

Chapter 4 Primary Source Activity

In the first century A.D., when few women were educated, Ban Zhao (Pan Chao) was a remarkable exception—a scholar and teacher (textbook page 98). Her father and brother were historians for the Han court. When her brother Ban Ku died in prison, the emperor ordered Ban Zhao to finish his work, which included biography, history, and astronomy. Despite her accomplishments, Ban Zhao is best known for this essay reminding women of their duties. Here she describes the first “virtue.” ♦ *As you read, think about what life in ancient China was like for an intelligent woman. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Seven Feminine Virtues

The first feminine virtue consists of meekness and humility. In ancient times a female infant, on the third day after her birth, was placed underneath her parents’ bed and given a spindle [for spinning thread] to play with. Meanwhile her father would fast and do penance and report to the familial ancestors on the arrival of a female child.

The placement of a female infant underneath the bed indicates her inferior position, and the provision of a spindle as her first toy is to familiarize her, at the earliest possible moment, with the importance of diligence and hard work. The fact that her arrival is reported to the ancestors shows that she, when she grows up, will have the honor as well as the obligation to host ancestor worship. In the acknowledgment of her own inferior position, in the lifelong devotion to work, and finally in the obligation to host the ritual of ancestor worship lies the essence of womanhood, enshrined in customs and tradition and regulated by law.

As a woman, she should always be modest and respectful, should keep herself constantly in the background, whatever she does; should never speak of her own goodness or flinch from the perfor-

mance of her assigned duties, however unpleasant; and finally, should be able to endure all the humiliations and insults, from wherever they come. This is what I mean by the acknowledgment of her own inferiority—her inability to live up to it should be her constant worry and fear.

More concretely, she should be the first to get up in the morning and the last to go to bed in the evening and should work every minute in her waking hours. She undertakes every task inside the house regardless of its difficulties, proceeds with it in an orderly and efficient manner, and completes it in time. This is what I mean by diligence. She waits upon her husband with seriousness and integrity and conducts herself in a most refined and unsullied manner. She of course never indulges

in any form of frolic, including laughter. At the time of ancestor worship, she sees to it that all religious offerings, such as food and wine, have been prepared most carefully for this occasion.

Source: *The Civilization of China*, compiled by Dun J. Li (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975).

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Questions to Think About

1. According to Ban Zhao, what three things should a woman learn as a baby?
2. How should a woman behave in her house if she follows these rules?
3. **Recognizing Ideologies** What do these rules for women show about attitudes toward women in general in ancient China?
4. **Activity** This excerpt discusses only one of the virtues. Think about what the others probably were. Then make your own list of seven “feminine virtues” for the 1990s. Then make a similar list of seven desirable qualities for men today.