

8.5 Ban Zhao - Lessons for Women

Source: <https://china.usc.edu/lessons-women-ban-zhao-pan-chao-ca-45-116>

Background: In Confucian teachings, women did not have equal status with men and they were thought to be incapable of higher education. Most Confucians believed the subservience of women to men was natural and proper and part of the harmonious organization of the universe. Failure to maintain this unequal status could result in the breakdown of society.

While rare, there were women who challenged Confucian norms and rose to prominence in Chinese history. During the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 AD) Wu Zetian was the only woman to be emperor of China. A former child concubine, she became empress in 656 AD and in 690 AD declared herself Emperor, claiming she was a Buddha reincarnation in feminine form.

During the Han Dynasty, Ban Zhao (c. 45-116 AD) followed her brother as imperial historian and completed his dynastic history. Ban was also an adviser to Empress Deng, who assumed power as regent for her infant son in 106 AD. The best-known work by Ban is her *Lessons for Women*, which was written as an instruction guide on feminine behavior for her daughter. Despite her own achievements, Ban accepted the inferior status of women. In the introduction, Ban described herself as “the unworthy writer, . . . unsophisticated, unenlightened, and by nature unintelligent,” who, “being careless, and by nature stupid,” had taught and trained her own children without system or clear purpose. In passage A she describes the proper role of women in society. In passage B she discusses the relationship between husband and wife. In passage C the differences between men and women.

Questions

1. Why were female infants placed below the bed and given potsherds?
2. How do husbands and wives differ?
3. In what way did Ban Zhao break with traditional Confucian teachings?
4. In your opinion, what would have been Ban Zhao advice to Wu Zetian if they had lived at the same time? Explain.

A. On the third day after the birth of a girl the ancients observed three customs: first to place the baby below the bed; second to give her a potsherd [a piece of broken pottery] with which to play; and third to announce her birth to her ancestors by an offering. Now to lay the baby below the bed plainly indicated that she is lowly and weak, and should regard it as her primary duty to humble herself before others. To give her potsherds with which to play indubitably signified that she should practice labor and consider it her primary duty to be industrious. To announce her birth before her ancestors clearly meant that she ought to esteem as her primary duty the continuance of the observance of worship in the home.

B. If a husband does not control his wife, then the rules of conduct manifesting his authority are abandoned and broken. If a wife does not serve her husband, when the proper relationship between men and women and the natural order of things are neglected and destroyed . . . Yet only to teach men and not to teach women – is that not ignoring the essential relation between them? According to the “Rites,” it is the rule to begin to teach children to read at the age of eight years, and by the age of fifteen years they ought then to be ready for cultural training. Only why should it not be that girls' education as well as boys' be according to this principle?

C. As Yin and Yang are not of the same nature, so man and woman have different characteristics. The distinctive quality of the Yang is rigidity; the function of the Yin is yielding. Man is honored for strength; a woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness.

