

## Encouragement to Learning\*

By Xun zi

Translated by D. C. Lau

The gentleman says: In learning there can be no respite. Blue is taken from the indigo plant yet is bluer than the plant; ice is composed of water yet is colder than water.

A piece of wood that is as straight as will satisfy the plumb-line, when made into a wheel by steaming it bent, will be as curved as will satisfy the compasses, and, even when dried, will never become straight again. This is the result of the bending.

Hence wood becomes straight when it submits to the plumb-line, and metal becomes sharp when it goes to the whetstone, while a gentleman, if he acquires extensive learning and examines himself every day, will become keen of mind and blameless of conduct.

Hence if we do not ascend a high mountain we will fail to realize the loftiness of Heaven; if we do not descend a deep ravine we will fail to realize the thickness of Earth; and if we have not heard the sayings of the Former Kings handed down to us from antiquity, we will fail to realize the vastness of learning.

The children from the states of Gan, Yue, Yi, and Mo make the same sounds when born, but have different customs<sup>1</sup> when grown up. This is the result of teaching.

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\* The *Xun zi* is a Confucian classic of equal importance to the *Mencius*. It is thus not surprising to find among the unpublished manuscripts of the late Professor D. C. Lau, who has translated *The Analects* and the *Mencius*, three drafts of his translation of “Encouragement to Learning,” the opening chapter of the *Xun zi*. To Professor Roger T. Ames, of the University of Hawai‘i, who was kind enough to read this translation closely and make valuable suggestions, the editor owes a debt of gratitude.

<sup>1</sup> This seems to refer to the difference in languages the children are brought up to speak. Cf. “約定俗成謂之宜” (When conventions are established and customs grow up, then it is considered suitable) (“Zheng ming” 正名 chapter of the *Xun zi*).

The *Odes* say,

O you gentlemen,  
Do not remain forever complacent.  
Strive to fulfil the duties of your office.  
Love those who help the straight and the crooked alike to be correct.  
Render yourself spiritual and attentive.  
Great will be your blessing.<sup>2</sup>

There is nothing more spiritual than to be transformed by the Way; there is no blessing greater than to be free from disaster.

I have tried racking my brains for a whole day, but the result was not as good as what I could learn in a moment. I have tried looking on tiptoes, but I could not see as extensively as going up on a high place.

In beckoning from a high place, it is not as though one's arm increased in length, but the beckoning can be seen further afield. In calling down wind, it is not as though one's voice increased in intensity, yet the call can be heard more distinctly. One who makes use of carriage and horses has not become fleet of foot, yet he can cover a thousand miles. One who makes use of boat and oars has not become a swimmer, yet he can traverse the River and Sea.<sup>3</sup> A gentleman is no different from others in nature. He is simply good at making use of things.

There is a bird in the South known as *mengqiu* whose nest is made of feathers plaited with hair, but hung by the shoot of a reed. So when the wind comes the shoot snaps, breaking the eggs and killing the young. It is not because the nest is imperfect; but because of that by which the nest is hung.

There is a tree in the West known as *yegan* whose stem is four inches long. Growing on the tops of high mountains, it looks down on abysses a hundred fathoms deep. It is not because the stem of the tree can make itself long, but because of that on which it stands.

The *peng* growing amongst hemp becomes straight without propping; white sand that is in the mud becomes likewise black.<sup>4</sup>

The root of the *lanhuai* is called the *zhi*.<sup>5</sup> If it is soaked in bilge-water, then a

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<sup>2</sup> Ode 207. In rendering the quotations of the *Odes*, I have followed the sense in which they are understood in the given context rather than their meaning in the original text. Needless to say the two do not necessarily coincide.

<sup>3</sup> Following Wang Niansun 王念孫, read 江海.

<sup>4</sup> Following Wang Niansun in restoring the eight characters 白沙在涅與之皆黑.

<sup>5</sup> The reading of this line seems defective. In the "Xu San wang shijia" 續三王世家 (*Shi ji* 史記 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959], *juan* 60) it is quoted with a sounder reading: "蘭根與白芷" (The root of the orchid and the white *zhi*) (p. 2119). The *zhi* is a fragrant plant.

gentleman will not go near it nor will a commoner wear it. It is not because it does not itself have a fragrant scent, but because of that in which it has been soaked.

Hence a gentleman invariably chooses the neighbourhood of his abode and seeks the company of scholars in his travels so as to avoid the depraved and perverted and to be close to those who are correct and proper.

The coming into being of things has, of necessity, a beginning. Honour or disgrace comes to him who has the moral quality akin to it. When meat goes bad or when fish decomposes worms are produced. When a man is negligent and reckless disasters will arise. That which is strong is used for support, while that which is pliable is used for binding. Each brings upon itself the treatment it deserves. When one's person is morally defiled, on him will ill-will befall.

Spread faggots so that they are perfectly even and fire will go after those that are dry. Flatten the ground until it is perfectly level and water will go for the part that is wet. Grass and plants grow side by side while birds and beasts flock together. This is because things will follow their own kind.

