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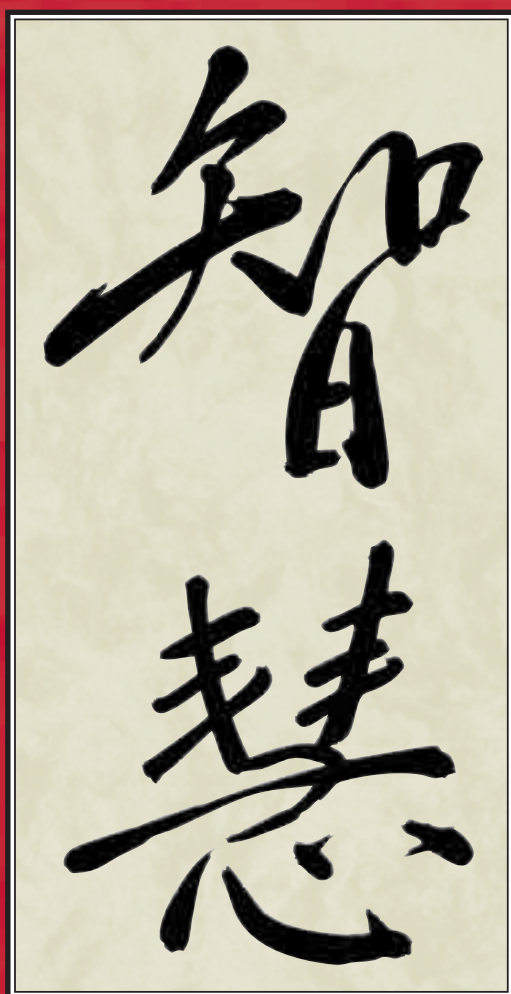
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WISDOM'S WAY

101 Tales of Chinese Wit



WALTON LEE

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Editor's Note:

Due to the unfortunate disunity among romanization systems, Mr. Lee devised the translation and spelling of all posthumous titles and epithets of the emperors and lords, as well as all the Chinese names. Names referred to in the text may be found in written Chinese in the endnote section of the book.

Preface

An emperor once remarked: “History is a mirror. Studying it mindfully, you will learn the causes of a dynasty’s growth, decline, and fall.” In ancient China, as a tradition, every emperor had two personal historians. One was meticulously writing down His Majesty’s conversations and the other his behavior. Unfortunately most of these detailed records were destroyed between dynasties, in wars and riots. However, every dynasty had at least one set of official history made by its successor. After overthrowing an old empire and taking over all the royal documents, the new emperor, or his offspring, would often appoint historians to edit and publish those documents in biographical form.

Twenty-six sets of these histories have survived. Covering over 2,500 years, there are more than three hundred volumes, each one averaging 250 to 300 pages in length. Reading this collection was and is a favorite pastime of Chinese intellectuals, who find it significant for both its historical and literary content.

One such reader was Feng, Mon-Lon (1574-1646 A.D.). Feng worked as a low-level clerk in the imperial service for most of his life. Politically, he had no hope for advancement. Living at the end of the Ming dynasty (1368 A.D. to 1644 A.D.), he was a frequent eye-witness to government corruption. He clearly foresaw the decline and eventual collapse of the huge Ming empire. Though perceiving this unavoidable destruction, as a low-level official Feng was miserably powerless.

Powerless, but not without hope. In 1626 he began copying from what was then only twenty four sets of official history and from other books. In only two months, he collected over 1,200 anecdotes and categorized them according to levels of wisdom. Feng’s objective was to lecture the educated to be broad-minded and far-sighted, otherwise catastrophe would soon visit them. His ominous prediction became true. The decaying Ming dynasty was overthrown seventeen years later.

Wisdom’s Way is an offspring of Feng, Mon-Lon’s extensive collection of anecdotes. In its 101 stories, some true, some passed down from legend and

popular lore, you will find many clues to the culture of China, and to human nature and interpersonal relationships.

To set the scene for these stories, you should understand an element of Chinese culture. In the old days, there were four classes in China: the educated, the farmers, the laborers, and the merchants. Each one of them had to follow a strict set of moral rules and a rigid code of social conduct.

For example, success in politics was the goal of the educated. It brought prestige to the individual and his family. Education was the only way to achieve this goal. Only by passing three extremely competitive national examinations could a person generally receive political appointments—usually to small and remote cities. This was the bottom of the political hierarchy. From the small cities and outlying provinces, these educated appointees would laboriously work their way back to the central government in hopes of becoming high-ranking officials. Only a handful of the intelligentsia passed all three exams. The majority of the educated class would pass only one or two exams in their whole lifetime, and usually end up becoming private tutors or government clerks.

