

# CHINESE ANCIENT FABLES



# **Chinese Ancient Fables**

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### *PUBLISHER'S NOTE*

One hundred and twenty-one of the best ancient Chinese fables — mostly from the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. as well as the 16th and 17th centuries — are contained in this volume. Until now, these fables have been circulated among the people by word of mouth or through various writings.

The source of each fable, and introductions to the authors and the original dates of publication are given in the notes following the text.

Previously published in two volumes, the editors have now combined them into one for the convenience of our readers.

中国古代寓言选

丰子恺 插图

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## FOREWORD

*Wei Jinzhi\**

ONE hundred and twenty-one of the best ancient Chinese fables — mostly from the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. as well as the 16th and 17th centuries — are contained in this volume. It was during these periods that fables reached a level of sophistication in China.

In the 3rd and 4th centuries B.C., the feudal rule of the Zhou Dynasty had fallen into decay: states fought among themselves with each trying to annex the other; land was bought and sold freely; aristocrats were no longer granted privileges by the rulers while ordinary citizens began to acquire culture. The spirit of the age encouraged many different schools of thought to flourish. Scholars, well-versed in ancient culture and history, made regular state inspection tours and, while mingling with the people, became acquainted with the fables that circulated among them. Later on, the scholars would make use of the fables when they remonstrated against rulers, argued with scholars from different schools of thought, instructed their own disciples, formulated their views and wrote books. Among the experts in the field were Han Fei Zi, Zhuang Zi and Lie Zi. Their fables, which have been handed down over the centuries, have made a significant contribution to the culture of ancient China.

After the unification of China in the Han Dynasty (2nd century B.C.), the feudal rule was intensified. Confucianism prevailed while other schools of thought were discouraged. Only Confucian scholars were appointed officials. Fearful that people would use fables to satirize society and to criticize them, scholars came to regard fables as "street gossip" rather than as literature. As a result, a mere hand-

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\* Wei Jinzhi is a well-known Chinese writer.

ful of fables were actually recorded and of those, most were in fragments. However, two writers should be mentioned: Liu Zongyuan, who wrote quite a number of fables in the 8th century and Su Shi, of the 11th century, who wrote *Miscellanea of Ai Zi*. Though neither was successful in his lifetime, their fables have left a mark in history for their satirical comments on society.

Another writer, Liu Ji, who was born in the 14th century, the period when the Mongolians dominated China, saw the misery around him which prodded him to write *Yu Li Zi*, a book that contains many fables. However, it is generally believed that these fables are not as vivid as those created by the people.

By the end of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Ming Dynasty was declining sharply. Officials were engaged in power struggles, heavy taxes were levied against the people and natural disasters caused rampant hunger and suffering. Complaints were heard everywhere. Some progressive intellectuals of this period used their pens to attack corrupt officials and social problems. Among these were Jiang Yingke, who wrote *Stories of Xue Tao* and Zhao Nanxing, author of *Xiao Zan (In Praise of Laughter)*. Another was Feng Monglong, author of *Xiao Fu (Treasure-House of Jokes)* which contained fables and other literary works. A master in this field, some of his fables, compiled along with his other works have been preserved until today. Thus, there were a number of writers of fables during this period who took material from the people and developed the fine traditions of the 3rd and 4th centuries B.C.

The fables contained in this book are all taken from the written works of ancient writers.

## HOW THE FOOL MOVED MOUNTAINS

TAIHANG and Wangwu Mountains are some seven hundred *li* around, and hundreds of thousands of feet high.

North of these mountains lived an old man of nearly ninety, who was called the Fool. His house faced these mountains, and he found it very inconvenient to have to make a detour each time he went out and came back; so one day he summoned his family to discuss the matter.

"Suppose we work together to level the mountains?" he suggested. "Then we can open a road southward to the bank of the Han River."

To this they all agreed. Only his wife was dubious.

"You haven't the strength to level even a small hill," she objected. "How can you move these two mountains? Besides, where will you dump all the earth and rocks?"

"We'll dump them in the sea," was the reply.

Then the Fool set out with his son and grandson, the three of them carrying poles. They dug up stones and earth, and carried them in baskets to the sea. A neighbour of theirs named Jing was a widow with a son of seven or eight, and this boy went with them to help them. It took them several months to make one trip.

A man living at the river bend, who was called the Wise Man, laughed at their efforts and did his best to stop them.

"Enough of this folly!" he cried. "How stupid this is! Old and weak as you are, you won't be able to remove even a fraction of the mountains. How can you dispose of so much earth and stones?"

