Over the past decade, Ban Zhao 班昭 (d. A.D. 116?), author of the controversial Admonitions for Women (Nüjie 女誡, also translated as Lessons for Women), has been the subject of several publications in English alone. Two of these are reissues of earlier works: Nancy Lee Swann’s Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China (first published in 1932) and R. H. van Gulik’s Sexual Life in Ancient China (1961). The eagerness of publishers to bring these works back into print testifies to the interest that they detect in Chinese gender studies in general and in Ban Zhao in particular. It is worth asking why Ban Zhao has been the focus of so much renewed attention, and I shall suggest below that the answer involves the emergence of gender studies as a legitimate branch of academic inquiry. But I also aim to show that researchers engaged in these topics have overestimated the usefulness of Ban Zhao’s work as a historical source.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, scholarly discussions of Ban Zhao fit into one of three general camps. There were those who praised her as a pioneer for women’s education, a paragon to be emulated by women in modern times. Swann is only the most famous of such exponents. In the late Qing, Chinese critics honored Ban Zhao as a brilliant example with an important message for Chinese women on the threshold of modernity: “To be a woman you must have an education!”¹ Swann also influenced many Western minds, most notably that of Florence Ayscough (1878–1942), who, in her popular Chinese Women: Yesterday and To-Day, placed Ban Zhao at the head of the rubric “The Educators,” concluding, “her example has shone, a light, to succeeding ages.”² Tien-chi Martin-Liao concurs: “Ban Zhao did indeed earn glory as a champion of women’s education.”³

The second commonplace point of view is completely opposed to the first. Writers such as Chen Dongyuan 陳東原 and Van Gulik decried
Ban Zhao as a mighty enemy of the cause of women. Chen went so far as to say that she “poisoned” women and that she is responsible for the fact that Chinese marriages are devoid of love.⁴ Van Gulik called her manual of uxorial behavior “one of the most bigotted books in Chinese literature.”⁵ Siegfried Englert espouses a similar view: Ban Zhao’s ideas “meant…a powerful burden for women.”⁶ To these critics, Ban Zhao may have been an outstanding teacher, but she taught women all the wrong things.

Finally, there are writers for whom Ban Zhao is neither heroine nor villain, but simply a child of her times. According to Kazuo Enoki, for example, the manual “tell[s] us the status of [a] wife in her husband’s family at the time of Pan Chao, that is to say in the first century A.D.”⁷ Joanna F. Handlin, similarly: “While at the first glance oppressive, [Ban Zhao’s manual] should be understood in the broader context of li, norms of proper behavior, to which boys no less than girls were expected to conform.”⁸ Scholars in this third category take Ban Zhao as a faithful recorder of conventional views regarding relations between the sexes and appropriate behavior for women.

The most recent opinion surveyed above dates to 1984 (Martin-Liao), and none would be accepted unconditionally today. The third view, as plausible as it may seem, is now probably the least defensible, for if contemporary studies of Ban Zhao agree on one point, it is that her prescriptions were exceptional even in her own day. Lily Lee has demonstrated this convincingly in a three-part argument: (1) Ban Zhao “does not encourage [women] to excel in any area, but counsels them to mediocrity,” whereas Empress Dowager Deng 鄧太后 (d. A.D. 121), Ban Zhao’s own pupil, “could hardly be said to have been the exemplification of a self-effacing woman”; (2) Lee finds no earlier references “which stipulate that women were not allowed to speak their minds, especially when they were wronged”; moreover, “the interdiction on socializing between men and women did not seem to exist or be enforced very strictly in pre-Qin times”; and (3) relying heavily on the pathbreaking work of Jack L. Dull, Lee reminds us that “remarriage of women was not an uncommon phenomenon in ancient China” and that it was possible for women to divorce their husbands or even leave them without officially divorcing them.⁹ I have recently submitted similar observations: the values that Ban Zhao advanced in the name of tradition were really her own moralizing invention.¹⁰

One of the most frequently cited studies is by Yu-shih Chen: “The Historical Template of Pan Chao’s Nû Chieh.” Two recent publications
refer to it in glowing terms. In her preface to the Swann reprint, Susan Mann declares that “Chen’s radical rereading of the Taoist language in Pan Chao’s work brings the Lessons for Women into an utterly new perspective.”11 And Bret Hinsch has called Chen’s essay “an exciting alternative reading of Admonitions for Women,” adding, “close analysis of this work’s language has revealed remarkable similarities with texts on Huanglao and military strategy that were also in vogue during the Han.”12

“The Historical Template of Pan Chao’s Nü Chieh” includes more than a study of Ban Zhao’s language; the first two-thirds of the essay are devoted to recounting the fortunes of the Ban family and to presenting various episodes from Han history designed to show that accommodation rather than overt confrontation was often viewed as a politically expedient manner of dealing with powerful superiors. But the core of the essay indeed consists of the radical reinterpretation of “key concepts used in the Nü chieh,” in comparison with such works as Laozi and Sunzi.

