

The Zhu Family Instructions

by
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Introduction

The Zhu Family Instructions were written by Zhu Yongchun (1617-1688) at the end of the Ming Dynasty. In it, he sets forth broad guidelines for the conduct of the entire Zhu family. While Zhu Yongchun authored several books on Confucian philosophy, he is most widely remembered in China for this one short work. The Zhu Family Instructions were widely read, and were adapted and copied by other Chinese families until the early part of the 20th Century.

-Andrew Gudgel

Get up at daybreak. Sprinkle water on and sweep your courtyard and steps; make it clean and tidy both inside and out. Go to bed at dusk. Lock your gates and inspect them personally. You should remember that even a bit of gruel or a bowl of rice is hard to come by and think of the difficulty of making a bit of silk or even a thread. Prepare beforehand - "Fix the roof before it rains." and do not "Wait until thirsty to dig a well." Be thrifty in your daily expenses; don't go overboard when entertaining guests. Your household utensils should be sturdy and clean. An earthenware jar is more valuable than gold or jade. Your food and drink should be simple and tasty; garden vegetables are better than delicacies.

Do not build luxurious buildings, do not attempt to obtain good fields. Nuns, matchmakers, and tradeswomen are all really accomplices of thieves and promiscuous persons. Beautiful servant girls and lovely concubines do not bring happiness to the bedroom. Your servants shouldn't be too beautiful or your wives and concubines dressed up too beautifully.

Although the ancestors are remote in time, your sacrifices to them cannot be insincere. Although your children may be stupid, they cannot not be taught the classics. In conducting yourself you must be thrifty and simple. In teaching your sons you must use an appropriate method. Do not covet unexpected wealth. Do not drink more wine than you can handle. When buying things from peddlers, do not take advantage of them. If you see relatives or neighbors in poverty, you

should treat them with sympathy. A house that is established through harshness normally will not last long enough to be enjoyed. Those who go against the principle of human relations are quickly destroyed. Brothers, uncles, and nephews who have more should give to those who have less. Close relatives, distant relatives, old and young - all should respect these rules and words.

He who listens to his wife at the expense of his own flesh and blood - is he truly a man? He who puts material wealth above his own parents cannot be called a son. When marrying your daughter pick a good man for a son-in-law, don't just try to get expensive betrothal gifts. In finding a wife for your son look for a kind and gentle woman, don't just try for a big dowry. Those who flatter someone with wealth and power are the most disgraceful kind of person. Those who see someone in poverty or humble circumstances and act haughty towards them are the very basest sort of man. Prevent arguments and litigation within the family. In the end litigation is an inauspicious thing. In conducting yourself do not speak too much, for too much speech leads to faults. Do not rely on force or bully widows and orphans. Do not wantonly slaughter fowl for the sake of feeding your hunger. Those who always consider themselves right must have many faults and regrets. If you are decadent and degenerate, it will be hard for you to get married and establish yourself in life.

If you associate with ruffians, after a while you will certainly get into trouble. Those who are experienced and prudent can be relied on in times of trouble. Don't quickly believe what others say. How do you know that it's not the false claims of others? Be patient and think things over. If you argue about something, how do you know that it is not you who is in the wrong? You should think things through clearly and calmly. If you do something benevolent, do not remember it, but do not forget the kindness of others done to you. In all things it is better to do a little extra, but once you have succeeded know when to stop. If others are experiencing good fortune, do not become jealous; if they are suffering misfortunes, do not become happy. If you do good and hope that others will see it, it is not true good. If you do something wicked and are afraid that others may find out, that is great evil. If you see something sensuous and are filled with lust, your wives and concubines will have the same reaction. If you hide your hatred and stab others in the back, then misfortune will extend to your children. If the family is in harmony and is obedient, although you may only be able to eat one meal a day, you can still have plenty of enjoyment. If your taxes are already paid, then even if your pockets are empty, you can still have boundless happiness. The will to study lies in the sages and men of virtue. The mind of an official must always think of king and country. Do your duty and be happy with your lot in life. Listen to the will of Heaven. He who can achieve this is not far from a sage.