

Chinese Proverbs^{*}

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^{*} from *Chinese Novels, Translated from the Originals, to which are added Proverbs and Moral Maxims Collected from Their Classical Books and Other Sources, The Whole Prefaced by Observations on the Language and Literature of China*. By John Francis Davis, F.R.S. London; John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1822.

Editor's note: This edition follows the original text except for the modernization of punctuation, the Americanizing of British spelling (*honor* in place of *honour*) and the updating of a few words (*show* in place of *shew*). I have dropped a few notes, especially the Latin and Greek quotations that Davis added. Notes in the original are labeled "Tr." All other notes are mine. My notes include a few Biblical analogues to some of the proverbs, to show the universality of wisdom.

The book is set in Baskerville Old Face 12. This eighteenth-century font gives the nineteenth-century book an older flavor, to match the style of the book.

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Chinese Proverbs

1. The man of first rate excellence is virtuous *independently* of instruction; he of the middling class is so *after* instruction; the lowest order of men are vicious *in spite* of instruction.
2. By a long journey we know a horse's strength; so length of days shows a man's heart.
3. The spontaneous gifts of Heaven are of high value; but the strength of perseverance gains the prize.
4. The generations of men follow each other, like the waves in a swollen river.
5. In the days of affluence, always think of poverty; do not let want come upon you and make you remember with regret the time of plenty.¹
6. Let us get drunk today, while we have wine; the sorrows of tomorrow may be borne tomorrow.
7. To correct an evil which already exists is not so well as to foresee and prevent it.
8. Modesty is attended with profit; arrogance brings on destruction.²
9. The growth of the mulberry tree corresponds with its early bent.³

¹ Davis notes the conflict with the proverb following. Compare Proverbs 6:6-11.

² Compare Proverbs 18:12 and Proverbs 22:4.

³ The old tree grows as it was bent when young. See Proverbs 22:6.

10. The same tree may produce sour and sweet fruit; the same mother may have a virtuous and vicious progeny.
11. It is equally criminal in the governor, and the governed, to violate the laws.⁴
12. As the scream of the eagle is heard when she has passed over, so a man's name remains after his death.
13. Questions of right and wrong (with reference to men's characters) are every day arising; if not listened to, they die away of themselves.
14. Doubt and distraction are on earth; the brightness of truth in heaven.⁵
15. In learning, age and youth go for nothing; the best informed takes the precedence.
16. Against open crimes, punishments can oppose a barrier; but secret offences it is difficult for the laws to reach.
17. If there be no faith in our words, of what use are they?⁶
18. If there be a want of concord among members of the same family, other men will take advantage of it to injure them.
19. The world's unfavorable views of conduct and character are but as the floating clouds, from which the brightest day is not free.
20. Wine and good dinners make abundance of friends; but in the time of adversity, not one is to be found.⁷
21. Let every man sweep the snow from before his own doors, and not trouble himself about the frost on his neighbor's tiles.⁸

⁴ What is wrong for the powerless is wrong for the powerful.

⁵ There is a saying about the importance of focus, but I got distracted and forgot it.

⁶ Or, for the postmodernists, "If words do not communicate, what use are they?"

⁷ Compare Proverbs 19:4 and Proverbs 17:17.

⁸ Compare Matthew 7:3-5.

22. He who can suppress a moment's anger may prevent many days' sorrow.⁹

23. The human relations are five in number, but that of husband and wife is the first in rank; the great ceremonies (or rites) amount to three thousand, but that of marriage is the most important.¹⁰

24. Worldly fame and pleasure are destructive to the virtue of the mind; anxious thoughts and apprehensions are injurious to the health of the body.

25. In a field of melons, do not pull up your shoe; under a plum-tree, do not adjust your cap.¹¹

26. The man of worth is really great, without being proud; the mean man is proud, without being really great.

27. Time flies like an arrow; days and months like a weaver's shuttle.

28. It is said in the *Ye-king*, that "Of those men, whose talent is inconsiderable, while their station is eminent, and of those, whose knowledge is small, while their schemes are large, there are few who do not become miserable."

29. When a man obtains a large sum, without having earned it, if it does not make him very happy, it will certainly make him very unhappy.