Chen’s thesis rests on the claim that Admonitions for Women “was not a work of the Confucian persuasion.” She endeavors to show that Ban Zhao was not “a Confucian moralist” but that, like her celebrated brother Ban Gu 班固 (A.D. 32–92), she maintained attitudes close to “that of the Taoist school.”13 This is a strange appropriation of the terms “Confucian” and “Taoist.” In effect, Chen means that Ban Zhao regarded “self-preservation and survival as man’s first order of business,” but Daoism—whatever means—is surely not the same thing as “self-preservation and survival.” (That would make Thomas Hobbes a Daoist!) Chen writes as though there were two organized and accredited schools of thought in Han China, dubbed “Confucianism” and “Daoism,” and that allegiance to one precluded inspiration from the other. That is an antiquated and simplistic model.

Chen’s most notable suggestion is that Ban Zhao crafted her manual in suggestive language: that her prescriptions were intended as subtle references to Laozi and Sunzi, and that her unspoken design was to provide young wives with a set of skills necessary for survival in the hostile world of the in-laws’ house.14 Obeying mother-in-law thus becomes a matter of life and death, not moral rectitude: “The advice here seems to be: ‘Always keep yourself at a safe distance.’… Pan Chao does not seem at all to be advising the girls to submit themselves, either in thinking or in action, to the dictate of others. But she considers it foolhardy and perilous to dash oneself against superior forces.”15 Then Chen cites Laozi 22 (“Those that bend remain intact” 曲則全, which she renders jarringly as
“bowed down then preserved”) and opines: “If we look again at the
text . . . we will see that Pan Chao there is not suggesting that when prac-
ticing ‘bow down and follow’ a daughter-in-law no longer has her own
judgment of right and wrong. What is suggested is that, even though the
daughter-in-law may sometimes know that her mother-in-law is not in the
right, for the sake of her own preservation, she nevertheless should ‘bow
down’ and follow her mother-in-law.”16

In other words, what Chen calls “bow down and follow” is a calcu-
lated strategy, inspired by Laozi, to avoid disastrous conflicts with the
ineluctable mother-in-law. Ban Zhao herself, it should be noted, says
nothing of the kind. Her only explicit fear is that her untutored daugh-
ters may humiliate their ancestors and clan if they do not learn proper
conduct,17 not that they must learn to dissimulate in order to appease po-
tential enemies.

More important, it is doubtful that Ban Zhao’s audience would have
had the schooling necessary to discern such allusions. Admonitions for
Women is not written in a learned style. Often it resorts to language that
can only be considered colloquial. A good example is in chapter 5:

若夫動靜輕脫，視聽鞅輸，入則亂髮懶形，出則窃窕作態，說所不當道，觀
所不當視，此謂不能專心正色矣。18

If her actions are frivolous and untrammeled, if she sees and hears shanshu,
if she has disheveled hair and an unkempt body when at home, if she is
yaoitiao and puts on airs when abroad, if she speaks of what ought not be
said, if she watches what ought not be seen—then she cannot be single-
minded or correct in her bearing.

Published translations of Admonitions for Women regularly mangle
shanshu, an obscure word, variously written and glossed, in the semantic
range of “inconstant” and “wanon,” usually in reference to an alluring
woman. (Shan may be related to shan 閃, as in the inconstant twinkling
of a star.) This term has a long history in the vernacular.

Knowledgeable Han readers would have recognized yaoitiao immedi-
ately as the attribute of the lovely lady described in “The Guan-ing
Ospreys” (Guanju 關雎), the first poem in the Odes. In that context,
yaoitiao is traditionally taken to mean something like “retiring, modest”;
modern readers may object to the inherent moralism in that gloss, yet it
is clear that, however one chooses to interpret the phrase, yaoitiao is un-
derstood as a laudable characteristic. Ban Zhao, however, can mean it
only in a pejorative sense, and commentators typically pounce on the
term, explaining it as something more or less like “sluttish.” How does
the term designating the noble lady in “Guanju” come to mean “sluttish”? *Yaotiao* is an old and versatile disyllabic word with a basic meaning of “elegantly feminine”; in the *Odes*, it is used as a compliment, but by Ban Zhao’s time, it seems to have acquired a more vulgar meaning. As early as the *Lyrics of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭), *yaotiao* has racy connotations—not “sluttish,” but not “modest” either.¹⁹ (Dictionaries sometimes attempt to
distinguish between the senses of “retiring” and “seductive”; while there
may be some lexicographical merit in keeping definitions orderly, it is
misleading to present these nuances as anything other than artifacts of usage.)²⁰

At any rate, what concerns us here is that Ban Zhao is manifestly not
alluding to the *Odes* and is unconcerned that her audience might be way-
laid by thinking otherwise. An audience that is not expected to recognize
a reference to a piece as famous as “The *Guan*-ing Ospreys” would hardly
be prepared for the abstruse allusions that Chen postulates. In any case,
Ban Zhao is not in the habit of vague citation: when she does cite earlier
texts, she labels them prominently, and the list is hardly Daoist: *Analects,
Rites, Odes, Changes*, and a lost source, presumably in the genre of domes-
tic guidebooks, called *Regulations for Women* (*Nüxian* 女憲).

