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**Rohsenow/ABC Dictionary of Chinese Proverbs**

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## Introduction

“To understand a proverb, and the interpretation;  
the words of the wise, and their dark sayings.” –*Proverbs 1,6*

“From childhood I read many, many poems and verses, and listened to  
many, many proverbs. And everywhere I went, I picked up proverbs.”  
–*Jiang Zemin, CCP General Party Secretary, Newsweek, March 12, 1990*

In 1956 when the president of Beijing University, the demographer Ma Yanchu warned against the dangers of China's rapid post-liberation surge in population growth, Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong is said to have replied characteristically by citing a proverb: *Zhōngrén shíchái huǒyàn gāo*, “The more people (there are to) collect firewood, the higher the flames will grow.” Describing the supposed popular reaction against “rightist” political elements that same year, Mao cited the proverb: *Lǎoshǔ guō jiē, rénren hàn dǎ*, “When a rat crosses the street, everyone cries out and beats it.” Expressing his opposition to the requirement that scientists, educators, and administrators be more “Red” than “expert,” Mao's pragmatic successor Deng Xiaoping quoted a proverb from his native Sichuan: *Bùguǎn hēi mǎo, bái mǎo, zhǐ zhuā dào lǎoshǔ jiùshì hǎo mǎo*, “It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it can catch mice.” In an interview with the American magazine *Newsweek* cited above, Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin legitimized his Party's anti-corruption campaign by quoting the proverb: *Shàngliáng bù zhèng, xiàliáng wāi*, “When the main beam is not upright, the entire structure will be crooked.” Clearly these traditional proverbs (*yányǔ*) continue to play a central role in the thinking and rhetoric of China's leaders to the present day.

Unlike the much studied and translated four-character traditional fused literary idioms or set phrases known as *chéngyǔ* (成语), these *yányǔ* (谚语), or “proverbs,” are ultimately the heritage of thousands of years of China's primarily illiterate, oral, peasant-based culture, in terms of which the present communist leaders of the Peoples Republic for ideological reasons continue to characterize her tortured transformation into a modern industrialized nation-state. Let us here examine the nature, definition, history and function which such proverbs have played in traditional society, as well as the reasons for their continuing currency in the Peoples Republic and other Chinese communities today.

Anyone living and interacting within Chinese society, whether it be on the mainland of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore or elsewhere becomes aware of the all-pervading nature of proverbs and proverbial sayings in Chinese life, both in daily speech, as well as in Chinese writings and other media. Some of these are in fact maxims or quotations or paraphrases of quotations from the so-called Chinese “Classics,” cited for so many hundreds of years that they have become proverbial, regardless of whether their written version or source is known to the speakers who use them. Thus *qiān lǐ zhī xīng, shǐ yú zú xià*, (literally) “A thousand league journey begins with [what is] under [one's] foot,” is attributed to the old Taoist Master known as Lǎozǐ, and transcribed in the third century B.C.E. work known as the *Dào Dé Jīng*, “The Classic of the Way and Integrity,” although some believe it to be in fact an even older proverb with an even longer oral history quoted by the Old Master. From the Analects of Master Kong (*Kōng Fūzǐ* or “Confucius”), which was promulgated and memorized as state orthodoxy for most of the last two thousand years, come dozens of similar maxims, made proverbial by long familiarity: *Zī yuē: Sìhǎi zhī nèi, jiē xiōngdì yě*, now usually translated: “The Master said: Within the four seas, all [men] are brothers.” Or again from the Confucian Analects: *Sān rén tóngxīng*,

*bì yǒu wǒ shī*, “If three [of us] are walking together, there must be [at least one who can be] my teacher”; that is, no matter how educated one is, one can always learn something from others. Even today, despite China’s massive problems with overpopulation, a familiar dictum of Mèngzǐ or “Mencius” is still often quoted: *Wú xiào yǒu sān, wú hòu wéi dà*; “There are three [ways of being] unfilial [to one’s parents, and] the greatest [of these] is to have no posterity.”

