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## VILLAGE ORDINANCES

*In every dynasty villages were allowed considerable self-government, and by the Ming many villages had councils that set and tried to enforce their own rules or ordinances. Well-known Confucian scholars, including Zhu Xi in the Song and Wang Yangming in the Ming, urged local literati to take leadership roles in helping villagers in these activities, seeing them as ways to promote morality and good social order.*

*The following three sample village ordinances come from late Ming reference books aimed at broad audiences and consequently given titles like The Complete Compilation of Everything the Gentry and Commoners Need to Know and The Complete Book of Practical Information Convenient for the Use of Commoners. The sample ordinances in them provide evidence of the principles by which villages, or at least village leaders, thought their affairs should be run and show the kinds of restraints people could be placed under by decisions of their neighbors.*

### PROHIBITION ORDINANCE

In the imperial court there are laws; in the village there are ordinances. Laws rule the entire nation; ordinances control only one area. Although laws and ordinances differ in scope, the matters they deal with are equally significant.

Each year we set up ordinances for our village, and yet, to our deep regret, they are denigrated by the greedy and overturned by the influential. As a result, they are rendered ineffective, customs deteriorate, and incalculable damage is done by our people and their animals.

The problem is not that ordinances cannot be enforced; rather, it is that those in charge of the ordinances are unequal to their posts, and those

who design them are incompetent. Recently we have followed the suggestion of the villages and grouped all households into separate districts, each with a fixed number of members. On the first and the fifteenth of each month, each district will prepare wine and hold a meeting to awaken the conscience of its residents. In this manner, contact between the high and low will be established, and a cycle will be formed. Anyone who violates our village ordinances will be sentenced by the public; if he thinks the sentence is unfair, he can appeal to the village assembly. However, let it be known that no cover up, bribery, blackmail, or frame up will be tolerated; such evil doings will be exposed by Heaven and punished by thunder. We know that even in a small group there are good men-

bers as well as bad ones; how can there be a lack of honest people among our villagers?

From now on, our ordinances will be properly enforced and the morality of our people will be restored. The village as a whole as well as each individual will profit from such a situation, and there will be peace between the high and the low, their morality and custom having been unified. Thus, what is called an "ordinance" is nothing but the means to better ourselves.

#### ORDINANCE PROHIBITING GAMBLING

This concerns the prohibition of gambling. Those who are farmers devote their time to their work and certainly do not gamble. It is the unemployed vagrants who have the gambling disease—a disease which is detrimental to social customs and ruins family fortunes. Unfortunately in our village the population increases daily, and proper behavior does not prevail. As a result vagrancy becomes the fashion. Among us there are homeless rovers who, lacking occupations, form gangs and occupy themselves solely with gambling. They either bet on card games or play with dice; vying to be the winner, they continue day and night, without food or sleep. They have nothing with which to support their parents or their wives and children. Thus, unlawful intents are born, and wicked schemes are hatched. In small offenses they dig holes or scale walls, using all the cunning they have to steal from others; in more serious cases they set fires and brandish weapons, stopping at nothing. If we fail to prohibit gambling, the situation will become impossible. This is why we are gathered here to enact an ordinance for the prohibition of gambling. From now on those in question should repent for their past sins and reform their souls; they should espouse duty and kindness; they should tend to their principal occupa-

tions. Should there be anyone who persists in this evil practice and fails to honor this ordinance, he will definitely be punished. The light offenders will be confined, upon the decision of our village assembly, and the serious ones will be brought to the officials for sentence.

Our purpose is clearly stated in the above, and this notice is not posted without good reason.

#### PROHIBITION ON TRAVEL AT NIGHT

This ordinance is drawn up by so-and-so to prohibit travel at night, for the purpose of safeguarding our village.

In ancient times, night travel was strictly prohibited, and violaters were punished without exception. Robbers and thieves were prevented from climbing walls and boring holes in houses, to the benefit of all the inhabitants of the area.

Recently, however, night wanderers, instead of resting at night, have dared to saunter around at will. Because of this we have prepared wine and called for this meeting to draw up a strict ordinance. As soon as the sun sets, no one will be allowed to walk about; not until the fifth drum will traffic be allowed to start again. We will take turns patrolling the streets, carrying a bell, and clapping the nightwatchman's rattle. He who sights a violator will sound his gong, and people in every household will come out with weapons to kill the violator on the spot. Should anyone fail to show up for roll call at the sound of the gong, he will be severely punished upon the decision of the village assembly.

We have made copies of this ordinance to be posted at various places so that night wanderers will be warned and thieves and rogues will not prevail. Duly enacted.

*Translated by Clara Yu*