One final difficulty: Chen does not take Ban Zhao’s other writings
into account. Mann laments that “to this day, little attention has been
paid to [the] other fragments of Pan Chao’s work,”²¹ but let us be fair: if
all that survived of Ban Zhao’s oeuvre were those other pieces, and not
“Admonitions for Women,” she would be known today as a pedestrian au-
thor who wrote montitory little poems about industry and modesty. Still, in
this instance the fragments are worth consulting, because they shed light
on her habits of composition. They consist of (1) two memorials, formula-
ica and hence not very informative; (2) odes to the cicada, to needle and
thread, and to some foreign bird that her brother brought back from Par-
thia; and (3) a medium-sized rhapsody, brimming with erudite allusions,
titled “An Eastward Journey” (*Dongzheng fu* 東征賦). The last item is the
most useful, because one can test whether its allusions corroborate
Chen’s theory that Ban Zhao wrote according to a Daoist “template.”

They do not. David R. Knechtges has carefully translated and anno-
tated “An Eastern Journey.” (In her complaint, Mann does not acknowl-
edge Knechtges—or, for that matter, the older translation by Erwin von
Zach.)²² From Knechtges’ work we can see that Ban Zhao cites virtually
the same sources in “An Eastward Journey” as in *Admonitions for Women*:
Analects, Odes, Application of Equilibrium, Zuo Commentary. (The only text that she cites from outside the Confucian canon is Lyrics of Chu, unexceptional in a stylized rhapsody about travel.) Furthermore, the conspicuous moral of “An Eastward Journey” is irreconcilable with the view that “self-preservation and survival [are] man’s first order of business”:

知性命之在天  我们知道生命和命运是和天有关的；
由力行而近仁  但通过积极努力，人可以接近仁德；
勉仰高而蹈景  努力向上而蹈之景；
盡忠信而與人  尽忠信而与人；
好正直而不回兮  喜欢正直而不回头；
精誠通於明神  精诚上通于神明；
庶靈祗之霑照兮  愿神光普照；
祐貞良而輔信  为贞良之士辅助；

Man’s first order of business is the cultivation of virtue. Life and death are left to Heaven.

Admonitions for Women may use language reminiscent of the Laozi, but not because the author wishes to impart a Daoist message. Rather, Ban Zhao adopts keywords traditionally associated with femininity, such as “weakness,” “softness,” “inferiority,” and “malleability.” The Laozi transformed this familiar lexicon into a coherent philosophy of rulership that involved presenting an exterior manifestation of weakness and softness in order to attain oneself to the irresistible dao and thereby dominate all the brittle beings that defy the natural order. Exalting attributes conventionally associated with inferiority and femininity was a powerful rhetorical device: Laozi redefined “weakness” and “softness” as profound philosophical concepts. When Ban Zhao, in contrast, says “weak and soft,” she means “weak and soft.” Not every discussion of femininity can be interpreted as a veiled reference to the Laozi.

In the name of traditional morality, Admonitions for Women reduced the complex gender discourse of the venerable canons to a rigid and inhibiting set of protocols that has long been an embarrassment to traditional Chinese ethics. Why, then, has so much been written about her lately—and why has Chen’s attempt to rehabilitate her image met with so much scholarly sympathy?

Susan Mann has touched on the essential point: “Pan Chao and her Lessons for Women have once again returned to historical visibility, among
Chinese as well as Euro–North American feminist historians eager to re-
visit China’s classics and history, and Confucian ideologies, using gender
as a category of analysis.\textsuperscript{24}

The unexamined assumption here is that a feminist historian ought
to begin the project of “revisiting China’s classics” with Ban Zhao. Her
role in furthering the cause of women’s education has been grossly over-
rated—it is evident from the fine article by Beatrice Spade, for example,
that women’s education in the Southern Dynasties bore little resem-
bance to Ban Zhao’s narrow program\textsuperscript{25}—as has her influence on familial
relations both in her own day and in subsequent dynasties. Historians in-
terested in gender will discover more fertile territory in the real classics:
Zuo \textit{Commentary}, \textit{Discourses of the States}, and especially the \textit{Canon of Odes}.
Even the demotic \textit{Romance of the Three Kingdoms} (\textit{Sanguo yanji})
away all the swashbuckling, discloses a richer vision of women’s place in
society. It is also more fun to read.