Hence when a target is set up bows and arrows will arrive; when a wood is luxuriant bills and axes will arrive. Where trees provide shade flocks of birds will come to rest; where vinegar is sour midges will gather. Hence one's words may bring disaster on oneself, and one's acts may bring disgrace. Should the gentleman not be careful as to that on which he stands?

When earth accumulates and a mountain is formed, wind and rain will arise; when water accumulates to a great depth, sea-monsters will be produced. When goodness accumulates into virtue, the spirit will find satisfaction in itself, and the sagely heart will not be in any way wanting.

Hence without the accumulation of half-steps, a thousand miles cannot be covered; without the accumulation of streamlets, rivers and seas cannot be formed. A steed cannot, in one leap, traverse ten paces, while a slow-footed horse can do ten days' journey by keeping at it.

Making one cut and then giving up, not even a piece of rotten wood can be severed, but if one keeps at it, even metal and stone can be engraved.

An earthworm has neither the sharpness of claw and fang, nor the strength of bone and sinew, yet it can feed on the earth above and drink from the subterranean springs below. This is because of its oneness of purpose. A crab has six<sup>6</sup> feet and two pincers, yet it can only find refuge in the abandoned dens of snakes and eels. This is because of its restlessness of mind.

Hence he who does not have singleness of purpose will not achieve illustriousness, and he who does not toil persistently will not achieve resounding success. One who follows both forks of the road will never arrive; one who serves

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<sup>6</sup> Lu Wenzhao 盧文弨 suggests that "six" is probably a corruption of "eight."

two princes will not be tolerated. The eye cannot see clearly, nor can the ear hear distinctly when the attention is divided. The *teng* snake, though without feet, can fly, while the flying squirrel, though in possession of five aptitudes,<sup>7</sup> is, in the end, at a loss what to do.

The *Odes* say,

The *shijiu* is on the mulberry.  
Its sons are seven.  
Good men and gentlemen,  
One is their bearing.  
One is their bearing,  
And firm their mind.<sup>8</sup>

Hence a gentleman is firm in being one.

Of old when Hu Ba strummed on the *se* the fish came from under the water<sup>9</sup> to listen; when Bo Ya strummed on the *qin* the six horses raised their heads while champing.

Hence there is no sound so soft but will be heard; no act so obscure but will be manifest. When there is jade in a mountain, the trees<sup>10</sup> will be moist; when pearls are produced in deep waters the cliffs will not crumple. Has one, perhaps, failed to store up goodness? Otherwise how can it remain unknown.

Where does learning begin and where does it end? The answer: Its curriculum begins with reading the Classics and ends with studying the *Rites*; its essence begins with being a scholar and ends with being a sage. Sincerity when accumulated and efforts when persisted in will open the way; learning only comes to an end with death. Hence in learning there is a completion of its curriculum, but its essence cannot be let go of even for a moment. To go in for it one is a man, to abandon it one is a beast. Hence the *Book of History* is the orderly arrangement of matters concerning government; the *Book of Odes* is the acme of harmonious sounds; and the *Rites* is the great division of the laws and the essence of classification. Hence in learning one reaches completion with the *Rites*.

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<sup>7</sup> Read *shi* 鼯 instead of *wu* 梧. The *shi* is described in the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (earliest extant dictionary by Xu Shen 許慎 c. 160 A.D.) as in possession of five aptitudes. "It is able to fly without being able to go over a house, to climb without being able to reach the top of a tree, to swim without being able to cross a ravine, to dig a hole without being able to make it big enough for a hiding place, and to run without being able to overtake a man."

<sup>8</sup> Ode 152.

<sup>9</sup> Following the *Da Dai Li ji* 大戴禮記, read 沈魚.

<sup>10</sup> Following Wang Niansun, omit 草.

Hence this is known as the highest of the Way and Virtue. In the respect and adornment of the *Rites*, the harmony of the *Music*, the erudition of the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History*, and the subtlety of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, all that is between Heaven and Earth is to be found.<sup>11</sup>

With the gentleman what he learns enters his ears, is engraved on his mind, extends to his four limbs, and manifests itself in his bearing and action. His least word and his least action alike can serve as a model. With the small man, what he learns enters his ears and emerges from his mouth.<sup>12</sup> There is but four inches between mouth and ear. How can this be sufficient to render beautiful a seven-foot body?

In antiquity one who learned did so for his own sake; today one who learns does so for the sake of others. A gentleman learns in order to render beautiful his person; a small man learns in order to use his learning as a passport to advancement.

Hence to answer without being asked is called arrogant.<sup>13</sup> To allow the answer to go beyond the question is called garrulous. It is wrong to be arrogant; it is also wrong to be garrulous. The gentleman should be like an echo.

In learning, it is most convenient to be near the right person. The *Rites* and the *Music* are models but carry no explanations; the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History* contain accounts of antiquity but do not show how these can be applied to the present day; the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is terse and does not enlarge on<sup>14</sup> its points. If one emulates such a person in being well-versed in the views of the gentleman, one will be exalted the world over. Hence it is said: in learning it is most convenient to be near the right person.