But against hundreds of such often-quoted maxims which have over the years become “proverbial,” there are a far greater number of anonymous colloquial proverbs in common use. The first one I can remember hearing, from a cook from Shandong, is *not* in the Confucian Analects; to sum up her view on the all-pervasiveness of nepotism in human affairs, she tartly observed: *Gǒu bù chī shī, rén bù piānxīn*, “When dogs stop eating excrement, people will stop practicing favoritism,” or something like “People will stop playing favorites, when Hell freezes over.”

In their writing and speaking, educated Chinese continue to use the older, more “literary” proverbs, and can sometimes give sources for some of them if asked, but they of course also use many of the more common colloquial proverbs and proverbial expressions as well. On the other hand, uneducated, often illiterate Chinese people also use quite a few of the more common, older “classical” proverbs, giving their speech the authority of antiquity, while at the same time they employ an even larger number of those earthy, witty, pomposity-piercing proverbs for which peasants are famous all over the world. Recently, a worker at a university in China where I have spent a good deal of time over the last twenty years delighted me by rendering her verdict on an extramarital affair between two married faculty members by using a proverb I had never heard before: *Mù gǒu bù chū pìgǔ, gōng gǒu nán shàng*, “If female dogs don’t present their posteriors, it is hard for male dogs to mount them.”

According to Francis Bacon’s *Essay* (1517), “. . . the genius, wit, and spirit of a nation are discovered in its proverbs.” But what is a proverb? The term has been widely used, yet it is difficult to define. The English statesman Lord John Russell is credited with the characterization of proverbs which has come down to us “proverbially” as “the wisdom of many and the wit of one.”<sup>1</sup> *The American College Dictionary* (1957) defines a proverb as a “short pithy saying . . . popularly known and repeated, usually expressing simply and concretely, though often metaphorically, a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of mankind.”<sup>2</sup> Neal Norrick, a contemporary paremiologist, after reviewing numerous studies of, and writing on the subject, noted that “proverbs are consistently described as self-contained, pithy, traditional expressions with didactic content and fixed poetic form.” (1985:31) Norrick then presents two of his own more technical definitions: an “ethnographic” definition of the proverb in English as “a traditional, conversational didactic genre with a general meaning, a potential free conversational turn, preferably with figurative meaning,” along with his more general “supra-cultural” definition of proverbs in general as “a typically spoken, conversational form with didactic function and not associated with any particular source.” (1985:78–79) Proverbs, then, can be differentiated on the basis of both formal as well as semantic criteria from other rhetorical forms such as colloquial phrases (“to face the music”); aphorisms or maxims (“Brevity is the soul of wit,” or “The truth shall make you free”); clichés (“so much for the facts”; “white as snow”); Wellerisms (“I see, said the blind carpenter as he picked up his hammer and saw”); and other related rhetorical figures. (Cf. Norrick 1985:32, 65–74).

Similar problems exist in Chinese, where the terminology in this area is also not consistently defined or applied, and is still a matter for discussion.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese term I take to be equivalent to the English word “proverb” in the sense just given is *yànyǔ* (谚语). There have been varying uses of this term *yànyǔ* in Chinese, both historically and in contemporary Chinese discussions of the subject. We may take as representative of the better treatments Sun Zhiping’s (1982) definition, which addresses the structure, meaning, and usage of *yànyǔ* in Chinese: “*Yànyǔ* are complete sentences, expressing a judgment or an inference, [which] may be used to validate [or to] represent [one’s] own [individual] views, [whereas] *chéngyǔ*, *xiēhōuyǔ*, and *sūyǔ* generally can only serve as parts of a sentence, [and are] used to give a concrete description or expression of the quality, state, degree, etc. of some objective material phe-

nomenon.” [(1984:3)—my translation] Discussion and analyses in Chinese similar to those in English summarized by Norrick above allow us to differentiate this term *yànyǔ* (proverb) from other related Chinese rhetorical terms such as *shúyǔ* (熟语, familiar sayings), *súyǔ* (俗语, colloquial expressions), *géyán* (格言, maxims), *chéngyǔ* (成语, fused phrase literary expressions), *xièhòuyǔ* (歇后语, enigmatic folk similes or truncated witticisms), as well as from the modern term *guànyòngyǔ* (惯用语, idiom, in the technical linguistic sense of a group of words used invariantly whose meaning cannot be determined from the sum of its parts).

