

# The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars

by  
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## Introduction

The text of *The Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars* has stood for generations as the prime folk document on what filial piety is all about. The collection is not by any means part of the Confucian canon, and indeed tends to attract little but scorn from Chinese intellectuals. But until the Communist regime campaigned to suppress the text as part of its campaign against tradition, there was probably not a bookstore in China that did not have copies available, and in the course of the 1990s new editions came flowing back into Chinese bookstores once again. The tales are known individually to most Chinese, and the collection has spawned many imitators containing other stories, sometimes overlapping with these.

The author of the *Twenty-Four Exemplars* was Guō Jūjìng , a Yuán dynasty (1260-1368) man who lived in Dàtián Xiàn, north of Déhuà, in Fújiàn province. He was apparently much known for his filial piety, and took the occasion of the death of his father to publish the tales we read here, recounting the feats of filial children —nearly all male— towards their parents —mostly aged mothers— from the age of the primordial Emperor Shùn down to his own era.

The present translation was made by me in 1973, and first appeared in the 1986 volume cited below. I have made minor editorial changes from time to time in the subsequent years.<sup>1</sup>

The numbering of the tales used here is traditional, but is not observed in all editions. Similarly, the brief summary titles (each four characters in Chinese) are quite traditional.

The full Chinese text, in traditional and simplified characters and full Pinyin Romanization, can be found on my web site at <http://anthro.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan> for the benefit of students who are also taking Chinese (or who already know Chinese and prefer to read the original).

I have published two articles on filial piety, the first (1986) concentrating on this collection of tales, including an examination of many later imitations that included different ones (a total of 131 all told), and the second (1998) expanding upon the analysis of filial piety itself that I began in the analysis of the *Exemplars* article. Both articles derive from a 1986 conference on the Psychodynamics of the Confucian family, held in Korea under the auspices and gracious hostmanship of the International Cultural Society of Korea. They are:

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<sup>1</sup> -I am grateful to Mrs. Shiu-kuen Fan Tsung for her criticism of the original translation and for her assistance in interpreting some passages which I found obscure. The responsibility for remaining errors is, of course, my own.

- 1986 Folk filial piety in Taiwan: the twenty-four filial exemplars. IN Walter H. Slote (ed.) *The psycho-cultural dynamics of the Confucian family: past and present*. Seoul: International Cultural Society of Korea. Pp. 47-106.
- 1998 Filial piety in Taiwanese popular thought. IN Walter H. Slote & George A. DeVos (eds) *Confucianism and the family*. Albany: SUNY Press. Pp. 267-284.

## Translation

### 1. THE FEELING OF FILIAL PIETY MOVED HEAVEN

Emperor Shùn of the Yú dynasty was the son of Gǔshǒu (=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 AND MEDICINE

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 AND PAINED HIS HEART

Zēng Shēn of the Zhōu dynasty was called Zī-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 Sūn of the Zhōu dynasty was called Zīqiān (=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 Sūn and dressed him in mere rushes. One day his father ordered Sūn to harness the cart. Sūn 's body was cold and he dropped the rope. His father looked into the reason, then resolved to divorce his second wife. Sūn 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 of the Zhōu dynasty was called Zìlù (=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.”<sup>2</sup>

#### 6. HE SOLD HIMSELF TO BURY HIS FATHER

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.

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<sup>2</sup> -Cf. *Book of Songs*: “Pity my parents who bore me with grievous toil.”

## 7. HE FED HIS PARENTS DEER'S MILK

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 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 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

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

Cūi Nánshān of the Táng dynasty had a great grandmother known as Madame Zhāngsūn. 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:

The filial daughter-in-law of the Cuī 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 MOSQUITOES CONSUME HIS BLOOD

When Wú Měng of the Jin 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 of the Jin 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

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 HIS FATHER

When Yáng Xiāng<sup>3</sup> of the Jin dynasty was fourteen, he often followed his father Fēng into the fields to reap grain. His 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 his father and not of himself as he leapt quickly forward and grabbed tightly at the tiger's neck. The tiger left in defeat, and his father was able to escape injury. A verse praises him saying:

In the deep mountains a white forehead<sup>4</sup> 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 he]  
Has rescued his [father's] body from the greedy mouth.

#### 15. HE ABANDONED A MANDARINATE TO SEEK HIS MOTHER

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, was 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 Chín [in Shaǎnxī], to find his mother, vowing not to return until he did so. He journeyed to Tóngzhōu [in Shānxī] and reached 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 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

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<sup>3</sup> -Because the name Xiāng ("fragrance") would today be a female one, some writers interpret Yáng Xiāng as female; others, as male. It is more likely that a son than a daughter would accompany a man to work in the fields, so I have considered the name male. Huáng Xiāng, the protagonist of tale 19, has the same Xiāng as a name, but is known from other sources to be male.

<sup>4</sup> -Some folktales maintain that a tiger who has eaten a hundred humans develops a white forehead.

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 AND GLAD CLOTHES

Old man Láí 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 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 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 AND WARMED THE QUILT

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 AND THE CARPS LEAPT

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;  
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 of the state of Wèi [at the time of the Three Kingdoms] 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

The father and mother of Dīng Lán of the Hàn dynasty died when Lán was young and never received support and service from him. But he thought often of their "grievous toil."<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> There is a verse which says:

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<sup>5</sup> -Cf. Tale 5, verse & note.

<sup>6</sup> -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

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 of the Three Kingdoms 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 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.<sup>7</sup>

### 24. HE WASHED HIS MOTHER'S BEDPAN

Huáng Tíngjiān of the Sòng dynasty was also called Shāngǔ. During the Yuányòu 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]?

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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.

<sup>7</sup> -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*, page 92 (available on-line at <http://hops.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/scriptorium/gga/ggach05.html#page92>).