

THE TWENTY-FOUR FILIAL EXEMPLARS
by
GUŌ Jūjìng (Yuán Dynasty)¹

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¹-This translation ©1973 by David K. Jordan. I have made minor editorial changes in this reprint. I am grateful to Mrs. Shiu-kuen Fan Tsung for her criticism of the original translation and assistance in interpreting some passages which I found obscure. The responsibility for remaining errors is, of course, my own. This numbering of the tales is traditional, but is not observed in all reprint editions. For a published study of this work, including an examination of many later imitations that included different tales, a total of 131 all told, see my article "Folk Filial Piety in Taiwan: The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars" In Walter H. Slote (ed.) 1986 *The Psycho-Cultural Dynamics of the Confucian Family: Past and Present*. Seoul: International Cultural Society of Korea. Pp. 47-106.

1. THE FEELING OF FILIAL PIETY MOVED HEAVEN (Shùn)
(Xiào Gǎn Dòng Tiān)

Emperor Shùn of the Yú dynasty was the son of Gǔ Shǒu (=Blind Old-Man). His nature was most filial. But his father was obstinate and his mother was boorish. His younger brother Xiàng was proud and overbearing. Shùn ploughed on Mount Lì [in Shāndōng province], where the elephants ploughed for him and the birds weeded for him, for his feelings of filial piety were so great [that even the beasts were moved]. Emperor Yáo [of Táng] heard of this; he sent nine of his sons to wait on him and two of his daughters to be his wives and later abdicated the throne in his favor. Verses praise him saying:

Herds of elephants plough in the spring;
Flocks of birds pull the weeds;
He is the heir of Yáo and mounts his throne;
The spirit of filial piety moves the heart of Heaven.

2. HER SON TASTED SOUPS & MEDICINE (Héng)
(Qīn Cháng Tāng Yào)

Emperor Wén of the western Hàn was named Héng. He was the third son of [Liú Bāng,] the founder of the dynasty. Before he became emperor he was appointed king of Dài [in Shānxī province]. His mother became Queen-Mother Bó[-jī]. the emperor-to-be respectfully tended her and was not idle. His mother took sick for three years. The emperor did not sleep nor even unfasten the belt of his clothes. And if he had not tasted a medicine, it was not brought to his mother. His benevolence and piety were rumored throughout the kingdom. Verses praise him saying:

Benevolence and piety are rumored through the kingdom;
Lofty and eminent he excels a hundred kings;
The Queen-Mother has been sick for three years,
And he always tastes the medicine first

3. SHE BIT HER FINGER & PAINED HIS HEART (Zēng Shēn)
(Niè Zhǐ Tòng Xīn)

Zēng Shēn of the Zhōu dynasty was called Zǐ-yú (=Disciple of the Master). He was extremely filial to his mother. Shēn once went to the mountains to gather firewood. A guest came to the house, and his mother had no arrangements [to entertain him]. She longed for Shēn , who did not return. Then she bit her finger, drawing blood. Suddenly Shēn felt a pain in his heart. He shouldered the firewood and returned home. Kneeling, he asked his mother what the matter was. His mother said: “A guest came unexpectedly. I bit my finger to alert you.” Later, verses praised him, saying:

His mother has just bitten her finger,
When her son’s heart aches uncontrollably;
He shoulders his wood to return and is not too late;
The tie between mother and child [lit.: bones & flesh] is so deep.

4. HE OBEYED HIS MOTHER IN SIMPLE CLOTHES (Mǐn Sǔn)
(Dān Yī Shùn Mǔ)

Mǐn Sǔn of the Zhōu dynasty was called Zǐ-qīān (=the Master’s Inferior). His mother died very early, and his father took another wife, who bore two sons, whom she dressed in raw silk lined with cotton wadding. She was jealous about Sǔn and dressed him in mere

rushes. One day his father ordered Sǔn to harness the cart. Sǔn 's body was cold and he dropped the rope. His father looked into the reason, then resolved to divorce his second wife. Sǔn said: “If Mother stays, one child will be poorly dressed. If Mother leaves, three children will be cold.” The stepmother heard this, and she repented and changed. Verses praise him, saying:

The Mǐn family has a saintly son,
Who never resents his stepmother;
Before the cart he [has begged his father to] let his [step-] mother stay;
Three children are saved from wind and frost.

