

**EXCERPTS FROM HOUSE INSTRUCTIONS OF MR. YAN (YANSHI  
JIAXUN)**

**Introduction**

It was common for successful men in China and elsewhere in East Asia to write down “House Instructions” for the benefit of their heirs and descendants. As you read these instructions, you may think about what their purposes in doing so may have been. This particular set of house instructions was written by Yan Zhitui (531-591), who was from a leading family of scholars and officials of the period of north-south division (317-589). Accordingly, he served four different, short-lived dynasties, including several whose rulers were foreigners — men of Turkic warrior clans who ruled northern China.

**Document Excerpts with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)

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***Excerpts from House Instructions of Mr. Yan (Yanshi Jiaxun)***

... as soon as a baby can recognize facial expressions and understand approval and disapproval, training should be begun so that he will do what he is told to do and stop when so ordered. After a few years of this, punishment with the bamboo can be minimized, as parental strictness and dignity mingled with parental love will lead the boys and girls to a feeling of respect and caution and give rise to filial piety. I have noticed about me that where there is merely love without training this result is never achieved. Children eat, drink, speak, and act as they please. Instead of needed prohibitions they receive praise; instead of urgent reprimands they receive smiles. Even when children are old enough to learn, such treatment is still regarded as the proper method. Only after the child has formed proud and arrogant habits do they try to control him. But one may whip the child to death and he will still not be respectful, while the growing anger of the parents only increases his resentment. After he grows up, such a child becomes at last nothing but a scoundrel. Confucius was right in saying, “What is acquired in infancy is like original nature; what has been formed into habits is equal to instinct.” A common proverb says, “Train a wife from her first arrival; teach a son in his infancy.” How true such sayings are!

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**Questions:**

1. How does Mr. Yan's advice on child-rearing fit with modern Western notions?
2. On what grounds can Mr. Yan compare the training of a child to the training of a wife? What assumptions does this imply about newly married wives?



A wife in presiding over household supplies should use wine, food, and clothing only as the rites specify. Just as in the state, where women are not allowed to participate in setting policies, so in the family, they should not be permitted to assume responsibility for affairs. If they are wise, talented, and versed in the ancient and modern writings, they ought to help their husbands by supplementing the latter's deficiency. No hen should herald the dawn lest misfortune follow. ...

**Questions:**

3. What roles does Mr. Yan prescribe for women?
4. How do Mr. Yan's prescriptions compare to those of female authors such as Ban Zhao and Song Ruozhao?

**Longer Selection**

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*Preface*

Of books written by sages and worthies that teach men to be sincere and filial, to be careful in speech and circumspect in conduct, and to take one's proper place in society and be concerned for one's reputation, there are more than enough already. Since the Wei and Jin periods prudential writings have reiterated principles and repeated practices as if adding room upon room [to the household] or piling bed upon bed. In doing the same now myself, I do not presume to prescribe rules for others or set a pattern for the world, but only to order my own household and give guidance to my own posterity. ...

The habits and teaching of our family have always been regular and punctilious. In my childhood I received good instruction from my parents. With my two elder brothers I went to greet our parents each morning and evening to ask in winter whether they were warm and in summer whether they were cool; we walked steadily with regular steps, talked calmly with good manners, and moved about with as much dignity and reverence as if we were visiting the

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awe-inspiring rulers at court. They gave us good advice, asked about our particular interests, criticized our defects and encouraged our good points -- always zealous and sincere. When I was just nine years old, my father died. The family members were divided and scattered, every one of us living in dire straits. I was brought up by my loving brothers; we went through hardships and difficulties. They were kind but not exacting; their guidance and advice to me were not strict. Though I read the ritual texts, and was somewhat fond of composition, I tended to be influenced by common practices; I was uncontrolled in feelings, careless in speech, and slovenly in dress. When about eighteen or nineteen years old I learned to refine my conduct a little, but these bad habits had become second nature, and it was difficult to get rid of them entirely. After my thirtieth year gross faults were few, but still I have to be careful always, for in every instance my words are at odds with my mind, and my emotions struggle with my nature. Each evening I am conscious of the faults committed that morning, and today I regret the errors of yesterday. How pitiful that the lack of instruction has brought me to this condition! I would recall the experiences of my youth long ago, for they are engraved on my flesh and bone; these are not merely the admonitions of ancient books, but what has passed before my eyes and reached my ears. Therefore I leave these twenty chapters to serve as a warning to you boys.

***Instructing Children***

Those of the highest intelligence will develop without being taught; those of great stupidity, even if taught, will amount to nothing; those of medium ability will be ignorant unless taught. The ancient sage kings had rules for prenatal training. Women when pregnant for three months moved from their living quarters to a detached palace where they would not see unwholesome sights nor hear reckless words, and where the tone of music and the flavor of food were controlled by the rules of decorum [rites]. These rules were written on jade tablets and kept in a golden box. After the child was born, imperial tutors firmly made clear filial piety, humaneness, the rites, and rightness to guide and train him.

The common people are indulgent and are unable to do this. But as soon as a baby can recognize facial expressions and understand approval and disapproval, training should be begun so that he will do what he is told to do and stop when so ordered. After a few years of this, punishment with the bamboo can be minimized, as parental strictness and dignity mingled with parental love will lead the boys and girls to a feeling of respect and caution and give rise to filial piety. I have noticed about me that where there is merely love without training this result is never achieved. Children eat, drink, speak, and act as they please. Instead of needed prohibitions they receive praise; instead of urgent reprimands they receive smiles. Even when children are old enough to learn, such treatment is still regarded as the proper method. Only after the child has formed proud and arrogant habits do they try to control him. But one may whip the child to death and he will still not be respectful, while the growing anger of the parents only increases his resentment. After he grows up, such a child becomes at last nothing but a scoundrel. Confucius was right in saying, "What is acquired in infancy is like original nature; what has been formed into habits is equal to instinct." A common proverb says, "Train a wife from her first arrival; teach a son in his infancy." How true such sayings are!

