

EXCERPTS FROM ADMONITIONS FOR WOMEN
By Ban Zhao

Introduction

Ban Zhao (c. 48-c. 116 CE) was an educated aristocratic woman of the Later (Eastern) Han dynasty. Members of the Ban family, including her father, Ban Biao, and elder brother, Ban Gu, were renowned for scholarship and for service. Highly educated and widowed (the Cao household to which Ban Zhao refers in the text is the household of her husband, Cao Shishu), Ban Zhao played an important part in completing the dynastic history of the Former Han, which her brother had been working on when he died in 92 CE. Ban Zhao was called to court regularly to serve as instructor to the empress and other imperial women. She left behind a substantial corpus of writing, including *Admonitions for Women*, of which excerpts appear below.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from Admonitions for Women
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Humility

... Let a woman retire late to bed, but rise early to her duties; let her not dread tasks by day or by night. Let her not refuse to perform domestic duties whether easy or difficult. That which must be done, let her finish completely, tidily, and systematically. [When a woman follows such rules as these] then she may be said to be industrious.

Let a woman be composed in demeanor and upright in bearing in the service of her husband. Let her live in purity and quietness [of spirit] and keep watch over herself. Let her not love gossip and silly laughter. Let her cleanse, purify, and arrange in order the wine and the food for the offerings to the ancestors. [Observing such principles as these] is what it means to continue the ancestral rites. ...

Questions:

1. What does Ban Zhao expect from a woman in terms of her responsibilities in the household? How do these expectations compare to the expectations of other cultures and times?

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
EXCERPTS FROM ADMONITIONS FOR WOMEN, BY BAN ZHAO**

Husband and Wife

If a husband be unworthy, then he possesses nothing by which to control his wife. If a wife be unworthy, then she possesses nothing with which to serve her husband. If a husband does not control his wife, then he loses his authority. If a wife does not serve her husband, then right principles [the natural order] are neglected and destroyed. As a matter of fact, in practice these two [the controlling of women by men and the serving of men by women] work out in the same way.

Now examine the gentlemen of the present age. They only know that wives must be controlled and that the husband's authority must be maintained. They therefore teach their boys to read books and [study] histories. But they do not in the least understand how husbands and masters are to be served or how rites and right principles are to be maintained.

Yet only to teach men and not to teach women — is this not ignoring the reciprocal relation between them? According to the *Rites*, book learning begins at the age of eight, and at the age of fifteen one goes off to school. Why, however, should this principle not apply to girls as well as boys?

Questions:

2. What does Ban Zhao mean when she refers to the reciprocity of the relationship between husband and wife?
3. On what grounds does Ban Zhao argue that girls should be educated? Do you agree with the argument? Why or why not?
4. To what kind of people would Ban Zhao's descriptions of husband-wife relations and her advocacy of education apply? Would they be relevant throughout the Chinese society of her time?

Longer Selection

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Preface

This lowly one is ignorant and by nature unclever. I was favored because of my ancestry and, relying on the teachings of governess and instructress, at fourteen I clutched dustbasket and broom [as a young wife] in the Cao household. Now more than forty years have passed ... and at last I am released [from such duties]. ...

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Yet I am anxious for you, [my daughters] who are about to marry and have not been instructed over the course of time nor heard about proper behavior for wives. I dread that you will lose face [when you are living behind] another's gate and bring shame on our lineage. ... Whenever I think of you like this, I am fearful and anxious and so have written these "Admonitions for Women" in seven sections. ... Now that it is done, I urge you to study them. ...

Humility

On the third day after the birth of a girl, the ancients observed three customs: [first] for three days to place the baby below the bed; [second] to give her a spindle with which to play; and [third] to fast and announce her birth to her ancestors by an offering. Now to lay the baby below the bed plainly indicated that she was lowly and humble and should regard it as a prime duty to submit to others. To give her a spindle with which to play signified that she should accustom herself to labor and consider it a prime duty to be industrious. To announce her birth before her ancestors clearly meant that she ought to esteem it a prime duty to see to the continuation of the ancestral sacrifices.

These three ancient customs epitomize a woman's ordinary way of life and the teachings of the rites and regulations. Let a woman modestly yield to others; let her respect others; let her put others first, herself last. Should she do something good, let her not mention it; should she do something bad, let her not deny it. Let her bear contempt; let her even endure when others speak or do evil to her. Always let her seem to tremble and to fear. [When a woman follows such maxims as these] then she may be said to humble herself before others.

Let a woman retire late to bed, but rise early to her duties; let her not dread tasks by day or by night. Let her not refuse to perform domestic duties whether easy or difficult. That which must be done, let her finish completely, tidily, and systematically. [When a woman follows such rules as these] then she may be said to be industrious.

Let a woman be composed in demeanor and upright in bearing in the service of her husband. Let her live in purity and quietness [of spirit] and keep watch over herself. Let her not love gossip and silly laughter. Let her cleanse, purify, and arrange in order the wine and the food for the offerings to the ancestors. [Observing such principles as these] is what it means to continue the ancestral rites. ...

Husband and Wife

The Way of husband and wife is intimately connected with yin and yang and relates the individual to gods and ancestors. Truly it confirms the great principle of Heaven and Earth and the great rule of human relationships. Therefore the *Rites* honor the interrelation of man and woman; and in the *Odes* the first Ode manifests the principle of marriage. For these reasons the relationship cannot but be an important one.

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Yet only to teach men and not to teach women — is this not ignoring the reciprocal relation between them? According to the *Rites*, book learning begins at the age of eight, and at the age of fifteen one goes off to school. Why, however, should this principle not apply to girls as well as boys?

Respect and Compliance

As yin and yang are not of the same nature, so man and woman differ in behavior. The virtue of yang is firmness; yin is manifested in yielding. Man is honored for strength; a woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness. Hence there arose the common saying, "A man born as a wolf may, it is feared, become a woman; a woman born as a mouse may, it is feared, become a tigress."

Now for self-cultivation there is nothing like respectfulness. To avert harshness there is nothing like compliance. Consequently it can be said that the Way of respect and compliance is for women the most important element in ritual decorum. ...

[If a wife] does not restrain her contempt for her husband, then it will be followed by scolding and shouting [from him]. [If a husband] does not restrain his anger, then there is certain to be beating [of the wife]. The correct relationship between husband and wife is based upon harmony and intimacy, and [conjugal] love is grounded in proper union. If it comes to blows, how can the proper relationship be preserved? If sharp words are spoken, how can [conjugal] love exist? If love and proper relationship are both destroyed, then husband and wife are parted.

Womanly Behavior

In womanly behavior there are four things [to be considered]: womanly virtue, womanly speech, womanly appearance, and womanly work. ...

To guard carefully her chastity, to control circumspectly her behavior, in every motion to exhibit modesty, and to model each act on the best usage: this may be called womanly virtue.

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To choose her words with care, to avoid vulgar language, to speak at appropriate times, and not to be offensive to others may be called womanly speech.

To wash and scrub dirt and grime, to keep clothes and ornaments fresh and clean, to wash the head and bathe the body regularly, and to keep the person free from disgraceful filth may be called womanly appearance.

With wholehearted devotion to sew and weave, not to love gossip and silly laughter, in cleanliness and order [to prepare] the wine and food for serving guests may be called womanly work.