5. HE SHOULDERED RICE TO NOURISH HIS PARENTS (Zhòng Yóu)
(Fù Mǐ Yàng Qīn)

Zhòng Yóu of the Zhōu dynasty was called Zǐ-lù (=Way of the Master). He was of a poor family, and they ate only brambles [Lit: chenopodium]. For his parents he often carried [sacks of] rice more than a hundred *lǐ*. After his parents died, he traveled south to the state of Chǔ, where he became an official and had a hundred chariots to follow him when he went out and a large store of grain. He sat upon many layers of cloth before rows of tripods [of food]. But he sighed and said: “I would rather be back eating brambles and carrying rice more than a hundred *lǐ* for my parents, but that is impossible.” A verse says of him:

He carried rice to provide good food,
And willingly traveled a hundred *lǐ* away;
He has become prosperous, but his parents are already dead;
He still thinks on their “grievous toil.”²

6. HE SOLD HIMSELF TO BURY HIS FATHER (Dǒng Yǒng)
(Mài Shēn Zàng Fù)

In the Hàn dynasty the family of Dǒng Yǒng was very poor. When his father died, he promised himself as security to borrow money to bury him. Then he went to work [for the lender to pay back the debt]. On the way he met a woman, who asked to become Yǒng's wife, and she went with him to his master's house. The master ordered them to weave 300 bolts of silk, and then they could return [home]. His wife wove for a month and then was finished. They returned as far as the locust tree where they had met, when she bade Yǒng good-bye and vanished. There is a poem praising him, saying:

To bury his father he has to borrow money;
A fairy concubine appears upon the road and
Weaves the silk to repay his debt;
Filial feeling moves the heavens.

7. HE FED HIS PARENTS DEER'S MILK (Tán)
(Lù Rǔ Fèng Qīn)

In the Zhōu dynasty lived a man named Tán whose nature was very filial. His parents were old, and both suffered from a malady of the eyes [for the cure of which] they desired to drink deer's milk. Tán therefore [disguised himself in] a deerskin and went to a herd of deer deep in the mountains to obtain deer's milk to give his parents. Some hunters saw him and

²-Cf. *Book of Songs*: “Pity my parents who bore me with greivous toil.” (āi'āi fùmǔ shēng wǒ qúláo.)

were about to shoot him, when Tán revealed himself to them to avoid [being shot]. There is a poem which praises him, saying:

His elderly parents want deer's milk,
So he wears a coarse fur garment;
If he had not spoken out loud,
He would have borne back arrows.

8. HE HIRED OUT TO SUPPORT HIS MOTHER (Jiāng Gé)
(Xíng Yōng Gòng Mǔ)

Jiāng Gé lived in the later Hàn dynasty. His father died when he was young, and he lived alone with his mother. The times were troubled and chaotic, so, carrying his mother on his back, he fled. Again and again they encountered bandits who wanted to force him to join them. But Gé burst into tears and told them that he bore his mother with him [whom he had to support]. The bandits could not bring themselves to kill him, and at length he reached Xià Péi [in Jiāngsū province]. Impoverished, naked, and barefoot, he hired himself out as a laborer to support his mother. His mother was able to have all she desired, and there was no end to what he gave her. A verse praises him thus:

He carries his mother out of danger;
When destitute brigands assault him many times,
He tells them his grief and is able to avoid them;
By his labors he supports his mother.

9. HE CONCEALED ORANGES TO PRESENT TO HIS MOTHER (Lù Jī)
(Huái Jú Wèi Qīn)

In the later Hàn dynasty there lived a certain Lù Jī, also called Gōngjì. When he was six, he went to Jiùjiāng (=Nine Rivers) [in Jiāngxī province], where he met [General] Yuán Shù. Shù brought out some oranges and presented them to him [as a guest]. Jī concealed two oranges in his sleeves. But when he thanked [the general] upon leaving, they fell out on the ground. Shù said: “Master Lù, you are my guest, and yet you conceal oranges?” Jī knelt and answered: “My mother has a fondness for them, and I wanted to present them to her when I returned.” Shù was greatly amazed. A poem praises him in these words:

Filial duty is an inborn quality, thus
Among men a six-year-old child
Conceals oranges in his sleeve to
Present them to his mother and repay her deep benevolence.

