




《三字经》（英译本）

THE THREE-CHARACTER PRIMER
(*San Zi Jing with Historical Introduction*)

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Preface

The Three-Character Primer (San Zi Jing) was an outstanding primer in ancient times. It was said that the book was edited by the great scholar Wang Yinglin in Song Dynasty. Some people called it “A Pocket Outline of Historical Events Retold as a Mirror for Government” or “The book of *zi* history” as the “unique book through the ages if one could understand or explain sentence by sentence”. Since the Song Dynasty this book has become known to every family and won universal praise, enjoying great popularity even in today’s China.

The book in total has only 1,128 Chinese characters but its content is very wide and rich. First, it tells us “If a son is uneducated, that is his father’s fault; If the education not strict, that is his teacher’s laziness.” “If a jade is not carved and



polished, it can be of no use; If a man does not study, he can not understand the truth.” These sentences have become dictums and they still have positive meanings. Second, it points out the standard of rites in which there is some feudalistic ethical morality such as three guiding principles and five constant virtues. Indeed it has some weaknesses or mistakes. But the sentences such as “Huang Xiang who was only nine years old was able to know how to warm his parents’ bed by using his own body temperature. Kong Rong was only four years old but could present bigger pears to his elder brothers” tell us the traditional beautiful morality and can influence the children very positively and up to now we should also advocate it highly. Third, it introduces the numbers: four seasons, five elements, six cereals, six animals — the basic names of objects. It also imparts knowledge: *Small Learning*, *the Four Books*, *Six Classics* and *Five Intellectuals* which should be studied by young students. There it uses a lot of space to tell Chinese history from Fuxi, Shengnong

and Emperor Huang up to the Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing dynasties. Finally, it tells us very clearly and completely some historic stories of talented scholars who studied very diligently that help encourage and educate children.

The book's text has also special features. It deserves to be studied. It adopts three-character sentences with rhythms which are easy for reading and remembering as well as for understanding. Its character contains no difficult or strange words. The book contained three words, six words or twelve words in a sentence with multi-changes. Since its publication in the world, it has exerted great influence both at home and abroad.

The book is so widely known in the world to advocate Chinese civilization. I like to write this preface to our readers to let China know the world and the world know China.

Ma Zhizhou

Fudan University

November, 17, 2011

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三字经(附历史背景介绍)

The Three-Character Primer

(*San Zi Jing* with historical introduction)



rén zhī chū xìngběnshàn
人之初 性本善

xìngxiāng jìn xí xiāngyuǎn
性相近 习相远

*Man when born is good in character,
there is no difference in good character.
But man's nature will change later in
external environment.*

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Who made the earliest human beings? An ancient Chinese myth told us that they were modeled in yellow clay by the goddess Nü Wa, who was the first to advocate the human beings are good by nature. It was recorded in *Mencius* that Mencius and Gao Zi once argued. Gao Zi said, "The character of human beings is just like a pond of water. When one digs the east dyke open, the water will flow eastward; while one digs the west dyke open, it will flow westward. Then we would see that the character of human beings can not be distinguished between good and bad." Mencius then argued, "Water itself can't decide to flow westward or eastward.

But can water decide to flow up or down? The character of human beings just like the water flowing from a highland to lower ones. Only when the water flow is bounded or forced will it flow upward or spray. But that is not the character of water. ”

Everything has its character, which will change through outside forces or environmental changes. For instance, the character of water is soft and it can benefit human beings. But if it is pressed with tremendous force, it can destroy hard things. For example, a flood will do great harm to human beings. Here is another example. The character of iron is hard. But if we raise the temperature of iron to a certain degree the hard iron will be changed to flowing molten iron.

In ancient times, the philosopher Mo Zi once went to a dyehouse to watch the silk-dyeing. He could not refrain from tears. His pupils felt strange and asked him why. Mo Zi said, “When bundles of pure and white silk are put into a green dye vat, they will become green. When put into a yellow dye vat, they will become yellow. The white silk



will become red, black... when put into red, black ... vats. However, the silk is of the same white colour before it is put into a vat. The same is true of men's nature. It will change under different environments. What a sorrowful thing!" Mo Zi was right indeed. A Chinese idiom says: one who stays near vermilion gets stained red, and one who stays near ink gets stained black.

