

Without being carved and polished,  
a jade can't be work of art.  
If one does not learn, he'll not know  
human virtues.

玉不琢，不成器。  
人不学，不知义。

With a tranquil disposition, one can remain in calm  
mood; but when the heart is ruffled, the spirit will get  
fired. With your mature genuinely kept, your aspirations  
will be fulfilled; but in pursuing worldly things, the mind  
often becomes distracted.

性静情逸，心动神疲。  
守真志满，逐物意移。



Chinese-English

# 三字经·千字文

Three-Character Canon  
Essay of One Thousand Characters

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中英文对照

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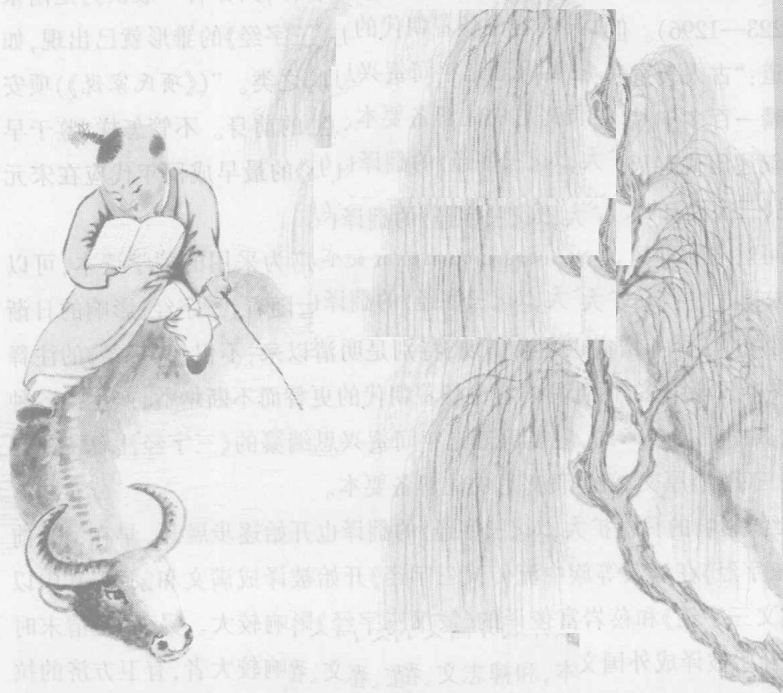
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Three-Character Canon



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## 《三字经》简述

《三字经》堪称是在中国广为流传、影响深远的蒙学著作，其作者一般认为是南宋硕儒王应麟(1223—1296)。但实际上早在王应麟之前，《三字经》的雏形就已出现，如宋人项安世曾道：“古人教童子多用韵语，如……《三字训》之类。”(《项氏家说》)项安世早生于王应麟一百多年，故《三字训》可看作是《三字经》的前身。不管怎样，鉴于早期的《三字经》叙述历代兴灭仅至宋代，故可断定《三字经》的最早成稿年代应在宋元时期。因此，说《三字经》的作者为宋人王应麟，料无大谬。

《三字经》问世之后即风靡华夏，成为宋代以后中国广为采用的蒙学读本，可以说，时至今日，未读过《三字经》的汉家蒙童恐怕寥寥无几。随着《三字经》影响的日渐扩大，对《三字经》的注释和增益也不断出现，特别是明清以来，不仅《三字经》的注释本、注音本、绘图本日渐增多，而且其内容也随着朝代的更替而不断增益，产生出各种不同的增补本，其中流传最广的，应推清道光年间贺兴思编纂的《三字经注解备要》，故笔者选用的《三字经》原文，就是贺兴思的注解备要本。

随着《三字经》影响的日益扩大，对《三字经》的翻译也开始逐步展开。早在清朝前期，为了便于《三字经》在满蒙等族中流传，《三字经》开始被译成满文和蒙文，其中以陶格敬译的《满文三字经》和崧岩富俊译的《蒙汉三字经》影响较大。另外，至清末时期，《三字经》也开始被译成外国文字，逐渐流传海外，其中影响较大者，有卫方济的拉丁译本，儒莲的法译本，和裨志文、翟理斯和艾泰尔的英译本。以上译本固然出自西洋人士之手，其语文表达固然无可指摘，但该译者的非汉语文化语境，自然使他们对华夏传统文化的真谛缺乏足够的了解，故对《三字经》所蕴含的文化精髓的把握不免会带有因文化隔阂而产生的某些偏颇。鉴于此，在当今中西文化全面交汇的时代大势下，站在华夏文化语境的角度对《三字经》进行更为准确的解读与传译，是一项既必要又极有意义的任务。