10. SHE SUCKLED HER MOTHER-IN-LAW (Madame Cuī)
(Rǔ Gū Bū Dài)

Cuī Nánshān of the Táng dynasty had a great grandmother known as Madame Zhǎng Sūn. She was very old and no longer had teeth. Each day his grandmother, Madame Táng, combed the old lady's hair, washed her face, and brought her into the main hall, where she fed her mother-in-law with her own milk. Although the old lady ate not a crumb, nevertheless she passed many years in good health. One day she fell sick, and young and old gathered about her as she announced: “There is no way that I can repay my daughter-in-law's favors. I want all the sons and grandsons and their wives to be as filial and respectful as this daughter-in-law has been.” She is praised in verse thus:

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The filial daughter-in-law of the Cū family
Gives milk to her mother-in-law after combing her hair
and washing her each morning;
This favor cannot be returned, but
It is wished that she receive the same treatment
from her sons and grandsons.

11. HE LET MOSQUITOS CONSUME HIS BLOOD (Wú Měng) (Zì Wén Bǎo Xuě)

When Wú Měng of the Jìn dynasty was eight years old, he was very filial towards his parents. The family was poor, and the bed had no mosquito net. Every night in summer mosquitoes in droves nibbled at their skin and sucked their blood without restraint. Although there were many, Měng did not drive them away, lest in leaving him they bite his parents. So great was his love of his parents! A poem praises him:

On summer nights without a mosquito net,
When mosquitoes are many he dares not wave them off;
They gorge themselves on his flesh and blood,
And thus he avoids their bothering his parents.

12. HE LAY ON ICE IN SEARCH OF CARP (Wáng Xiáng) (Wò Bīng Qiú Lǐ)

Wáng Xiáng of the Jìn dynasty lost his mother early. His stepmother, named Zhū, was unloving toward him and unceasingly spoke ill of him before his father. Because of this he lost the love of his father also. His stepmother often liked to eat fresh fish, but one winter the cold froze [the river] to ice. Xiáng loosened his clothes and lay on the ice to [melt it so he could] procure them. Suddenly the ice opened of itself and a pair of carp leapt out. He took them and returned to serve them to his stepmother. A verse speaks of this:

We have seen stepmothers before,
But never a Wáng Xiáng,
Until today upon the river, when
He left us a model by lying on the ice.

13. HE BURIED HIS SON FOR HIS MOTHER (Guō Jù) (Wèi Mǔ Mái Ér)

In the Hàn dynasty the family of Guō Jù was poor. He had a three-year-old son. His mother sometimes divided her food with the child. Jù said to his wife: “[Because we are] very poor, we cannot provide for Mother. Our son is sharing Mother’s food. Why not bury this son?” He was digging the pit three feet deep when he struck a caldron of gold. On it [an inscription] read: “No official may take this nor may any other person seize it.” A verse says of him:

Guō Jù wishes to serve his mother, and
Buries his son that his mother may survive;
Yellow gold is bestowed by heaven, and
Brilliant fortune brightens their poor threshold.

14. HE STRANGLERED A TIGER TO SAVE HER FATHER (Yáng Xiāng)
(È Hǔ Jiù Qīn)

When Yáng Xiāng of the Jìn dynasty was fourteen, she often followed her father Fēng into the fields to reap grain. Her father [on one occasion] was dragged away by a tiger. Although at the time Yáng Xiāng had no weapon at hand, she thought only of her father and not of herself as she leapt quickly forward and grabbed tightly at the tiger's neck. The tiger left in defeat, and her father was able to escape injury. A verse praises her saying:

In the deep mountains a white forehead³ reared, and
When it moved the wind was filled with the smell [of its dead prey];
The father and child have suffered no injury, [for she]
Has rescued her [father's] body from the greedy mouth.