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Generally parents' inability to instruct their own children comes not from any inclination just to let them fall into evil ways but only from parents' being unable to endure the children's looks [of unhappiness] from repeated scoldings, or to bear beating them, lest it do damage to the children's physical being. We should, however, take illness by way of illustration: how can we not use drugs, medicines, acupuncture, or cautery to cure it? Should we then view strictness of reproof and punishment as a form of cruelty to one's own kith and kin? Truly there is no other way to deal with it. ...

As for maintaining proper respect between father and son, one cannot allow too much familiarity; in the love among kin, one cannot tolerate impoliteness. If there is impoliteness, then parental solicitude is not matched by filial respect; if there is too much familiarity, it gives rise to indifference and rudeness.

Someone has asked why Chen Kang [a disciple of Confucius] was pleased to hear that gentlemen kept their distance from their sons, and the answer is that this was indeed the case; gentlemen did not personally teach their children [because, as Yan goes on to show, there are passages in the classics of a sexual kind, which it would not be proper for a father to teach his sons.] ...

In the love of parents for children, it is rare that one succeeds in treating them equally. From antiquity to the present there are many cases of this failing. It is only natural to love those who are wise and talented, but those who are wayward and dull also deserve sympathy. Partiality in treatment, even when done out of generous motives, turns out badly. ...

***Brothers***

After the appearance of humankind, there followed the conjugal relationship; the conjugal relationship was followed by the parental; the parental was followed by the fraternal. Within the family, these three are the intimate relationships. The other degrees of kinship all develop out of these three. Therefore among human relationships one cannot but take these [three] most seriously. ...

When brothers are at odds with each other, then sons and nephews will not love each other, and this in turn will lead to the cousins drifting apart, resulting finally in their servants treating one another as enemies. When this happens then strangers can step on their faces and trample upon their breasts and there will be no one to come to their aid. There are men who are able to make friends with distinguished men of the empire, winning their affection, and yet are unable to show proper respect toward their own elder brothers. How strange that they should succeed with the many and fail with the few! There are others who are able to command troops in the thousands and inspire such loyalty in them that they will die willingly for them and yet are unable to show kindness toward their own younger brothers. How strange that they should succeed with strangers and fail with their own flesh and blood! ...

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***Family Governance***

Beneficial influences are transmitted from superiors to inferiors and bequeathed by earlier to later generations. So if a father is not loving, the son will not be filial; if an elder brother is not friendly, the younger will not be respectful; if a husband is not just, the wife will not be obedient. When a father is kind but the son refractory, when an elder brother is friendly but the younger arrogant, when a husband is just but a wife overbearing, then indeed they are the bad people of the world; they must be controlled by punishments; teaching and guidance will not change them. If rod and wrath are not used in family discipline, the faults of the son will immediately appear. If punishments are not properly awarded, the people will not know how to act. The use of clemency and severity in governing a family is the same as in a state.

Confucius said, "Extravagance leads to insubordination, and parsimony to meanness. It is better to be mean than to be insubordinate."<sup>1</sup> Again he said, "Though a man has abilities as admirable as those of the Duke of Zhou, yet if he be proud or niggardly, those other things are really not worth being looked at."<sup>2</sup> That is to say, a man may be thrifty but should not be stingy. Thrift means being frugal and economic in carrying out the rites; stinginess means showing no pity for those in poverty and urgent need. Nowadays those who would give alms are extravagant, but in being thrifty are stingy. It would be proper to give alms without extravagance and be thrifty without being stingy. ...

A wife in presiding over household supplies should use wine, food, and clothing only as the rites specify. Just as in the state, where women are not allowed to participate in setting policies, so in the family, they should not be permitted to assume responsibility for affairs. If they are wise, talented, and versed in the ancient and modern writings, they ought to help their husbands by supplementing the latter's deficiency. No hen should herald the dawn lest misfortune follow. ...

The burden of daughters on the family is heavy indeed. Yet how else can Heaven give life to the teeming people and ancestors pass on their bodily existence to posterity? Many people today dislike having daughters and mistreat their own flesh and blood. How can they be like this and still hope for Heaven's blessing? ...

It is common for women to dote on a son-in-law and to maltreat a daughter-in-law. Doting on a son-in-law gives rise to hatred from brothers; maltreating a daughter-in-law brings on slander from sisters. Thus when these women, whether they act or remain silent, draw criticism from the members of the family, it is the mother who is the real cause of it. ...

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<sup>1</sup> *Analects* 7:35.

<sup>2</sup> *Analects* 8:11.

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A simple marriage arrangement irrespective of social position was the established rule of our ancestor Qing Hou.<sup>3</sup> Nowadays there are those who sell their daughters for money or buy a woman with a payment of silk. They compare the rank of fathers and grandfathers, and calculate in ounces and drams, demanding more and offering less, just as if bargaining in the market. Under such conditions a boorish son-in-law might appear in the family or an arrogant woman assume power in the household. Coveting honor and seeking for gain, on the contrary, incur shame and disgrace; how can one not be careful?

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<sup>3</sup> Qing Hou was the posthumous name of Yin Zhitui's ninth-generation ancestor. His name was Yan Han.