As we have noted, proverbs are fundamentally an oral form consisting of complete sentences, which reduce the observations, experiences, and wisdom of ordinary people into short, pithy, colloquial statements and judgments, employing familiar images and tropes phrased in easily memorizable forms. Thus, for example, the *yànyǔ*: *qiǎo fū nán wéi wú mǐ zhī chuī*, (“[Even] the cleverest housewife cannot cook [a meal] without rice”) is comparable in its meaning and usage to the English proverb “One cannot make bricks without straw.” *Súyǔ* or colloquial expressions, on the other hand, are equally familiar colloquial set phrases, images or tropes, but which consist only of sentence fragments used for description, such as *jīng lí lǎo qǐ; yōu diào jìn chí lí*, literally: “to scoop something from inside the well, only to drop it into the pond,” that is, to get out of one calamity, only to get into another, comparable to the English colloquial expression, “out of the frying pan, into the fire.” Note that both the Chinese example just cited and “out of the frying pan, . . .” etc. are sentence fragments, and that neither one expresses an observation or judgment, but rather merely describes a situation. On the other hand, the English proverb “Out of sight, out of mind,” while grammatically parallel to the “frying pan” example, *does* express an observation of cause and effect, i. e., that [when one is] not seen [for some time], [one tends to be] forgotten [by others]. Similarly, the classical four character proverb *chún wáng chǐ hán*, “[When] the lips are gone, the teeth are cold,” is a complete (if elliptical) sentence consisting of two subject + verb clauses, and also expresses cause and effect metaphor, and thus qualifies as a proverb, despite its use of literary Chinese phrasing and its four-character, *chéngyǔ*-like appearance.

As Obelkevitch (1987:44) rightly notes, however, “what [really] defines the proverb . . . is not its internal organization, but its external *function*, [which is] . . . usually moral and didactic: people use proverbs to tell others what to do in a given situation or what attitude to take towards it. Proverbs, then, are ‘strategies for situations,’ but they are strategies with authority, formulating some part of a society’s common sense, its values and ways of doing things.” Proverbs employ familiar images and tropes to capture the experience and values shared by successive generations; they are repeatedly quoted and appealed to for persuasion, in argumentation, and as guides for daily living. In the mouths of ordinary peasant farmers, craftspeople and tradespeople, they are “mini-texts” of a commonly shared “oral literature” which possess authority by virtue of their constant repetition and use. [My italics –JSR]<sup>4</sup>

*Géyán* or maxims are usually also complete statements, likewise expressing judgments or observations, but differing in that they are quotations, that is, guides for behavior taken from the writings attributed to some famous author or work in the past. Thus they usually have a decidedly written flavor in lexical choice, grammar, and style, even if they have over the years become “proverbial” in use and their original written sources or authors forgotten or unknown by their users. Thus, numerous quotations from the Confucian Analects (*Lùnyǔ*) such as the “Within the four seas, all men are brothers” example cited above have become “proverbial” even beyond China’s borders, although their source is often forgotten. Similarly, the famous line from the *Dào Dé Jīng* also cited above: *qiǎn lǐ zhī xīng, shì yú zú xià*, now usually paraphrased in English as “The longest journey begins with (but) a single step,” may in fact be an even older popular proverb with an even longer oral history which was simply quoted by or attributed to the old Taoist master Lǎozǐ in that third century B.C.E. work.

Another basically written form is the ubiquitous *chéngyǔ*, set phrases or fused phrase idioms. *Chéngyǔ* are also fixed literary expressions or idioms, usually consisting of four characters, employing the vocabulary and structures of literary Chinese (*wényán*), which are often taken from or contain allusions (*diǎngù*) to classical written works. Thus China’s “Chicken

Little,” the man of the ancient kingdom of Qi who also worried that the sky might fall, has become immortalized in the *chéngyǔ*: *Qǐ rén yōu tiān*, literally, “the man of Qi worries about the sky,” used to this day by educated writers and speakers to mean “(entertaining) groundless or unnecessary fears.” Unlike most *chéngyǔ*, this particular example can be read as a complete subject-plus-verb sentence, but it does not express an observation or judgment, and thus does not qualify as a proverb. Four syllable colloquial sentences such as *Hǎoshì duō mó*, “The road to happiness is strewn with setbacks,” often equated with Shakespeare’s “The course of true love never did run smooth,” and the more literary *Néngzhě duō láo*, “Able persons [should] do more work,” do fulfill the criteria for proverbs and should not be misclassified as *chéngyǔ* descriptive expressions. *Chéngyǔ* are included along with the other terms discussed here under the general heading of *shúyǔ*, or familiar sayings, because so many have passed into common use and are widely used, even in contemporary vernacular (*báihuà*) writing, as well as in the speech of educated speakers.

