

WOMEN AND THE PROBLEMS THEY CREATE

Getting beyond stereotyped descriptions of women's virtues to a fuller understanding of the ideas, feelings, and conventions that shaped their lives is difficult because not nearly as many historical records survive concerning women's lives as men's. The sorts of sources included in selection 17, "Women's Virtues and Vices," survive in abundance for all periods. Following the conventions of Liu Xiang's Biographies of Heroic Women, the standard dynastic histories regularly included brief accounts of women who achieved renown for some act of courage or principle, such as sacrificing themselves to save a parent or to prevent themselves from being raped or forced to remarry. By Song times, however, with the explosion in the range and numbers of surviving books, it is possible to see other dimensions of women's lives and gender conceptions. Below are selections from two twelfth century authors who took fresh looks at women.

First are three brief stories recorded by Hong Mai (1123–1202), a man attracted to the uncanny who collected stories wherever he went. Some of the stories he recorded probably began as folktales, others may be quite factual, altered little in the retelling. Either way, they reveal Song perceptions of women, their powers and weaknesses, and their relations with men.

These stories are followed by selections from Yuan Cai's (ca. 1140–ca. 1195) book of advice for family heads on how to handle both the financial and interpersonal problems commonly encountered by relatively well-off families. Yuan could not of course write from a woman's point of view, but he seems to have been a sensitive and sympathetic observer of the problems women faced and the problems they created for the men around them.

HONG MAI'S STORIES

Wang Balang's Wife

Wang Balang was a rich man from Biyang in Tangzhou. Every year he went to the Jianghuai

area where he was a large merchant. While there he fell in love with a prostitute. Each time he went home, he would treat his wife badly, trying to drive her out. His wife was intelligent. She had borne four daughters, three of whom were already

married, but since the youngest was only a few years old, she figured she could not leave. Consequently, she responded to her husband meekly, "I have been your wife for over twenty years. Our daughters are married and we have grandchildren. If you chase me out, where can I go?"

Wang left again, this time bringing the prostitute back with him and setting her up in an inn in a nearby street. The wife, at home, had to pawn or sell little by little everything she had stored in her cases, until there was not a thing left in the house. When Wang returned and saw this, he was even angrier. "You and I can never get together again. Let's settle things today." His wife, finally becoming agitated, said, "If that is how it is, we must go to court." She grabbed him by the sleeve and dragged him to the county court, where the magistrate granted the divorce and divided the property in two. Wang wanted to take the young girl, but his wife objected, "My husband is shameless. He abandoned his wife and took up with a prostitute. If this girl goes with him, she will certainly end up in degraded circumstances." The county magistrate agreed with her, and so she got custody of the girl.

The woman went to live in another village. She bought such things as jars and jugs and lined them up by her door the way shopkeepers do. One day her ex-husband passed her door, and spoke to her as though they were on the same familiar terms as before. "How much money can you make on these? Why not try something else?" She chased him away, railing at him, "Since we have broken our relationship, we are like strangers. How do you get to interfere in my family affairs?" Thereafter they never saw each other again.

When the daughter came of age, she was married into the Tian family of Fangcheng. By then the woman's property had grown to 100,000 strings, and the Tian family got it all. Mr. Wang lived with the prostitute and died away from home in Huainan. Several years later his ex-wife also died. When she was ready to be buried, the daughter, troubled that her father's body had not been brought back, sent someone to get it, wanting to bury him with her mother. After the two

bodies were washed and dressed, they were laid on the same table, and while those in charge were not paying attention, the two bodies turned their backs on each other. Thinking this a coincidence, the daughter cried and put them back in their original place, but before long it happened again. So she knew that this couple were as emotionally estranged in death as in life, and still hated each other. Nevertheless, she buried them in the same grave.

"Chaste Woman" Shi

Ning Six of South Meadow village, in the southern suburbs of Jianchang was a simple-minded man who concentrated on his farming. His younger brother's wife, Miss Shi, was a little sleeker than her peers. She was also ruthless and licentious, and had an adulterous affair with a youth who lived there. Whenever Ning looked askance at her she would scold him and there was not much he could do.

Once Miss Shi took a chicken, wanting to cook it. When Ning learned of it, he went into her room, demanded that she give it to him, then left with it. Miss Shi quickly cut her arm with a knife, then went to the neighbors screaming, "Because my husband is not home, brother-in-law offered me a chicken and tried to force me to have sex with him. I resisted, threatening to kill myself with the knife I was holding, and so just managed to escape."

