

Women's Voices in Pre-modern East Asian Literature

“Letter to My Sons.” By Gu Ruopu. Translated by Dorothy Ko.

From: Susan Mann and Yu-Yin Cheng (Eds.)

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Ever since I married your father in 1606, I have been involved in the affairs of our family. For twenty-six years I tasted all sufferings and experienced every tribulation. In fear and caution I rose early to toil and retired late to ponder the day. My only thought was to avoid any mistake, so that my ancestors' law will not be violated and my parents' concerned care will not be in vain. Do you suppose that I endured all the hardship because I enjoyed it?

Barely ten months after your father was born your grandmother passed away. By the time I married into the family, poverty and illness had taken their toll [on your father.] Many obstacles stood in his way, and troubles assaulted him from more than one direction. On his deathbed, he merely instructed me to be frugal with his funeral, to teach you well so that you inherit his family's scholastic tradition, and to serve your grandfather with devotion to make up for his own untimely departure. Abiding by his will, I strove to be even more cautious in everything than in the previous thirteen years. As if treading on the edge of an abyss or on a sheet of thin ice, I was constantly wary that one misstep would ruin the bygone elders' enterprise. After your grandfather passed away, more tribulations befell a widow and her bereaved sons; it is not easy to recount them one by one in public.

I gave birth to my son Can in 1612 and to son Wei in 1614. You two only know that you were born into a scholar-official family. You have grown up in comfortable quarters, enjoyed adequate food and clothing, and scarcely tasted distress or pain. Little did you know that your mother had to battle poverty, illness, and fatigue to keep the family from going adrift. For twenty-six years I persevered as if it were one single day.

Fortunately, my children are now grown-up and duly married. Finally able to pass on my heavy responsibilities, I feel slightly relieved. Intent on achieving unity through division, I am separating you—my two sons—(into two branches) so that you can each tend to your family affairs. I would have been happy to keep shouldering the burden alone so that you can relax and so that our ancestors' deeds can be emulated. But what I have observed has led me to think otherwise.

People have often preached the propriety of housing nine generations under one roof. It is also true that both brothers are filial and equally known for their virtue. But even those who are one in sentiments often part ways in their handling of practical matters. Some are generous, others frugal; some prefer abundance, others meagerness: people have incompatible likes and dislikes. The similarities and differences in human feelings can take many forms; how can I expect to always get what I want? Moreover, it is human nature that when people have been together for a long time, they tend to slacken in behavior, which easily breeds disdain. Hence when people are apart they want to be united; when they are together they want to go separate ways. One has to discern the forces that draw distant people together and the forces that tear intimate people apart.

I am glad that both my daughters-in-law are virtuous and wise. Frugal and restrained, they abide by the teachings of the ancestors. Before I advance in years and run out of energy, I wish to clearly divide up every item [of family property]. You will now know just how difficult it has been to provide for this family and how taxing the ways of the world have been. You will establish yourselves on your own, so that each of you will gradually ascend to the gateways of propriety and righteousness. Then the family will not be weakened by internal strifes, nor will it be threatened by permanent extinction. Why should unity be held up as the only desirable goal?

Every fiber and every grain that this family owns are the fruits of my industry and hardship over several decades. Preserve and magnify them. These are the high hopes I have for my two sons.