

## Women's Voices in Pre-modern East Asian Literature

**“When I Hired a Teacher to Instruct the Girls, Someone Ridiculed Me, So as a Joke I have Written This Retort to Explain Matters.”** Translated by Maureen Robertson.

From: Kang-I Sun Chang and Haun Stussy (Eds.)

*Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*

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Since first the Primal Forces were discrete  
and human relations, engendered thus, complete,  
Men must be the arbiters of Right  
and in the home all virtuous women Chaste.  
But if we fail to practice poetry and prose,  
how shall we display our natural gifts?  
An elder woman scolded me for this:  
“You don’t pursue the true and wifely way,  
Engaging teachers to instruct the girls  
as if they sought to win the world’s regard.  
They put aside our normal women’s work  
and waste their efforts to recite and learn.”  
I listened well to what she said  
but it left me unimpressed.  
In human society sexes segregate  
and yet preserving chastity is hard;  
How can we in women’s quarters  
fail to take the ancients as our teachers?  
Yi Jiang and Da Si, royal women of Zhou,  
both were praised for their solid virtue.  
Ban Zhao wrote *Instructions for Women*  
that we might know the code of proper conduct.  
I am ashamed of my own stupidity,  
unable to correct my faults,  
Yet I pity those today who cultivate  
appearances—they are only pretty dresses.  
Not treating moral training seriously  
will visit shame upon the family name.  
Bring girls together, let them study,  
debate the issues, inquire into fine points.  
The Four Virtues, the Three Obediences—  
make the ancient ways their standard.  
Prune their character, refine and beautify;  
make their persons fine and good.  
Who expects them to be famous?  
Seek only that the bad will be restrained.  
Do this, then test them, and if something is amiss,  
take your complaint to the worthy men of old.