Ning at that time had no wife, so the neighbors thought she might be telling the truth. They took them to the village headman, then the county jail. The clerks at the jail reviewed the evidence and demanded 10,000 cash to set things right. Ning was poor and stingy, and moreover, knew himself to be in the right, so stubbornly refused. The clerks sent up the dossier to the prefect Dai Qi. Dai was unable to examine it but noted that it involved an ordinary village wife who was able to protect her virtue and her body and not be violated. The administrative supervisor, Zhao Shiqing, concurred with Qi, and they sent up the case

making Ning look guilty. Ning received the death penalty and Miss Shi was granted 100,000 cash, regular visits from the local officials, and a banner honoring her for her chastity. From this, she acquired a reputation as a chaste wife. The local people all realized Ning had been wronged and resented how overboard she had gone.

In the end Miss Shi had an affair with a monk at the nearly Lintian temple. Charges were brought and she received a beating and soon became ill. She saw Ning as a vengeful demon and then died. The date was the sixth month of 1177.

The Reward for Widow Wu

Miss Wu served her mother-in-law very filially. Her mother-in-law had an eye ailment and felt sorry for her daughter-in-law's solitary and poverty-stricken situation, so suggested that they call in a son-in-law for her and thereby get an adoptive heir. Miss Wu announced in tears, "A woman does not serve two husbands. I will support you. Don't talk this way." Her mother-in-law, seeing that she was determined, did not press her. Miss Wu did spinning, washing, sewing, cooking, and cleaning for her neighbors, earning perhaps a hundred cash a day, all of which she gave to her mother-in-law to cover the cost of firewood and food. If she was given any meat, she would wrap it up to take home.

Miss Wu was honest by nature. She did not chat idly, and even if other people's things were right in front of her, she did not look at them, wanting only what was her own. Thus neighbors often engaged her and they helped out her and her mother-in-law, so they managed to avoid dying of hunger or cold.

Once when her mother-in-law was cooking rice, a neighbor called to her, and to avoid overcooking the rice, she dumped it into a pan. Due to her bad eyes, however, she mistakenly put it in the dirty chamber pot. When Miss Wu returned and saw it, she did not say a word. She went to a neighbor to borrow some cooked rice for her mother-in-law and took the dirty rice and washed it to eat herself.

One day in the daytime neighbors saw Miss Wu ascending into the sky amid colored clouds. Startled, they told her mother-in-law, who said, "Don't be foolish. She just came back from pounding rice for someone, and is lying down on the bed. Go and look." They went to the room and peeked in and saw her sound asleep. Amazed, they left.

When Miss Wu woke up, her mother-in-law told her what happened, and she said, "I just dreamed of two young boys in blue clothes, holding documents, and riding on the clouds. They grabbed my clothes and said the Emperor of Heaven had summoned me. They took me to the gate of Heaven and I was brought in to see the emperor, who was seated beside a balustrade. He said, 'Although you are just a lowly ignorant village woman, you are able to serve your old mother-in-law sincerely and work hard. You really deserve respect.' He gave me a cup of aromatic wine and a string of cash, saying, 'I will supply you. From now on you will not need to work for others.' I bowed to thank him and came back, accompanied by the two boys. Then I woke up."

There was in fact a thousand cash on the bed and the room was filled with a fragrance. They then realized that the neighbors' vision had been a spirit journey. From this point on even more people asked her to work for them, and she never refused. But the money that had been given to her, she kept for her mother-in-law's use. Whatever they used promptly reappeared, so the thousand cash was never exhausted. The mother-in-law also regained her sight in both eyes.

YUAN CAI ON WOMEN'S PROBLEMS

Women Should Not Take Part in Affairs Outside the Home

Women do not take part in extrafamilial affairs. The reason is that worthy husbands and sons take care of everything for them, while unworthy ones can always find ways to hide their deeds from the women.

Many men today indulge in pleasure and gam-

bling; some end up mortgaging their lands, and even go so far as to mortgage their houses without their wives' knowledge. Therefore, when husbands are bad, even if wives try to handle outside matters, it is of no use. Sons must have their mothers' signatures to mortgage their family properties, but there are sons who falsify papers and forge signatures, sometimes borrowing money at high interest from people who would not hesitate to bring their claim to court. Other sons sell illicit tea and salt to get money, which, if discovered by the authorities, results in fines.

Mothers have no control in such matters. Therefore, when sons are bad, it is useless for mothers to try to handle matters relating to the outside world.

For women, these are grave misfortunes, but what can they do? If husbands and sons could only remember that their wives and mothers are helpless and suddenly repent, wouldn't that be best?

Women's Sympathies Should Be Indulged

Without going overboard, people should marry their daughters with dowries appropriate to their family's wealth. Rich families should not consider their daughters outsiders but should give them a share of the property. Sometimes people have incapable sons and so have to entrust their affairs to their daughters' families; even after their deaths, their burials and sacrifices are performed by their daughters. So how can people say that daughters are not as good as sons?