《三字经》之所以一经问世便流传不衰，其要有二：一、具有琅琅上口的韵律美感；



二、具有言简意赅的教化功用。从理论角度而言,翻译《三字经》,既应传达出原文的韵律美感,也应传达出原文的教化功用,这样方能尽善尽美。而从翻译实践的角度而言,在跨文化语境的语言转换中,这种试图尽善尽美的译事目标却极难达到,因为,欲传达《三字经》原文的韵律美,自然以韵文译之为佳,但若斤斤于韵脚之穿凿,实有因声伤意之虞,美则美矣,难于尽善;而欲再现其言意间的教化功用,自然以达意传实为上,但若亟亟于言意之究竟,恐又有以意害韵之嫌,善则善矣,却难于尽美。善美难以两全之际,译者往往不得已而求其次,或彰其美声而损益其辞,或显其实意而放任其韵。今以散体译文呈献读者,求其达意也。

质言之,译事之妙,惟在二心:自心,他心。自心即经营译事之勇猛精进心,他心即体贴读者之方便分别心。二心合一,译事之至也。



## About the Three-character Canon

*The Three-Character Canon* can be called a most popular and influential enlightening work in China. The author is generally considered to be Wang Yinglin (1223-1296), a learned scholar in the South Song Dynasty. As a matter of fact, however, the embryonic form of *the Three-Character Canon* had emerged before Wang Yinglin published it. For instance, Xiang Anshi, a historical figure of the Song Dynasty, once said, "The ancient people tended to enlighten their children with rhymed words, such as *the Three-Character Admonition*, etc." (*Family Precept of Xiang*). Xiang Anshi lived more than a hundred years earlier than Wang Yinglin; *the Three-Character Admonition*, therefore, can be regarded as the predecessor of *the Three-Character Canon*. Anyhow, seeing that the historical account ends with the Song Dynasty in its early editions, we know for sure that the earliest edition of *the Three-Character Canon* must have been published during the period between the Song and the Yuan Dynasties. Thus, it is plausible to determine that the author of *the Three-Character Canon* was Wang Yinglin.

*The Three-Character Canon* has become popular all over China as the widely adopted textbook for children immediately following the period of the Song Dynasty. So far, so to speak, few Chinese children fail to read *the Three-Character Canon*. With its gradually expanding influence, a great amount of work has been done to annotate and augment it. Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, in particular, *the Three-Character Canon* has improved not only in form, but also in content. Various editions of *the Three-Character Canon*, such as the annotated, the phonetic and the illustrated editions, etc. have appeared. On the other hand, it has also been expanded upon in content with the alternation of dynasties, bringing about various revised editions, the most popular being *the Annotated Edition of the Three-Character Canon* compiled by He Xingsi, a scholar during the reign of Emperor Daoguang in the Qing Dynasty. *The Three-Character Canon* chosen as the original in this book is the very edition compiled by He Xingsi.

With the enlarged influence of *the Three-Character Canon*, steps have been taken to translate it. In the early stage of the Qing Dynasty, for example, translations were begun in the Manchu and Mongolian languages for convenience of being learned by those nationalities. Of these, the most influential ones are in the Manchu Language, translated by Tao Gejing, and the translation into the Mongolian Language, by Songyan Fujun. And what's more, during the late



Qing period, translations had begun in other foreign languages, such as Latin, translated by Francais Noël, into French, by Julien, and the English versions, by Bridgman, Gilles and Yitaier respectively. These have exerted larger influences than other versions. Though they were translated by foreigners who were sound in the expression of their own languages, yet it is probable that their non-Chinese cultural context would prevent them from thoroughly absorbing the true spirit of the traditional Chinese culture, which would have more or less misled them in the exact interpretation of the work's cultural spirit. Hence, it's of great necessity and significance for us to interpret and translate *the Three-Character Canon* more exactly in the cultural context of China in the present time of a full interflow of the Chinese and western cultures.

