

Dutiful Wives and Virtuous Mothers

賢 妻 良 母

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continued from last issue # 218
(News from Dharmar Realm)

II. General Ywe Fei's Mother

General Ywe Fei (1103-1141) was a great hero of the Southern Sung Dynasty. His family was extremely poor. Right after his birth, Ywe Fei started to cry loudly and constantly. His mother found this very strange. An old cultivator happened to pass by and told her, "Make a big wooden tub and put the infant in the tub. Then he will stop crying." As soon as the tub was completed, huge rains fell and a great flood inundated the land. Ywe Fei's father was drowned. But Ywe Fei's mother climbed into the wooden tub with her child, and drifted in the raging current. The tub finally washed ashore at a village in Tang Yin County. The villagers were surprised to see a woman with her child in the tub. Some members of the local gentry came together and offered the mother and child a thatched hut. From then on, Ywe Fei and his mother settled down there.

From a very young age, Ywe Fei was enthusiastic about learning. But because they were so poor, they didn't even have money to buy paper and brushes. Mrs. Ywe wrote out characters in the sand, using a stick, and in that way taught her son to read. In the village there was a private school for boys. The school master, Jou Tung, saw the young Ywe Fei lingering outside the schoolgrounds and invited him in to study, free of charge. He also taught the young boy martial arts.

Thus it was that Ywe Fei became a man of letters as well as a valiant warrior. His essays and calligraphy were excellent, and his physical strength was unrivaled. At age seventeen he became a top candidate in the martial arts exam. In the archery competition he hit the bullseye nine out of nine times. One of the spectators, Li Chwun, was so impressed with the young man's valor that he gave Ywe Fei his daughter's hand in marriage.

At that time, a brigand named Yang Yau (楊么) started a rebellion. He sent one of his henchmen, Wang Dzwo, with 100 taels (about 133 ounces) of gold to Ywe Fei and offered him the job of commanding general. Ywe Fei came to the front yard of his house and politely declined the offer, saying, "My mother, who is getting on in years, still lives with me. Moreover, I am a citizen of the House of Sung, and I wish to remain loyal to the emperor."

After Wang Dzwo left, Ywe Fei went back into the house and reported the incident to his mother. His mother showed her approval by saying, "You acted correctly. A superior person stands firm, even in poverty, but a petty man wavers in the throes of destitution. Make sure you never compromise your loyalty!"

Wishing to impress this point upon her son, she ordered her daughter-in-law to prepare some writing ink. With Ywe Fei kneeling on the floor, the old mother wrote four characters on his back: "Serve your country with utmost loyalty." (精忠報國) She repeatedly exhorted him to never forget his duty towards his country and his people, even sacrificing his own life if necessary.

Later, Ywe Fei rose to the ranks of chief commanding general and repelled the marauders who were invading the northern frontier. He reclaimed a lot of territory that had been lost to the enemy, and established great military prowess for his country. The secret of his success was that he followed his mother's instructions. He was extremely patriotic and performed magnificent deeds.

In West Lake, in the city of Hang Jou, lies General Ywe Fei's tomb. A shrine has been built, dedicated to his memory. A matched couplet graces the wall of the shrine. The upper line reads,

Magnificent and imposing,
he presides in the front hall.
Look at the General now!

Beneath the tomb are the bronze images of Chin Kwei (秦檜) and his wife. Chin Kwei was the treacherous prime minister who betrayed Ywe Fei and had him killed. Chin Kwei forged twelve golden medallions and had Ywe Fei recalled from the frontier where he was engaged in battle with the marauders. When Ywe Fei was brought back to the imperial court, Chin Kwei fabricated charges against him and ordered his execution. Several hundred years have passed since that incident, but to this day the Chinese people vehemently detest Chin Kwei. The bronze images of Chin Kwei and his wife are consistently defaced and damaged by tourists, and need to be repaired from time to time. The lower line of the couplet reads:

Dishevelled, with smudged faces, they kneel at the bottom of the steps.
Think back on the prime minister of yesteryear.

Of those two famous personalities, one enjoys honor for eternity, while the other is slandered and reviled.

How important is a mother's job. If a woman fails in her basic duty, then she is going against the appointment of heaven. If a woman doesn't raise her children properly, so that as a result they become a burden to society, then she has no merit.

III. Ban Jau (班昭)

Ban Jau was both a virtuous woman and a very intelligent scholar. She lived during the Eastern Han dynasty, during the first century A.D. She was the daughter of the famous historian Ban Byau (班彪), and the younger sister of Ban Gu (班固). Because women in ancient China married when they were quite young, she was married into the Tsau (曹) family when she was fourteen. She has several works to her credit, one of which is a short essay called "The Seven Exhortations to Women" (女子七誡). In this work, Ban Jau relates her experiences when she first became a daughter-in-law of the Tsau family. "I was fourteen when I took up the broom in the Tsau family. I was ever-cautious and respectful, as if approaching a deep abyss, as if treading on thin ice, afraid that I would make a mistake and thereby tarnish my own reputation. "

Although Ban Jau was only a young girl at that time, she deeply understood the duties of a wife. She carefully carried out her chores and meticulously attended to her duties so that she would not violate the comportment befitting her position. In her essay she further notes, "As I held the wine cup in my hand, I was careful not to drop or overturn it." Thus we can see how serious-minded and attentive she was, even to the smallest detail.

Ban Jau served her inlaws, admirably took good care of her husband, raised her children well, and fulfilled all of her duties. She never thought of enjoying herself or taking it easy. Yet nowadays some

women make a big fuss about fighting for their rights. What's the purpose of fighting for anything? Besides, being a good mother is a big enough duty. You will not gain your rights by fighting or competing with men, but by fulfilling your duty.

Ban Jau's father was imprisoned towards the end of his life. But she was not afraid of death. She completed The History of the Han Dynasty (漢書) begun by her father and her brother. This is one of the most extensive and inspiring historical works of ancient China. Afterwards, the imperial palace invited her to be a tutor to the ladies-in-waiting. This was because Ban Jau had remarkable talent, intelligence, and lofty conduct.

A woman should examine her action daily to see if her actions can stand the light of day. If we do shameful things, we won't be able to face our parents. But if we can preserve our own purity, then we can fulfill our filial duty, our responsibilities, our moral obligations, and we won't be ashamed before our ancestors and children. Everyone will bask in the light from such women as Confucius' mother, who raised worthy children. The Book of Odes says, "When one person has a reason to be happy, the many citizens all rely on him." I hope that all my women friends will exhort themselves onward and go on to do great things.