



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

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Ban Zhao concludes her *Lessons for Women* with “modesty is virtue’s handle” and asserts that in possessing modesty and acquiescence, women will “have sufficient for harmony with others.” In the first chapter, titled *Humility*, she advises: “let a woman modestly yield to others,” respect others, and put others first. Modesty means not bragging when you act for good, and admitting if you act for bad. It means also that in the face of evil being spoken or done to you, that you bear the disgrace and endure it. Modesty is intimately related to humility. Humility as subject of the first chapter, is given importance as both virtue and duty. Ban Zhao uses the humility stance to introduce the *Lessons for Women* — “I the unworthy”, I “a humble subject,” a stance that she was taught to take from infancy, symbolized by the custom of being placed “below the bed.” One of the other two customs announced on the birth of a baby girl, is that her “primary duty” in her life will be “to humble herself before others.” A modest, humble woman attends to domestic duties, tidily, orderly, and with completeness. She continues rites of worship, and she maintains an upright character, meaning that she keeps her own counsel and quietness of spirit. For Ban Zhao, men’s modesty is complementary to women’s, for in her counterpoint to the *Lessons*, “Rhapsody on a Journey to the East,” she admonishes her son “embarking on a public career,” to “always be respectful/full of simple modesty” (cf. Idema & Grant 2004: 26).

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