The reason why *the Three-Character Canon* has exerted such a lasting influence as soon as it came into being lies in its two features, namely its rhyming beauty, which makes it quite readable, and its instructiveness, which is conveyed in concise wording. Theoretically, the translation of *the Three-Character Canon* should convey not only the original rhyming beauty, but also the original instructiveness, by means of which a perfect version could be obtained. Practically, however, it's extremely difficult to make the version perfect in the lingual transfer in the cross-cultural context, for, to convey its original rhyming beauty, the translator had better translate it in form of verse. If the translator tries to copy the original rhyming forms without caring about the meaning it may result in a beautiful, but unfaithful version. On the contrary, if the translator emphasizes the instructiveness of the original without caring about faithfully conveying the original rhyming form, the rhyming beauty will be sacrificed for the original meaning. If the translator fails to get a perfect version with its original beauty and faithful meaning united in harmony, the content will be second best, namely, either being prior to its beautiful original rhyming forms with increasing or decreasing its original wording, or being prior to its original meaning letting alone its original rhyming patterns. This publication adopts the form of essay so as to enable the readers to get a thorough and exact understanding of the original meaning of the *Three-Character Canon*.

Essentially, the mystery of translation lies in two "hearts", namely, the heart of the One, and the heart of the Other. The former refers to the translator's desperate intention to obtain an exact version, and the latter, to the translator's delicate consideration of the variety of the version readers. The combination of the two "hearts" will bring about the most appropriate translation.



# Three-Character Canon\*



\* "Three-Character Canon", which was composed by Wang Yinglin (王应麟, 1223—1296), a famous scholar of the South Song Dynasty, is said to be the most popular writing for primary education in ancient China. Short and concise as it is, it contains a vast range of comprehensive knowledge. That is why it is widely influential in China today.



rén zhī chū  
人之初，

xìng běn shàn  
性本善。

xìng xiāng jìn  
性相近，

xí xiāng yuǎn  
习相远。



At the beginning of life,

Man is good in nature.

Human nature is alike,

Habits make them different.





gǒu bù jiào ,  
苟 不 教 ,

xìng nǎi qiān 。  
性 乃 迁 。

jiào zhī dào ,  
教 之 道 ,

guì yǐ zhuān 。  
贵 以 专 。

For lack of education,

The nature is in alteration;

And the nurture of the young,

Better be maintained for long.



xī mèng mǔ  
昔孟母，

zé lín chǔ  
择邻处。

zǐ bù xué  
子不学，

duàn jī zhù  
断机杼。



Once Mencius's mother

Chose the best neighborhood for her son;\*

When her son played truant,

She cut the threads on the loom.\*\*

\* Mencius (372 BC—289 BC), a great thinker during the Warring States period. According to historical records, Mencius was very young when his father died. In order to raise him in sound surroundings, his mother Zhang (仉) moved their home three times. Originally they lived near a graveyard, where she found her son imitating the acts of mourning. She thought it was bad for her son's upbringing, and then she moved the home to the town and live near a butcher's. There, however, she found her son imitating the acts of killing pigs and sheep. It was not a proper environment for her son, either. At last, the mother and son moved again and lived near a school, where young Mencius began to imitate the scholars' behavior and study. The mother was very pleased with this, and she decided to settle down there. This is the famous story of "Three Moves by Mencius' Mother".

\*\* One day, seeing young Mencius run back home playing truant, his mother, who was weaving at the loom, became so angry that she cut off all the threads on the loom. She said to her son, "I'm weaving inch by inch, and if I cut off the threads now, I can no longer weave a piece of cloth. Your learning is the same as weaving cloth. If you fail to accumulate your knowledge day by day, you'll never succeed." Young Mencius was deeply sorry for his deed, and began to make great efforts in his studies, so much so, that he became a great thinker as well as a sage, second only to Confucius.





dòu yān shān  
窦燕山，

yǒu yì fāng  
有义方。

jiào wǔ zǐ  
教五子，

míng jù yáng  
名俱扬。



Another case is Dou Yanshan,  
Who was wise in family education.  
He raised his five sons,  
And all of them were blessed with fame.\*

