

顏之推：顏氏家訓

## Advice to My Sons

By Yen Chih-t'ui (A.D. 531-after 597\*)

Translated by D. C. Lau

### Introductory Remarks

1. The works of the ancient sages have left nothing unsaid in teaching a man to be true to himself and good to his parents, to be cautious in word and careful in deed, to become a man of integrity and make his name extensively known. From the Wei (220-263) and the Chin (265-420) all the philosophical works that have been written serve only to repeat these ideas and facts, each imitating the ones that appeared before, like erecting under the roof another roof or laying above the bed another bed. If I am doing once more what has been done before, it is not because I presume to impose patterns of behaviour on the world. My only intention is to regulate my own family and to impress these lessons upon my own children and their children.

Of two speakers who say the same thing, we believe in the one who is near and dear to us; of two persons enjoining the same action, we obey the one we admire. In preventing the mischievous pranks of a boy, the admonition of teachers and friends is not as effective as the guidance of servant girls. In stopping a fight between two common men, the way of Yao and Shun is not as effective as the remonstrances of their wives. All I hope is that this book will win your confidence, and this will at least be better than leaving it to servant girls and wives.

2. Our family has always been careful about discipline. As a young boy I received gentle guidance in good behaviour. When, in the morning and in the evening, my two elder brothers went to pay their respects to our parents, I used to go along with them and we walked in a careful manner, learning to be composed in countenance and in word, and to proceed in a respectful manner as if we were being received by our "majestic prince".<sup>1</sup> Our parents, for their part, spoke kindly to us, asking about our inclinations, and encouraging us to overcome our shortcomings and develop our good points, and everything was said with great earnestness and sincerity. When I was only nine years old, I lost my father. Our family fortunes declined and there were a hundred mouths waiting to be fed. I was brought up by my elder brother in the face of considerable hardship. He was, however, too kind and lacked the sternness for strict discipline. Though I read the *Rites* together with the commentaries, I was rather fond of literary composition, and not a little influenced by vulgar people, so that my speech was often frivolous and my

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\*The date of Yen Chih-t'ui's death, long a matter of uncertainty, has now been determined as "after 597", according to a research note in the journal *Wen Shih*, Peking, 1963.

<sup>1</sup>In ritual writings, the 'majestic prince' is a common metaphor for one's father.

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*This article is the first part of a projected translation of the Sixth century work Yen shih chia hsun (Yen's family instructions). The author, Yen Chih-t'ui, was a scholar and statesman who lived from the Chung Ta T'ung period (529-534) in the reign of Emperor Wu of Southern Liang to the second decade in the Sui Dynasty (581-601). He died "in his sixties", leaving a number of works of which the Chia hsun is one of only two preserved intact. The book consists of twenty chapters and deals not only with human relations and self-cultivation but also with literature, the arts, and problems of life and death.*

*Professor D. C. Lau has written: "The Yen shih chia hsun occupies a very special place in Chinese literature. Its significance goes far beyond what one can expect of a work of this genre. This is because Yen Chih-t'ui was a man of parts. He served four dynasties and rose to a position of some importance in his official career. He was a Confucian whose views were tempered by Buddhism. He was a considerable scholar and talented writer. Above all he was an authority on phonology who was, to a large extent, responsible for the form the ch'ieh yun (切韻) eventually took. This versatility accounts for the wide range of topics covered by the Chia hsun, which is a mine of information for students in a variety of fields."*

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appearance unkempt. By the time I was eighteen or nineteen, I had started pulling myself together, but habits are like second nature, and cannot be got rid of overnight. It was only after the age of thirty that it became rare for me to commit major errors. Yet often my mind contended with my mouth, my nature with my inclinations, and I came to see in the evening the mistakes I had made in the morning and to regret each day the failings of the day before. I felt sorry for myself in that it was through the lack of instruction that I got into such straits. When I look back upon the purposes of a lifetime, the lessons seem to be etched into my skin and bones and are not just something I happen to have read or heard in ancient tomes. This is the reason I have written these twenty chapters in which I will offer myself as an example to be avoided.

