; rites and rightness will flourish; and the change [for the good] in people's behavior will merit being recorded [for posterity].

Returning to the Good

Now the [principal] faults of women are none other than laziness, jealousy, and licentiousness. Laziness leads to arrogance and then filial respect vanishes. Jealousy leads to harsh treatment of

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others, whereupon cruelty and avarice take over. Licentiousness leads to self-indulgence and then one's chastity is ruined. These three are all impediments to one's virtue and injurious to the self. Even if you have only one of these, you should get rid of it as you would a grub and distance yourself from it as you would from hornets and wasps. If hornets and wasps are not kept at a distance, they will sting you; if grubs are not gotten rid of, they will eat your grain. If you don't correct your faults, they will compromise your virtue.

Looking Up to Virtuous Exemplars [of the Past]

Those who aspire to be sages flourish; those who walk in evil ways perish. ... If, in taking the ancients as models and trying to emulate them, you equal them, then you can be a sage. Short of this, you can be a worthy; and if you are not this [successful], you still will not have failed to follow what is good.

Pearls and jade are not what is precious [to a woman]; to emulate sageliness is. If your moral character is without any deficiency, you can order well your household. The Ode says, "The high mountain is to be looked up to. The great road is easy to be traveled on." This is what I mean.