\* Dou Yanshan, a famous historical figure in the period of the Five Dynasties. His real name was Dou Yujun (窦禹钧). Since he lived at the foot of Yanshan Mountain, he was also called Dou Yanshan. He had five sons, whom he raised in such a wise way that all of them became high government officials. This is the well-known story of "Five Sons, All Ascend".

yǎng bù jiào  
养 不 教 ,

fù zhī guò  
父 之 过 。

jiào bù yán  
教 不 严 ,

shī zhī duò  
师 之 惰 。

Rear children without instructing them,

And the father should be blamed;

Teach in a slack and lazy way

And the teacher should be criticized.





zǐ bù xué ,  
子 不 学 ,

fēi suǒ yí 。  
非 所 宜 。

yòu bù xué ,  
幼 不 学 ,

lǎo hé wéi ?  
老 何 为 ？



Rear children without instructing them,

If a pupil plays truant,

And the father should be blamed;

It proves to be improper.

Teach in a slack and lazy way

If a child fails to learn,

And the teacher should be criticized.

What could he be when getting old?



yù bù zhuó  
玉不琢，

bù chéng qì  
不成器。

rén bù xué  
人不学，

bù zhī yì  
不知义。

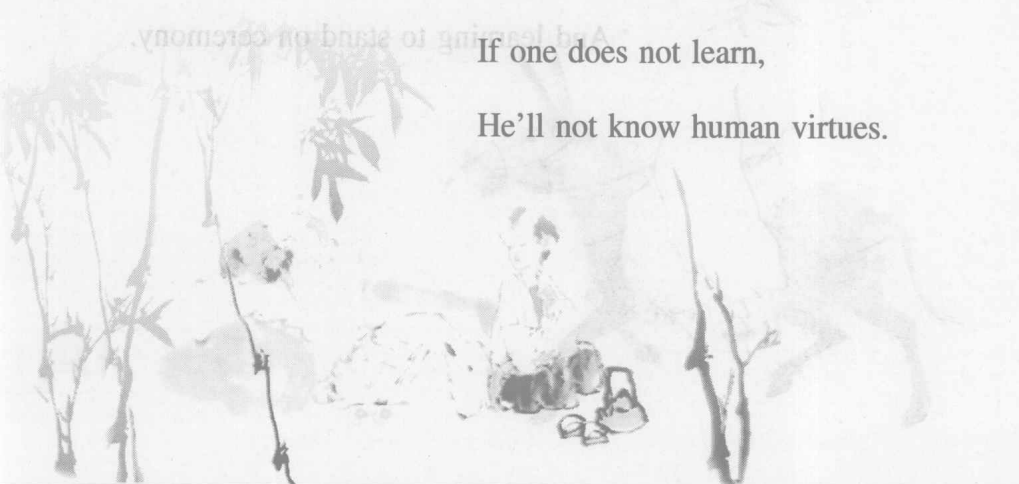
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人不学，  
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Without being carved and polished,

A jade can't be a work of art.

If one does not learn,

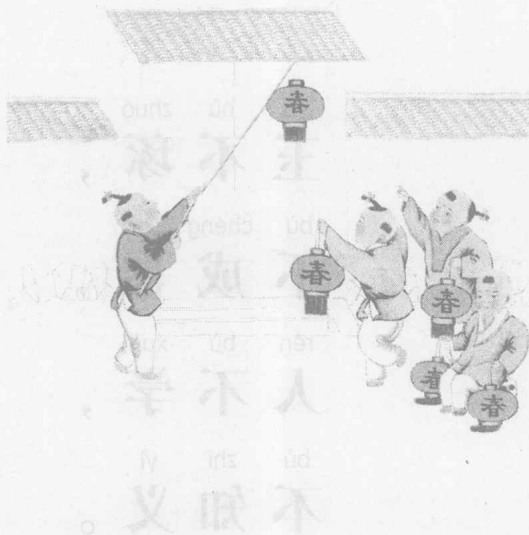
He'll not know human virtues.







wéi rén zǐ  
为人子，  
fāng shào shí  
方少时。  
qīn shī yǒu  
亲师友，  
xí lǐ yí  
习礼仪。



When one is young,

He should make the best of his time,

Associating with the good and the wise,

And learning to stand on ceremony.