### The Education of Sons

1. The wisest develop naturally and have no need for education while the most foolish are unable to benefit by it.<sup>2</sup> But those between the two extremes have to be instructed if they are to acquire any knowledge at all. In antiquity the sage kings had the method of "pre-natal training". Three months after she was with child, the queen moved to a separate building. She was not allowed either to look at or listen to anything improper, all sounds and tastes being regulated in accordance with the rites. This method was recorded on a jade tablet which was kept in a golden casket. When a few months old, the child was taught by tutors who were versed in good behaviour and the rites. Though ordinary people cannot hope to emulate this, they should begin educating their children as soon as

<sup>2</sup>See *The Analects of Confucius*, 17/3.

they are old enough to sense whether people are pleased or angry with them. The children must be trained to obey, when they are ordered or forbidden to do anything. Thus by the time they are a few years old, a great deal of chastisement can be spared. When parents inspire both awe and love, the children are subdued while, at the same time, there is engendered in them a love for their parents. I have often seen the inability of parents to live up to this. They love without being able to discipline. In food and drink, speech and deed, the children are allowed to do as they please. When they ought to be admonished, the parents, on the contrary, encourage them; when they should be scolded, the parents laugh instead. On reaching the age when they are capable of learning, they are then told what they ought to do, but, by that time, they have got so used to having their own way that it is too late to try to bring them under control. Even if they are beaten to death they will have no respect for their parents. All that happens is that every day the parents become more angry while the children grow more resentful. When such children grow up their character is sure to be marred. Confucius has rightly said, "What is learned in childhood will become second nature; what is instilled as habit will become spontaneous." The common saying has it, "Train a daughter-in-law when she first comes into the family; train a son when he is still a baby." How very true!

2. The reason why people fail to train their children is not that they wish to ensnare them in crime and evil. It is simply this: they cannot bring themselves to scold because it hurts them to see the expression on the faces of their children; neither can they steel themselves to punish because they cannot bear to see their children suffering physical pain. Such parents should take illness as an analogy. In illness, how can one avoid using potions and herbs, needles and mugwort<sup>3</sup> if that will save them? They should likewise realise that those who discipline their children unremittently do not do so because they wish to ill-treat their own flesh and blood but because there is no alternative.

3. Lady Wei, the mother of Wang Seng Pien, the Marshal of the Army, was by nature severe and strict. When Wang was in P'en Ch'eng, he was over forty years of age and had three thousand men under his command, yet when she was in the least displeased with him she used to give him a beating. This is why his achievement was so outstanding.

In the time of Yuan Ti of Liang (r. 552-555) there was a scholar who was quick-witted and quite gifted. He was, however, spoiled by his father and never properly disciplined. Whenever he said anything right, his father would repeat it to all and sundry and never stop praising it from one year's end to another, but when he did something wrong, his father would try his best to gloss over it, hoping that he would mend his ways of his own accord. When he reached the age of marriage and entry into an official career, he became increasingly violent and arrogant. In the end, for some ill-chosen words, he was disembowelled by Chou Ti.

4. The relation between father and son is an austere one, where familiarity cannot be permitted, and though there is the natural bond of love between them, the observance of the rites must not be curtailed. When it is curtailed the love of the father and the love of the son will have no means of making contact, and when there is familiarity slackness will set in. "From the rank of the royally appointed Gentleman upwards, a father and his son should occupy separate quarters."<sup>4</sup> Such is the way to avoid familiarity. "Massage and

<sup>3</sup>The one in acupuncture and the other in moxibustion.

<sup>4</sup>A quotation from the *Nei tse* chapter of the *Li chi*.

stroke away the aches and pains," "hang up the bed-clothes and replace the pillow in its case."<sup>5</sup> Such is the way to avoid the curtailment of the observance of the rites.

Someone asked, "Why was Ch'en Kang pleased to learn that the gentleman kept aloof from his son?"<sup>6</sup> The answer is, "What is said of the gentleman is true. This is presumably because a gentleman does not personally take on the duties of training his own son. In the *Odes* there are words of covert criticism of authority; in the *Rites* there are injunctions against promiscuity; in the *Book of History* there are recorded deeds of rebellion and insubordination; in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* there is censure against improper conduct; and in the *Book of Changes* there are images representing the procreation of things. None of these are things a father can speak about to his son. It is merely for this that he does not instruct his son personally."

