



Propriety in Ban Zhao (5-ca. 116 CE)

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Propriety is not mentioned as such in Ban Zhao's *Lessons for Women*, yet it is the main subject matter of the *Lessons*, in particular, propriety of women's words and actions in regard to human relations. The propriety in all relationships is based on "harmony and intimacy" and in the case of married relationship "grounded in proper union." To live a life of propriety, women need follow "proper customs," rules, "correct manners," rites, and duties of worship. In marriage, propriety means that husbands and wives give each other proper space, and in this way avoid disrespecting each other with "improper language." Because language is related to actions, the propriety of women's rhetoric is as important as her actions. While womanly words "need be neither clever in debate nor keen in conversation," her words should be chosen "with care" to avoid "vulgar language," speaking at the inappropriate "time," and wearying others. To speak with propriety is to refrain from gossip and improper language. "Crookedness" in affairs "will lead to accusation and thus to anger," yet "straightforwardness," (praised in western thinking) will "lead to quarreling." So to speak with propriety is to be honest but not directly so. Sharp words spoken make living a loving life difficult. Rebuking or scolding of husbands will lead to wife-beating, yet, the "beseeching wife" need not use "flattery" nor "coaxing words" to gain a relationship of "intimacy." "Personal opinion," however, must be suppressed if it negatively affects a woman's honor or the harmony of relationships. It is clear from the above examples that propriety is bound to morality as much as to culture or convention. Most importantly for Ban Zhao is to learn what propriety means, and for that to occur, both men and women need to be educated about the propriety of words and actions.

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