Finally, certainly in modern speech and writing and even in some older written works one encounters another primarily spoken form, *xièhòuyǔ*, enigmatic folk similes or truncated wit-ticisms. A true *xièhòuyǔ* is a two-part allegorical saying consisting first of a descriptive phrase, always stated and often preceded by a verb of explicit comparison (e.g., *hǎo bǐ* . . . , “it’s just like . . .”; thus the term simile). This first metaphorical image is then followed by a pause, then followed by a second phrase, often left unspoken, which either directly or indirectly resolves and explains the relevance of the simile to which the first part of the *xièhòuyǔ* has been applied metaphorically. For example, recalling the old days when upper class Chinese girls and women’s feet were every day tightly wrapped with long cotton strips of cloth in order to deform them into erotically attractive (to men) “golden lily” feet, a certain person’s lecture might therefore be described as “(just like) an old [Chinese] woman’s foot-binding bandages—[i.e.] both long and stinky!” Often the resolution of the metaphor involves a double-entendre or pun on the superficial meaning of the second part of the *xièhòuyǔ*, as when Mao Zedong described himself to the visiting American journalist Edgar Snow as (being like) “a [bald-shaven Buddhist] monk under an umbrella” (*hèshang dāsān*). As Mao did not complete the *xièhòuyǔ* and as Snow did not know the hidden meaning of the second part of this enigmatic folk simile: *wú fǎ, wú tiān*, literally: “having neither hair nor Heaven [above him],” he could only take Mao’s image literally. But the literal meaning of the resolution of the simile is not the true meaning; *wú fǎ, wú tiān* is in fact homophonous with Mao’s truly intended meaning, a four character fused phrase idiom meaning “[bound by] neither [earthly] law [*fǎ* = hair/law], nor by Heaven [above].”<sup>5</sup>

Some of the earliest recorded types of proverbs are the so-called “agricultural proverbs” (*nóngyàn* 农谚) and “weather proverbs” (*qìxiàng yànyǔ* 气象谚语) which encapsulate traditional observations and advice concerning the weather and various agricultural practices in different areas of China over the centuries. We have examples of collections of these types of proverbs dating as far back as the Eastern Han dynasty, eighteen hundred years ago, when Cui Shí (崔寔) first collected proverbs as part of his *Sì Mǐn Yuè Lìng* (四民月令, Farmers’ Monthly Guide). Similar collections in succeeding times containing proverbs on various aspects of agriculture, animal husbandry, aquaculture, and other farming side production are Wú Lùjī’s (吴陆玑) *Máo Shī Cǎo Mù Niǎo Shòu Chóng Yú Shū* (毛诗草木鸟兽虫鱼疏, Mao’s Annotations on Plant, Tree, Bird, Animal, Insect and Fish Metaphors) in the Three Kingdoms period; Jiǎ Sīxié’s (贾思勰) *Qí Mǐn Yào Shù* (齐民要术, Important Skills for Commoners) in the Northern Wei dynasty; Chén Fū’s (陈敷) *Nóng Shū* (农书, Book of Agriculture) in the Song dynasty; Lóu Yuánlǐ’s (娄元礼) *Tiánjiā Wǔ Háng* (田家五行, The Farmer’s Five Skills) in the Yuan dynasty; and Xú Guāngqǐ’s (徐光启) *Nóng Zhèng Quán Shū* (农政全书, Complete Book of Agricultural Management) in the Ming.

Not until the Song dynasty were there works purely devoted to the collection of proverbs *per se*. The first two such collections produced in the Song were Gong Yízhèng’s (龚颐正) *Shì Cháng Tán* (释常谈, Explanations of Common Sayings) and Zhōu Shǒuzhōng’s (周守忠) *Gǔ-Jīn Yàn* (古今谚, Ancient and Contemporary Proverbs). Other outstanding such works