5. The Prince of Lang Yeh, son of King Wu Ch'eng (r. 561-565) of the Northern Ch'i Dynasty, was the younger brother of the Crown Prince by the same mother. He was clever by nature and much loved by the king and the queen. In clothes and food he was allowed to enjoy the same style as the Crown Prince. The king often said, in his hearing, "This is a clever boy and he will go far." When the Crown Prince came to the throne, the prince was transferred to a separate dwelling, but he was allowed to arrogate to himself a style of living quite above the other princes. The Dowager Queen was still not satisfied and often complained about it. When he was about ten, he was arrogant and wilful and quite without restraint. In the matter of dress and other possessions, he insisted on emulating the king. Once he had an audience in the Southern Palace when he saw officials presenting new ice and early plums.<sup>7</sup> On returning to his own palace, he demanded these and when he was not given them became angry and said abusively, "If His Majesty can have them, why can't I?" His lack of appreciation of his own station was generally of this magnitude. Learned people disparagingly compared him to Shu Tuan and Chou Hsu. Subsequently, because he disliked the prime minister, he had him executed by faking a royal edict. When the execution was being carried out, he was afraid that help might come to the victim, so he sent his own soldiers to guard the entrances to the palace. As he really had no rebellious intentions, he called off his soldiers when he received gracious reassurances from the king. In the end, he was imprisoned and killed<sup>8</sup> on account of this affair.

6. Few people are able to love their children with complete impartiality. This is a failing to be met with time and again throughout history. Good and bright children are naturally lovable, but one should also have compassion on those that are mischievous or stupid. When one loves one child more than the others, though one's intention is to do him good, it serves only to bring disaster upon him. Thus the death of Shu Tuan of Kung was really brought about by his mother; and the murder of the Prince Chao by his father. The collapse and fall of the whole Liu clan that came after Liu Piao, and the disintegration of Yuan Shao's territory upon the defeat of his army, should serve as lessons to us like the tortoise that reveals what is to come or the mirror<sup>9</sup> that serves as a guide to future conduct.

<sup>5</sup> These are quotations from the *Nei tse* chapter of the *Li chi*.

<sup>7</sup> The presentation of these things is of ritual significance.

<sup>8</sup> at the age of thirteen.

<sup>6</sup> See *The Analects of Confucius*, 16/13.

<sup>9</sup> i.e. past history.

7. There was an official at the court of the Northern Ch'i who once said to me, "I have a son who is seventeen and has quite a good epistolary style. I shall teach him to speak the Hsien Pei language and to play the *p'i p'a*, in the hope that he will gain a certain degree of proficiency in these. With such accomplishments he is sure to gain favour with men in high places. This is a matter of some urgency." At that time I hung my head without making any answer. Strange indeed is the way this fellow teaches his son. Even if, through such means, you could become a minister, I would still not wish you to do so.

(For Chinese text see page 136)

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### *The French Connection*

There is an anecdote, possibly apocryphal, about a woman at a cocktail party in Paris telling James Thurber how much she had enjoyed his "delightful sketches" in French translation. "Thank you," said Thurber. "It is undoubtedly true that my writing loses a good deal in the original."

Thurber's humor, here as elsewhere, obliquely points to a truth: this time to the truth that a translation may be better literature than the work which inspired it.

— JOHN A. KOUWENHOVEN  
 "The Trouble with Translation"  
*Harper's Magazine*, August 1962

There is a certain half-malicious pleasure in watching the genuine scholars curry-combing English versions of foreign classics, old and new, to tease out the howlers. Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* has been available for most of us in the form of *Remembrance of Things Past*, as Englished by C.K. Scott-Moncrieff. But now the novelist Anthony Powell points out that this title is scarcely accurate and not wholly Proustian. J.C. Weightman, whose own credentials are guaranteed by his being the translator of Levi-Strauss, describes Scott-Moncrieff as "belonging to a generation of English men of letters content with a rather sketchy knowledge of French."

For example, he did not know that a "*chapeau melon*" is what the British call a bowler and the Americans a derby. Instead he describes it as "a hat shaped like a melon". [In Chinese a *kua-p'i mao* (瓜皮帽)? — EDITOR.]

— ALAN BRIEN, in a London dispatch to  
*The New York Times*, March 2, 1970.

Translations are like women — if they are beautiful, they are not faithful; if they are faithful, they are not beautiful.

— OLD FRENCH PROVERB