30. Though a man may be utterly stupid, he is very perspicacious while reprehending the bad actions of others; though he may be very intelligent, he is dull enough, while excusing his own faults. Do you only correct yourself on the same principle that you correct others, and excuse others on the same principle that you excuse yourself.¹²

⁹ Compare Proverbs 39:33.

¹⁰ *Human relations*: Namely, Husband and wife, parent and child, brothers, prince and minister, friends. -Tr.

¹¹ That is, be very careful of your conduct under circumstances of suspicion. -Tr. Today we might say, "Don't tie your shoe in a strawberry patch."

¹² Compare Matthew 7:2.

31. The figure of men in ancient times resembled that of wild beasts but their hearts contained the most perfect virtue.¹³ The outward appearance of the present race of men is human, but their dispositions are utterly brutish.

32. Do not anxiously expect what is not yet come; do not vainly regret what is already past.

33. Men's passions are like water. When water has once flowed over, it cannot easily be restored; when the passions have once been indulged, they cannot easily be restrained. Water must be kept in by dikes, the passions must be regulated by the laws of propriety.¹⁴

34. Without ascending the mountain, we cannot admire the height of heaven; without descending into the valley, we cannot admire the depth of the earth; without listening to the maxims left by the ancient Kings, we cannot know the excellence of wisdom.¹⁵

35. In making a candle, we seek for light; in studying a book, we seek for reason; light, to illuminate a dark chamber; reason, to enlighten man's heart.¹⁶

36. By learning, the sons of the common people become public ministers; without learning, the sons of public ministers become mingled with the mass of the people.

37. Though an affair may be easily accomplished, if it is not attended to, it will never be completed; though your son may be well disposed, if he is not instructed, he will still remain ignorant.

38. If you love your son, be liberal in punishment; if you hate your son, accustom him to dainties.¹⁷

¹³ Davis notes that this is a reference to Chinese beast fable history.

¹⁴ Compare Marcus Aurelius: A man determined to be great "is a competitor in the greatest of all contests, the struggle against passion's mastery" (*Meditations*, III.4, tr. Staniforth). And Compare Proverbs 14:30.

¹⁵ Compare Proverbs 1:2-6.

¹⁶ It is said that we cannot evaluate something until we know its purpose. In other words, we find a thing's value in its purpose.

¹⁷ Compare Proverbs 22:15.

39. Past events are as clear as a mirror; the future, as obscure as varnish.

40. What exists in the morning, we cannot be certain of in the evening; what exists in the evening, we cannot calculate upon for the next morning. The fortunes of men are as variable as the winds and clouds of heaven.

41. When you are happier than usual, you should be prepared against some great misfortune. Where joy is extreme, it precedes grief. Having obtained the Imperial favor, you should think of disgrace; living in quiet you should think of danger. When your glory is complete, your disgrace will be the greater; when your success is great, your ruin will be the deeper.

42. In security, do not forget danger; in times of public tranquility, be prepared against anarchy.

43. The fishes, though deep in the water, may be hooked; the birds, though high in the air, may be shot; but man's secret thoughts are out of our reach. The heavens may be measured, the earth may be surveyed; the heart of man only is not to be known.

44. Riches are what the man of worth considers lightly; death is what the mean man deems of importance.

45. When the man of a naturally good propensity has much wealth, it injures his advancement in wisdom; when the worthless man has much wealth, it increases his faults.

46. In enacting laws, rigor is indispensable; in executing them, mercy.

47. Do not consider any vice as trivial, and therefore practice it; do not consider any virtue as unimportant, and therefore neglect it.

48. Following virtue is like ascending a steep; following vice, like rushing down a precipice.

49. All events are separately fated before they happen. Floating on the stream of life, it is in vain that we torment ourselves. Nothing

proceeds from the machinations of men, but the whole of our lives is planned by destiny.

50. A vicious wife, and an untoward son, no laws can govern.

51. He who tells me of my faults, is my instructor; he who tells me of my virtues, does me harm.

52. Let your words be few, and your companions select; thus you will escape remorse and repentance; thus you will avoid sorrow and shame.¹⁸

53. If a man's wishes be few, his health will be flourishing; if he has many anxious thoughts, his constitution will decay.