Feng's collection is treasured by Chinese intellectuals. Now, Western readers can enjoy these tales of sophisticated Chinese wisdom. I believe that Western readers will also be fascinated by the political intrigue and shrewd problem-solving skills demonstrated in these stories.

Because the original edition of Feng's collection was unavailable, I used the contemporary revised version. By translating and enhancing this collection from dry and rigid classical Chinese to simple and colorful English, I hope to engage a new generation of both Chinese and Western readers.

Walton C. Lee
El Cerrito, CA



PART ONE

Supreme Wisdom

There is no single rule of wisdom. What matters is how you use it. Consequently, even a blockhead sometimes makes a smart choice, or a genius makes a foolish one. Why? The Supreme Wisdom naturally flows from one's mind and answers the problem; there is no need to rack one's brain for a solution. The wise person positions him or herself outside of a problem and analyzes it, always looking at the puzzle from a larger perspective, before undertaking any solution. He or she weighs the ultimate long-term advantages against the immediate short-term disadvantages.

At the other end of the human spectrum, the narrow-minded person approaches problems with tunnel vision, confounded by immediate gain or short-term loss. While the wise person is calm and rational in a crisis, the impatient person is worried, emotional and irritated. These states of mind are counterproductive when dealing with a dilemma. Facing a problem, the person with Supreme Wisdom always behaves, in the beginning, ordinarily, and even indifferently. But the outcome is remarkable and even astounding to average people. It is a rare and unique talent to be capable of following the Supreme Wisdom, which can be divided into four categories. Here are several stories to illustrate my point.

CHAPTER ONE

Look at the Whole Picture

How to Rule a Country

Warring States Period
475 B.C. to 221 B.C.

This conversation occurred in 312 B.C. during the Warring States period. China was unfortunately in disunity as a handful of kings and lords jockeyed for domination. The country of Yang had been devastated by a palace insurrection and an invasion, and the older ruler had suffered an untimely and humiliating death. After visiting the sacked city and wounded soldiers, the new king Yang-Jau¹ was disturbed, and wondered how a similar situation could be prevented.

“How should I manage my country?” he asked one of his advisors, a man named Guo Wai.²

“Your Majesty, if you want to be an Emperor,” the advisor explained, “you should treat your subordinates as teachers. To be a King, you should treat them as friends. To be a Lord, you should treat them as guests. If you wish to ruin your country, if I may say, you should treat them as servants or even slaves. The choice is yours alone.”

Impressed and a little surprised, the king politely returned, “Your statement is very interesting. Since I desire to be an Emperor, whom should I begin to respect?”

“Your Majesty might start with me,” the advisor boldly suggested, “a little-known person. As a result, other capable individuals, with greater reputations, will be envious and come to try their political fortunes here. These intellectuals, whose counsel you seek and esteem, having heard of your generosity and expecting to be treated likewise, will confidently approach Your Majesty and freely present their ideas and suggestions. Your Majesty may then choose the best administrators from among them. Thus our country’s prosperity and

Your Majesty's potency is surely secured."

The king was well pleased and acted swiftly. Besides providing his advisor with an exceptionally generous salary, this smart ruler also ordered his royal architect to design and construct a splendid villa for him. This news rapidly spread among neighboring countries. Hearing this, people were amazed. Many well-educated gentlemen resigned their current positions and relocated themselves to this country. In less than three years, after meticulous selections and severe competitions, a handful of distinguished and competent foreigners were properly appointed, with similar generous treatment from the king. They helped him to efficiently manage his country and steadily expand its borders.

The advisor really understood one of humankind's most important abilities; utilize the wisdom of others to establish one's success.

The Right People

Spring and Autumn Period
770 B.C. to 476 B.C.

One day, Confucius's horse ran away and trampled a neighbor's rice field. The victimized farmer was infuriated and retained the vandalizing horse. Upon hearing of this misfortune, Confucius immediately instructed Tzy Gon,³ one of his best students, to negotiate with the farmer, compensate him for the damage, and win the release of the animal. Tzy Gon arrived at this rural area, and after a few inquiries, this well-dressed student, in the polished language and manner of the upper-class, apologized to this illiterate farmer, and tried to settle the matter as two gentlemen would.

However, after a brief conversation, this farmer was baffled by the visitor's fine talk and hurriedly retreated home, hiding behind a tightly bolted door. Standing in the front yard, the student courteously explained his intention. Understanding none of the elegant words, the farmer, puzzled and irritated, stubbornly refused to receive him again. After a whole day of fruitless effort, the student, exhausted and frustrated, went back and reported his failure.