There is no quicker path to learning than to be attracted to the right person. Next to this is to have a feeling of reverence for the rites. Not to be capable, on the one hand, of being attracted to the right person, nor, on the other, to be able to feel reverence for the rites, one will be able merely to glean from works containing curious information<sup>15</sup> and to follow slavishly the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History*, and all one's life one will be no more than an ill-informed Confucian. If one wishes to trace the origins of the Former Kings and the sources of morality, the *Rites* are precisely the channel through which this can be done. To do this is like holding a fur coat by the collar and, with one's fingers curved, shaking it; in so doing the

<sup>11</sup> This paragraph seems to be an interpolation. The previous paragraph makes the point that the *Rites* is the culmination of learning which begins with the Classics, yet here the *Rites* figures only as one of the Classics, and not the most important one at that.

<sup>12</sup> He is quick to retail what he has heard but not understood.

<sup>13</sup> See n. 16 below.

<sup>14</sup> Take 速 as a loan for 邈, which is glossed both by the *Guangya* 廣雅 and the *Fangyan* 方言 as 張 (to spread out, to enlarge).

<sup>15</sup> Following Wang Yinshi 王引之, omit 識.

number of hairs that are smoothed is innumerable. To not follow the rites and the laws, but to act merely by means of the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History*, is like sounding the River with a finger, pounding millet with a spear, or eating from a jar with a gimlet. It simply cannot be done. Hence in feeling reverence for the rites, though one has not yet attained perspicacity he is still a disciplined scholar; in failing to feel reverence for the rites, though one is meticulous in making distinctions he is but a worthless Confucian.

Answer no one whose questions are ill-mannered; ask no one whose answers are ill-mannered; listen to no one whose explanations are ill-mannered; debate with no one who is out to be quarrelsome. Hence receive only those who approach you in the correct way, and avoid those who do not. Hence it is only to someone whose manners are respectful that you should show the general direction of the Way; it is only to someone whose words are courteous that you should show the principles running through the Way; and only to someone with a docile air that you should show the acme of the Way. Hence to speak to someone who is not yet in a position to understand is called arrogance;<sup>16</sup> not to speak to someone who is ready to understand is called secretiveness; to speak without first noting the expression on the listener's face is called blindness. Hence a gentleman is not arrogant; neither is he secretive or blind. He is cautious about his person.<sup>17</sup> The *Odes* say,

Neither precipitate nor slack,  
He it is who receives the bounty of the Emperor.<sup>18</sup>

This is what is meant.

To miss once in a hundred shots, one is less than a good archer; to fall short of a thousand miles by half a pace, one is less than a good charioteer; to fail to understand the principles of things thoroughly or to be uniformly moral, one is less than a good scholar. To learn is to learn to be uniform. When of one's actions some are good, and some are bad, one is no more than a man in the street. When the bad far exceeds the good then one is a Jie<sup>19</sup> or a Zhou or a Bandit Zhi. It is only when perfect that one is a scholar.

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<sup>16</sup> In the *Analects* there is a similar passage (16.6) where the reading is *cao* 躁 (impatient) instead of *ao* 傲 (arrogant). It is most unlikely that *ao* is, as has been suggested, a loan or even a corruption of *cao*.

<sup>17</sup> The *Han shi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (4/16) has a better reading: “言謹慎其序” (In his words he observes carefully the gradation of the various stages).

<sup>18</sup> Ode 222.

<sup>19</sup> The last emperor of the Xia dynasty whose name, together with that of Zhou, the last emperor of the Shang dynasty, has become a byword for the wicked ruler.

The gentleman knows that short of perfection and purity nothing is worth being considered beautiful. Hence he studies what is in the curriculum in order to provide unity for it;<sup>20</sup> reflects on it in order to understand it as a whole; tries to be like those he emulates in order to abide in it; and rids himself of hindrances in order to nourish it. He causes his eye not to want to see anything other than this, his ear not to want to hear anything other than this, his mouth not to want to speak anything other than this, and his mind not to want to think about anything other than this. And when he gets to like it to the utmost, his eye will like it better than the five colours; his ear will like it better than the five notes; his mouth will like it better than the five tastes; and his mind will consider it a greater benefit than the possession of the Empire. Hence he cannot be turned by either power or profit, moved by superior numbers, or shaken by the whole Empire. In life as in death it is this that he follows. Such is called having a firm hold on virtue. Having a firm hold on virtue, he will be stable; being stable he will be able to respond. To be stable and to be able to respond, he will, then, be a complete man. Heaven exhibits its brightness; Earth exhibits<sup>21</sup> its extensiveness; the gentleman values his completeness.

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<sup>20</sup> The word “it” in what follows seems to refer to the perfection and purity that have just been mentioned. In effect this amounts to the Way.

<sup>21</sup> Yu Yue 俞樾 is probably right in suggesting that for *xian* 見 (to exhibit) in both cases the text should, in line with the last part of sentence, read *gui* 貴 (to value).