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Since people understood the circumstances could have great influence, they were very careful to select environment for themselves and their offspring. Here was an allusion called "Jiya's finding a good neighbour" telling that there was a man called Song Jiya. When he learned Lü Sengzhen was a knowledgeable man of noble morality, he made every effort to buy a house next to Lü. Later Lü asked him how much he paid for the house. Song replied it was 11 million. Lü thought it was too dear. Song explained that he spent one million on the house but 10 million for the good neighbour. The story of Song's finding a good neighbour soon spread and later generations praised him by saying

“Finding a good neighbour to live next to his wall, deriving old tradition and practice to teach descendants.”

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gǒu bù jiào xìng nǎi qiān
苟不教 性乃迁

*If you do not educate your children,
their good character will be changed.*

In the Ming Dynasty there was a celebrated official named Yang Shiqi. In his old age, he loved his son Yang Ji very much. Others told him that Yang Ji did evil things but he never believed it. When many more people told him of the same thing, he asked his son. Yang Ji answered that some people brought a false charge out of jealousy. Yang Shiqi trusted Yang Ji and then others dared not to tell him about his son's evils. It turned out that Yang Ji murdered ten people in the end. But at that time Yang Shiqi was very sick in bed and after his death, Yang Ji was sentenced to death. So the later generations commented that Yang Ji was spoiled by his father and turned out to be an unpardonable criminal. This story teaches us a lesson that

when parents and teachers find a child's wrongdoings, they should help correct him at once, thus saving the child's good nature.

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jiào zhī dào guì yǐ zhuān
教之道 贵以专

The important thing in the way of education is to concentrate on one's study.

There was a story in *Mencius* telling about an ancient outstanding chess player Yi Qiu, who had two pupils. One pupil listened to his explaining the techniques of playing chess very carefully and memorized every word his teacher said. So this pupil's skills progressed very quickly. But what about the other one? He also learned how to play chess but at the same time was thinking about some swans flying overhead and dreamed of shooting one down. Finally he did not learn any skills at all. Was the first pupil cleverer than the second one? No! The reason is that the second pupil didn't study with concentration.

xī mèng mǔ zé lín chù
昔孟母 择邻处

In the past Mencius's mother selected a good neighbourhood to live in.

It was said that Mencius's mother moved three times before they found a better neighbourhood to live in. The moral conduct of one's neighbours would have a great influence on the child. When Mencius was a little boy, they happened to live near a graveyard. So he often played a game of how to dig and bury the dead. His mother was very worried and decided to move away. So they moved to the downtown, where many neighbours around them were busy making money by doing business. Mencius watched them and began to hold a steelyard as if selling things. Mencius's mother felt upset and decided to move again. This time they moved to a place near a school. Mencius studied hard and behaved well like pupils of the school. Mencius's mother felt satisfied and smiled, thinking it a best place for her son to live and to grow.



zǐ bù xué duàn jī zhù
子不学 断机杼

When she found her son did not study hard, Mencius's mother cut the weaving silk on the loom.

When little Mencius felt tired of learning at school, he sneaked back home for a rest. When his mother found he had cut class, she took him near her loom, pointing at the silks she was weaving, and told him, "You study just like I weave. The silks were woven inch by inch and from inch to yard. Now it will be a bolt of silks for clothes, but if I cut it with a pair of scissors, you can see what will happen." Then she cut the silks in the middle and destroyed the silks to pieces. Mencius was shocked and cried, "No, Mom! It will be useless!" Mencius's mother answered, "Yes, boy. You're right that the silks are wasted by the cut. Just compare it with your study. Only when you persevere can you make progress in your study. Now you've stopped learning and do you think

that's like my cutting the silks in the middle?" Mencius was moved by his mother's words and felt deeply ashamed. Since then he studied diligently from morning till night and never played truant. Later Mencius became a respectful scholar and great thinker.

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