54. Honors come by diligence; riches spring from economy.

55. The mild and gentle must ultimately profit themselves; the violent and fierce must bring down misfortune.

56. If you wish to know what most engages a man's thoughts, you have only to listen to his conversation.¹⁹

57. In our actions, we should accord with the will of heaven; in our words, we should consult the feelings of men.

58. If a man be not enlightened within, what lamp shall he light? If his intentions be not upright, what prayers shall he repeat?

59. Man perishes in the pursuit of wealth; as the bird meets with destruction in search of its food.

60. Knowing what is right without practicing it denotes a want of proper resolution.

61. There are plenty of men in the world but very few heroes.

¹⁸ Compare Proverbs 10:19.

¹⁹ In the past, this may have been a comment on the greedy. Today, it serves as a comment on the chronically self-referential.

62. Poverty and ruin must in the end be proportioned to a man's wickedness and craft, for these are qualities which heaven will not suffer to prevail. Were riches and honors the proper results of crafty villainy, the better part of the world must fatten on the winds.²⁰

63. The best cure for drunkenness is, whilst sober, to observe a drunken man.

64. The opening flower blooms alike in all places; the moon sheds an equal radiance on every mountain and every river. Evil exists only in the heart of man; all other things show the benevolence of heaven towards the human race.

65. Would you know the character of the Prince, examine his ministers; would you understand the disposition of any man, look at his companions; would you know that of a father, observe his son.

66. A man is as ignorant of his own failings as the ox is unconscious of his great strength.

67. A man, by the cultivation of virtue, consults his own interest; his stores of wisdom and reflection are every day filling up.

68. Confucius says, "The capacity for knowledge, of the inferior man, is small and easily filled up; the intelligence of the superior man is deep and not easily satisfied."

69. Though the screen be torn, its frame is still preserved; though the good man be plunged in want, his virtue still remains to him.

70. Without the wisdom of the learned, the clown could not be governed; without the labor of the clown, the learned could not be fed.

71. The cure of ignorance is study, as meat is that of hunger.

72. Though the white gem be cast into the dirt, its purity cannot be (lastingly) sullied; though the good man live in a vile place, his heart cannot be depraved. As the fir and the cypress withstand the

²⁰ *Fatten on the winds*: That is, the evil few would have all the wealth, leaving the rest of the world to eat air.

rigors of the winter, so resplendent wisdom is safe in situations of difficulty and danger.

73. It is not easy to stop the fire when the water is at a distance; friends at hand are better than relations afar off.

74. If a man wish to attain to the excellence of superior beings, let him first cultivate the virtues of humanity; for if not perfect in human virtue, how shall he reach immortal perfection?

75. Man is born without knowledge, and when he has obtained it, very soon becomes old; when his experience is ripe, death suddenly seizes him.²¹

76. There are three great maxims to be observed by those who hold public situations; namely, to be upright, to be circumspect, to be diligent. Those who know these three rules know that by which they will ensure their own safety in office.

77. A man's prosperous or declining condition may be gathered from the proportion of his waking to his sleeping hours.²²

78. Unsullied poverty is always happy, while impure wealth brings with it many sorrows.

79. He who receives a benefit, and is not ungrateful—as a son, will be dutiful—as a minister, will be faithful.

80. The fame of men's good actions seldom goes beyond their own doors; but their evil deeds are carried to a thousand miles distance.

81. The sincerity of him, who assents to every thing, must be small; and he who praises you inordinately to your face, must be altogether false.

82. Petty distinctions are injurious to rectitude; quibbling words violate right reason.

²¹ The popular version of this is, "We grow too soon old and too late smart."

²² Compare Proverbs 6:10-11.

83. Though powerful medicines be nauseous to the taste, they are good for the disease; though candid advice be unpleasant to the ear, it is profitable for the conduct.

84. To show compassion towards the people, by remitting the severity of the taxes, is the virtue of the prince; and to offer up their possessions, sinking their private views in regard for the public, is the duty of the people.

85. Though the life of man be short of a hundred years, he gives himself as much pain and anxiety as if he were to live a thousand.

86. The advantages of wise institutions can be sought for, only in an inflexible observance of them.

87. If a man does not receive guests at home, he will meet with very few hosts abroad.

88. Where views and dispositions agree, the most distant will unite in friendship; where they disagree, relations themselves will soon be at enmity.