Generally speaking, a woman's heart is very sympathetic. If her parents' family is wealthy and her husband's family is poor, she wants to take her parents' wealth to help her husband's family prosper. If her husband's family is wealthy but her parents' family is poor, then she wants to take from her husband's family to enable her parents to prosper. Her parents and husband should be sympathetic toward her feelings and indulge some of her wishes. When her own sons and daughters are grown and married, if either her son's family or her daughter's family is wealthy while the other

is poor, she wishes to take from the wealthy one to give to the poor one. Her sons and daughters should understand her feelings and be somewhat indulgent. But taking from the poor to make the rich richer is unacceptable, and no one should ever go along with it.

Orphaned Girls Should Have Their Marriages Arranged Early

When a widow remarries she sometimes has an orphaned daughter not yet engaged. In such cases she should try to get a respectable relative to arrange a marriage for her daughter. She should also seek to have her daughter reared in the house of her future in-laws, with the marriage to take place after the girl has grown up. If the girl were to go along with the mother to her stepfather's house, she would not be able to clear herself if she were subjected to any humiliations.

For Women Old Age Is Particularly Hard to Bear

People say that, though there may be a hundred years allotted to a person's life, only a few reach seventy, for time quickly runs out. But for those destined to be poor, old age is hard to endure. For them, until about the age of fifty, the passage of twenty years seems like only ten; but after that age, ten years can feel as long as twenty. For women who live a long life, old age is especially hard to bear, because most women must rely on others for their existence. Before a woman's marriage, a good father is even more important than a good grandfather; a good brother is even more important than a good father; a good nephew is even more important than a good brother. After her marriage, a good husband is even more important than a good father-in-law; a good son is even more important than a good husband; and a good grandson is even more important than a good son. For this reason women often enjoy comfort in their youth but find their old age dif-

ficult to endure. It would be well for their relatives to keep this in mind.

It Is Difficult for Widows to Entrust Their Financial Affairs to Others

Some wives with stupid husbands are able to manage the family's finances, calculating the outlays and receipts of money and grain, without being cheated by anyone. Of those with degenerate husbands, there are also some who are able to manage the finances with the help of their sons without ending in bankruptcy. Even among those whose husbands have died and whose sons are young, there are occasionally women able to raise and educate their sons, keep the affection of all their relatives, manage the family business, and even prosper. All of these are wise and worthy women. But the most remarkable are the women who manage a household after their husbands have died leaving them with young children. Such women could entrust their finances to their husbands' kinsmen or their own kinsmen, but not all relatives are honorable, and the honorable ones are not necessarily willing to look after other people's business.

When wives themselves can read and do arithmetic, and those they entrust with their affairs have some sense of fairness and duty with regard to food, clothing, and support, then things will usually work out all right. But in most of the rest of the cases, bankruptcy is what happens.

Beware of Future Difficulties in Taking in Female Relatives

You should take into your own house old aunts, sisters, or other female relatives whose children and grandchildren are unfilial and do not support them. However, take precautions. After a woman dies, her unfilial sons or grandsons might make outrageous accusations to the authorities, claiming that the woman died from hunger or cold or left valuables in trunks. When the authorities receive such complaints, they have to investigate and trouble is unavoidable. Thus, while the

woman is alive, make it clear to the public and to the government that the woman is bringing nothing with her but herself. Generally, in performing charitable acts, it is best to make certain that they will entail no subsequent difficulties.

Before Buying a Servant Girl or Concubine, Make Sure of the Legality

When buying a female servant or concubine, inquire whether it is legal for her to be indentured or sold before closing the deal. If the girl is impoverished and has no one to rely on, then she should be brought before the authorities to give an account of her past. After guarantors have been secured and an investigation conducted, the transaction can be completed. But if she is not able to give an account of her past, then the agent who offered her for sale should be questioned. Temporarily she may be hired on a salaried basis. If she is ever recognized by her relatives, she should be returned to them.

Hired Women Should Be Sent Back When Their Period of Service Is Over

If you hire a man's wife or daughter as a servant, you should return her to her husband or father on completion of her period of service. If she comes from another district, you should send her back to it after her term is over. These practices are the most humane and are widely carried out by the gentry in the Southeast. Yet there are people who do not return their hired women to their husbands but wed them to others instead; others do not return them to their parents but marry them off themselves. Such actions are the source of many lawsuits.

How can one not have sympathy for those separated from their relatives, removed from their hometowns, who stay in service for their entire lives with neither husbands nor sons. Even in death these women's spirits are left to wander all alone. How pitiful they are!

Translated by Patricia Ebrey