15. HE ABANDONED A MANDARINATE TO SEEK HIS MOTHER (Zhū Shòuchāng)
(Qì Guān Xún Mǔ)

When Zhū Shòuchāng of the Sòng dynasty was seven years old, his mother, [a concubine] named Liú, because of the envy of the first wife, married out again [to another family]. For fifty years the mother and son did not see each other. In the reign called Shén Zōng [1068-1085] he gave up his office and went to Qín [in Shaǎnxī], where he found her. At that time his mother was already seventy. A verse praises him thus:

At seven he was separated from his mother,
And fifty years have passed;
One morning they meet again,
And the joy of it moves Heaven.

16. HE TASTED DUNG WITH AN ANXIOUS HEART (Yǔ Qiánlóu)
(Cháng Fèn Yōu Xīn)

Yǔ Qiánlóu of the southern Qí dynasty was sent as a magistrate to Chánglíng [south of Gōng'ān in Húběi province]. He had been in the district less than ten days when suddenly his heart was alarmed and he perspired. Immediately he gave up his office and returned, [to find] his father had been sick for two days. The doctor said: "To know whether a sickness is improving or very serious, one must taste the [patient's] dung. If it is bitter, then there is hope." Qiánlóu tasted it, and it was sweet. His heart was very anxious. When night came, he kowtowed to the North Star [of longevity], beseeching it to let him die in his father's place. Verses praise him saying:

He was in his post less than ten days, when
His father suddenly met with serious illness;
He wants to substitute himself in death for his father;
Facing north, he is weighted down in worry.

17. HE AMUSED HIS PARENTS WITH PLAY & GLAD CLOTHES (Old Man Lái)
(Xì Cǎi Yú Qīn)

Old man Lái of the Zhōu dynasty was noted for his filial nature. He respectfully cared for his two parents, preparing them sweet and crispy foods. He was over seventy, but he

³-Some folktales maintain that a tiger who has eaten a hundred humans develops a white forehead. Because the name Xiāng would today be a female one, most writers interpret Yáng Xiāng as female. Others consider "him" male.

never mentioned the word “old.” He wore five-colored patterned clothes and played like a child before his parents; often he carried water into the room and would slip and fall, and then he would cry like a baby to amuse his parents. A verse says of him:

He plays and dances and pretends delicate nonsense;
The spring wind blows his colorful clothes;
His two parents throw open their mouths in laughter,
And their joy fills the hall.

18. HE PICKED MULBERRIES TO SERVE HIS MOTHER (Cài Shùn)
(Shí Shèn Gòng Qīn)

Cài Shùn of the Hàn dynasty was left fatherless at a young age. He served his mother with utmost filial devotion. They had to endure the tumult of Wáng Mǎng, and the crops were bad and the land unproductive. He gathered mulberries, which he sorted into different containers until they were full. A [band of] Red-Eyebrow robbers [rebels against Wáng Mǎng] saw this and asked him about it. Shùn said: “The black, ripe ones I give to my mother. The red, unripe ones I eat myself.” The robbers took compassion because of this filiality and gave him three catties of white rice and an ox leg. A verse says of him:

With black mulberries he nourishes his mother;
Tears of hunger drench his clothing;
The Red-Eyebrows know his filial intent and
Present beef and rice for the filial son to bring home.

19. HE FANNED THE PILLOW & WARMED THE QUILT (Huáng Xiāng)
(Shān Zhěn Wēn Qīn)

When Huáng Xiāng of the Hàn dynasty was nine years old, he lost his mother. He [continued to] think of her so much and with such love that the neighbors praised his filial devotion. Xiāng did diligent and painful work, and his one thought was to serve his father. In summer, when the weather was hot, he cooled his [father’s] pillow and mat with a fan. In winter, when the weather turned cold, he warmed his [father’s] quilts and cushions with his body. The prefect Liú Hù publicly honored and recognized him [for his rare filiality]. A verse praises him thus:

In winter he warms the quilts, and
In hot weather he fans the pillow to make it cool;
The child knows a son’s duty;
In a thousand ages there can be but one Huáng Xiāng.

20. THE FOUNTAIN BUBBLED & THE CARPS LEAPT (Jiāng Shī)
(Yǒng Quán Yuè Lǐ)

Jiāng Shī of the Hàn dynasty served his mother filially. His wife was named Páng, and she was even more respectful. The old mother liked to drink water from [a certain] river, and the wife would go to draw it and bring it back to the old lady. His mother also loved eating minced fillet of fish, and Shī and his wife often prepared it. They [even] invited the neighbors’ mothers to join her when she ate. Suddenly a fountain sprang up beside the house with a taste like the water from the river, and each day two carp jumped from it, which Shī would take to give to his mother. a verse says of this:

Beside the house a sweet fountain flows, and
Each morning a pair of fish appears;

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The son can constantly be filial to his mother;
The daughter-in-law can be filial to her husband's mother.