89. Without a clear mirror, a woman cannot know the state of her own face; without a true friend, a man cannot discern the errors of his own actions.

90. The evidence of others is not comparable to personal experience; nor is "I heard" so good as "I saw."²³

91. The three greatest misfortunes in life are, in youth to bury one's father, at the middle age to lose one's wife, and, being old, to have no son.

92. A virtuous woman is a source of honor to her husband; a vicious one causes him disgrace.

93. It being asked, "Supposing a widowed woman to be very poor and destitute, might she in such a case take a second husband?"—It was answered, "This question arises merely from the fear of cold

²³ The modern version is, "One look is worth a thousand memos."

and hunger; but to be starved to death is a very small matter compared with the loss of her respectability.”

94. Those who cause divisions, in order to injure other people, are in fact preparing pitfalls for their own ruin.

95. Even the carriers of burdens may, by honesty and diligence, obtain a sufficiency. The Proverb says, “Every blade of grass has its share of the dews of Heaven;” and “Though the birds of the forest have no garner, the wide world is all before them.”

96. Wisdom, and Virtue, and Benevolence, and Rectitude, without Good-breeding, are imperfect.

97. He who wishes to know the road through the mountains, must ask those who have already trodden it.²⁴

98. Rich men look forward to the years that are to come; but the poor man has time to think only of what is immediately before him.

99. It is better to believe that a man does possess good qualities, than to assert that he does not.

100. The mischiefs of fire, or water, or robbers, extend only to the body; but those of pernicious doctrines, to the mind.

101. The original tendency of man’s heart is to do right; and if a due caution be observed, it will not of itself go wrong.

102. As it is impossible to please men in all things, our only care should be to satisfy our own consciences.

103. He who at once knows himself, and knows others, will triumph as often as he contends.

104. Though brothers are very near relations, the difference of fortune widely separates them.

105. Eat your three meals in the day, and look forward to sleeping at night.

²⁴ That is, we must look for instruction to the experienced. -Tr.

106. A man's countenance is a sufficient index of his prosperity or adversity, without asking him any questions.

107. Adversity is necessary to the development of men's virtues.

108. It is too late to pull the rein when the horse has gained the brink of the precipice; the time for stopping the leak is passed when the vessel is in the midst of the river.

109. The scholar is acquainted with all things, without the trouble of going out of doors.

110. He who advances may fight, but he who retreats may take care of himself.

111. Those who respect themselves will be honorable, but he who thinks lightly of himself will be held cheap by the world.

112. Great promises are not followed by corresponding actions.

113. It is easy to convince a wise man, but to reason with a fool is a difficult undertaking.²⁵

114. To meet with an old friend in a distant country may be compared to the delightfulness of rain after a long drought.²⁶

115. Speak of men's virtues as if they were your own, and of their vices as if you were liable to their punishment.

116. Diligence is a treasure of inestimable price, and prudence is the pledge of security.

117. Mencius said, "All men concur in despising a glutton because he gives up every thing that is valuable for the sake of pampering what is so contemptible."

118. Him, whose words are consistent with reason, and whose actions are squared by the rule of rectitude, what man shall dare to oppose?

²⁵ Compare Proverbs 9:8, 10:8, 12:15, 13:1, and 14:16.

²⁶ "Country" is literally "village." -Tr.

119. Inattention to minute actions will ultimately be prejudicial to a man's virtue.

120. To the contented, even poverty and obscurity bring happiness; while to the ambitious, wealth and honors themselves are productive of misery.

121. As the light of a single star tinges the mountains of many regions; so a single unguarded expression affects the virtue of a whole life.²⁷

122. Though a poor man should live in the midst of a noisy market, no one will ask about him; though a rich man should bury himself among the mountains, his relations will come to him from a distance.

123. Knowledge is boundless, but the capacity of one man is limited.

124. A single hair of silk does not make a thread; one tree does not make a grove.

125. A single conversation across the table with a wise man is better than ten years mere study of books.

126. Prudence will carry a man all over the world; but the impetuous find every step difficult.

²⁷ Compare Proverbs 21:23.