



Duties toward Family in Ban Zhao (5-ca. 116 CE)

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The Confucian notion of family as moral unit viewed individuals as family members. The family as a loving unit relies on the morality and astuteness of family member, and family determines the state of society and government. The political and ethical nature of family involves “duties” and “love.” Duty lies heavily on the daughter-in-law for harmony in all relationships, family, and beyond. Ban Zhao confides that when she married at age fourteen, she worried that she might disgrace her parents and make difficulties for her in-laws.

That fear was so distressing, she worked without admitting the toll. Having learned from her experience, however, she sought to pass on what she learned in a “systematic” way to those she had “taught and trained,” particularly her “daughters” of marriageable age who needed to know the “proper customs for married women.” For without knowing good manners, they might humiliate both ancestors and clan. From her experience as daughter-in-law and mother, Ban Zhao gained knowledge about duty toward family. This brought her the authority to teach moral behavior and to argue that such was not enough to bring about family harmony. Rather, one must also have knowledge about expectations and learn strategies to deal with family members, customs, and situations. To benefit her “daughters,” Ban Zhao in *Lessons for Women* wrote advice in seven chapters for them to copy. To give ethical advice to her son, who had taken a new position as district magistrate, she wrote her famous poem “Rhapsody on a Journey to the East”:

Know that both your nature and fate rest with heaven.
Exhaust your loyalty and forgiveness on behalf of others.
If you do not waver in your love of the straight and narrow,
Then your sincerity is bound to touch the gods (Idema, 25).

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