21. HE HEARD THUNDER AND WEPT AT THE GRAVE (Wáng Póu) (Wén Léi Qì Mù)

Wáng Póu of the state of Wèi [at the time of the Warring States] served his mother with filiality. When she was alive, she was afraid of thunder. After she died she was buried in a hilly wood. Whenever there was wind and rain and Póu would hear the loud sound of [thunder like the passing of the chariot of the thunder-goddess] Àxiāng, he would hurry to the grave and kneel and pray. He would weep, saying: "Póu is here; Mother must not be afraid." A poem praises him saying:

His loving mother feared hearing thunder;
[Now] her chill spirit dwells among the dead, and
When Àxiāng thunders over and over
He goes to the tomb to walk about it a thousand times.

22. HE CARVED WOOD TO SERVE HIS PARENTS (Dīng Lán) (Kē Mù Shì Qīn)

The father and mother of Dīng Lán of the Hàn dynasty died when Lan was young and never received support and service from him. But he thought often of their "grievous toil."⁴ He carved wooden statues and served them as though they were alive. His wife began after a time not to revere them. [One day] she took a needle and pricked their fingers in mockery. Blood flowed, and when the wooden statues saw Lán, tears fell from their eyes. Lán inquired about their condition; then he divorced his wife and cast her out.⁵ There is a verse which says:

He carves wooden statues of his mother and father,
Giving them the appearance they had in life;
And this is to caution every son and nephew,
that each must be filial towards his parents.

23. HE WEPT TILL THE BAMBOO SPROUTED (Mèng Zōng) (Kū Zhú Shēng Sǔn)

Mèng Zōng of the Warring States period was also called Gōngwǔ. His father died when he was small, and his mother was very ill. One winter she longed to eat a soup made with boiled bamboo shoots. Zōng had no means to give her such a thing, and he went out to the bamboo grove where, seizing a bamboo stalk, he wept. His filial piety moved heaven and earth. In a moment, the earth cracked open and many stalks of bamboo shoots appeared. He

⁴-Cf. Tale 5, verse & note.

⁵-This is the one story which some modern editors most often rewrite, apparently in order to avoid the divorce. In a couple of retellings in my collection, the wife, seeing the statues react, is grief-stricken, reforms, and is forgiven rather than divorced by her husband. In one elaborately illustrated, heavy-paper edition designed for younger children, a neighbor's wife, come to borrow something, scoffs at Dīng Lán's wife at her devotions. Dīng Lán's wife, angered, refuses to lend her what she wants. The neighbor's wife returns home and sends her husband over, who sneers and beats the statues with his stick. Dīng Lán returns, sees the weeping statues, hears the tale, and stabs the neighbor to death. The magistrate, rather than punishing him, commends him as a fine example of filial piety.

gathered them and returned home to make soup for his mother. When she had eaten it, she recovered. Verses praise him, saying:

Tears drop; the north wind is cold
And moans through a stand of bamboo;
But winter bamboo shoots come forth!
The wish of Heaven is to bring harmony.⁶

24. HE WASHED HIS MOTHER'S BEDPAN (Huáng Tíngjiān)
(Dí Qīn Niào Qì)

Huáng Tíngjiān of the Sòng dynasty was also called Shāngǔ. During the Yuán Yòu reign period [1086-1093] he was a government compiler. His nature was filial, and although he was very prominent, he served his mother with deep sincerity. Every evening he himself washed out his mother's bedpan. A moment did not pass in which he did not display the responsibility of a son. A verse praises him saying:

He is prominent enough to be known throughout the world, but
All his life he is filial toward his mother;
He does not decline to wash out her urine;
How could he use maids and let himself be spoilt [by prominence]?

⁶-*Píng'ān*. For a discussion of this complex concept in its specialized application to families, see my book, *Gods, Ghosts, & Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), page 92.