"You two are from totally different social levels," Confucius beamed a profound smile and calmly remarked. "Your attempt to reason with the farmer is like serving expensive and delicious dishes to a cow or playing beau-

tifully composed music to a chicken. They couldn't appreciate or understand it at all."

Next morning, Confucius dispatched his horseman to handle the problem. After a brief dialogue, the farmer happily accepted the terms and returned the horse.

Different people have different abilities. Only a wise person can manage these differences appropriately. Because of their different backgrounds, the literate student's refined language wasn't understood by the uneducated farmer. Even if the student had used a coarse dialect, which might have been taken as a mockery, the farmer wouldn't have felt comfortable communicating with him.

Then why didn't Confucius send his horseman in the first place? Because he understood that his well-bred student, in his arrogance, would have felt offended if he, an educated and capable gentleman, was not sent. Confucius also saw that, after the student had failed his mission, the horseman's success would be valued all the more by the other students. The wise man perceived that his students and servants would profit equally from the experience.

A Drunken Bodyguard

Western Han Dynasty

206 B.C. to 25 A.D.

Once, a famous prime minister named Bin Jyi⁴ was on his way to attend a party. One of his bodyguards was a little drunk, and suddenly threw up on the carpet of the carriage.

"How dare you?" an assistant promptly scolded, and then with great embarrassment and uneasiness, asked his master "Your Highness, should I discharge this lout on the spot?"

"Of course not," the prime minister responded tranquilly, not showing any anger at all. "Such a fine young man! If you discharged him, he, bearing such a disreputable stigma, couldn't find a proper job elsewhere. I don't want to ruin his future. Be considerate and kind to others. He only accidentally stained part of the carpet, which is not a terrible crime. I don't mind it at all."

In that era, life was cheap—especially the lives of servants and slaves. For

similar trivial offenses, a servant often would be severely punished or even put to death. The assistant, at first baffled by his master's generosity, reluctantly conveyed this decree to the frightened bodyguard, who was amazed yet profoundly appreciative. After that incident, the prime minister unconsciously acquired an exceptionally loyal servant, who would willingly sacrifice his own life for his warm-hearted master.

The bodyguard, who was from the western border, once, on a leave of absence, returned to his native village. Overhearing a rumor that the nearby barbarians intended to invade the frontier, he immediately returned and delivered this piece of vitally important information to his master, who duly reinforced the garrisons there. Several days later, a war broke out. Since the army was pre-warned and well-prepared, the casualties were low and the attack unsuccessful.

Later, at an imperial military conference, the emperor quizzed all of his high-ranking officials and senior generals, one by one, about this invasion. Nobody could provide satisfactory background knowledge except the prime minister, who was highly praised. He was rewarded handsomely by the emperor.

Always strew the seeds of small kindness. Some of those seeds might cultivate and become flowers of success in the future.

Hire a Leading Gangster

Tang Dynasty
618 A.D. to 907 A.D.

One day in the late seventh century A.D., the emperor Tang-Kao "Magnificent"⁵ wanted to visit a city located several hundred miles from the imperial palace. Due to famine and plague, many starving farmers had abandoned their lands and became ruthless highwaymen. They frequently held up and even killed travelers on unguarded routes. Nobody dared to leave the city without heavy protection. Some of the most notorious gangsters frequently raided the suburban areas of the capital city. The emperor was deeply worried for his safety, and dispatched a competent censor Wai Yuan-Jong,⁶ as an advance unit, to secure the road.

Confidently accepting this tough task, the official, to all of his colleagues'

About the Editor

Feng, Mon-Lon (1574–1646 A.D.) was a low-level civil servant during the last years of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 A.D.) A student of political intrigue, he compiled and edited many short stories. In 1626, selecting primarily from well-known historical events, he assembled a work of 28 volumes, with over 830 stories, in only two months. The stories in this book come from that collection.

About the Translator

Walton C. Lee, born in Taipei, Taiwan (the democratic China), is very fond of Chinese history and literature. A naturalized American citizen, he is a graduate of San Francisco State University. His goal is to introduce sophisticated Chinese culture to Western readers. Mr. Lee lives in El Cerrito, California.

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Popular in China, these stories have been translated and enhanced by Walton Lee. Mr. Lee, born in Taipei, Taiwan, is a graduate of San Francisco State University and an enthusiast of classical Chinese literature. He lives in El Cerrito, California.