The Fool heaved a long sigh.

"How dull and dense you are!" he said. "You haven't even the sense of the widow's young son. Though I shall die, I shall leave behind me my son, and my son's sons, and so on from generation

to generation. Since these mountains can't grow any larger, why shouldn't we be able to level them?"

Then the Wise Man had nothing to say.

*Lie Zi\**

## SUSPICION

A MAN who lost his axe suspected his neighbour's son of stealing it. He watched the way the lad walked — exactly like a thief. He watched the boy's expression — it was that of a thief. He watched the way he talked — just like a thief. In short, all his gestures and actions proclaimed him guilty of theft.

But later he found his axe himself when he went out to dig. And after that, when he saw his neighbour's son, all the lad's gestures and actions looked quite unlike those of a thief.

*Lie Zi*

## TOO MANY PATHS

ONE of Yang Zi's neighbours, who lost a sheep, sent all his men out to find it, and asked Yang Zi's servant to join in the search.

"What!" exclaimed Yang Zi. "Do you need all those men to find one sheep?"

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\* A book attributed to Lie Zi (Lie Yukou), who lived some time between the seventh and fifth centuries B.C. It was also said to be written later by Han authors (206 B.C.-220 A.D.). In any case, most of the works are not original.

"There are so many paths it may have taken," the neighbour explained. When his servant returned, Yang Zi asked him: "Well, did you find the sheep?"

He answered that they had not. Then Yang Zi asked how they had failed to find it.

"There are too many paths," replied the servant. "One path leads to another, and we didn't know which to take, so we had to come back."

At that Yang Zi looked very thoughtful. He was silent for a long time, and did not smile all day.

His pupils were surprised.

"A sheep is a trifle," they said, "and this wasn't even yours. Why should you stop talking and smiling?"

Yang Zi did not answer, and his pupils were puzzled. One of them, Mengsheng Yang, went out to describe what had happened to Xindou Zi.

"When there are too many paths," said Xindou Zi, "a man cannot find his sheep. When a student has too many interests, he fritters away his time. The source of all knowledge is one, but the branches of learning are many. Only by returning to the primal truth can a man avoid losing his way. You are Yang Zi's pupil and study from him, yet you seem to have failed completely to understand him."

*Lie Zi*

## PRESENTING DOVES

IT was the custom in Handan to catch doves to present to the prince on New Year's Day, for this pleased him so much that he

gave rich rewards. Someone asked the prince the reason for this custom.

"I free the doves at New Year to show my kindness," he said.

"Since your subjects know you want doves to set free, they all set about catching them," objected the other. "And the result is that many doves are killed. If you really want to save the doves, you had better forbid people to catch them. As things are, you catch them to free them, and your kindness cannot make up for the damage you do."

The prince agreed with him.

*Lie Zi*



## FELLING THE PLANE TREE

A MAN had a withered plane tree.

"It's unlucky to keep a withered tree," said his neighbour.

But when the first man had felled the tree, his neighbour asked him for some of the wood as fuel.

"The old man simply wanted some fuel," thought the owner of the tree indignantly. "That's why he told me to fell my tree. We are neighbours, and yet he tricks me in this way — this is really going too far!"

*Lie Zi*

## THE TITLE-DEED LOST ON THE ROAD

A MAN of the state of Song was strolling along the road when he came across an abandoned title-deed. He took it home and hid it, and used to count the items on the deed in secret.

"I am going to be rich," he told a neighbour.

*Lei Zi*

## THE MAN WHO SAW NOBODY

THERE was a man in the state of Qi who wanted some gold. One morning he dressed himself smartly and went to the market.



Arriving at the gold-dealer's stall, he seized a piece of gold and made off.

The officer who caught him asked him: "Why did you steal gold in front of so many people?"

"When I took the gold," he answered, "I saw nobody. All I saw was the gold."

*Lie Zi*

## THE CONCEITED COACHMAN

ONE day Yan Zi, prime minister of the state of Qi, went out in his carriage. His coachman's wife, from her gate, saw her husband looking thoroughly smug and conceited under the great carriage awning as he drove his four horses.

When the coachman went home, his wife told him she wanted to leave him.

Her husband asked her why.

"Yan Zi is prime minister of Qi," she replied. "He is famed throughout the states. But I saw him out today, deep in thought and not giving himself any airs. You are only a coachman, yet you look so conceited and pleased with yourself. That's why I want to leave you."

After this, her husband behaved more modestly. When Yan Zi, surprised, inquired the reason for this change, the coachman told him the truth. Then Yan Zi recommended him for an official post.

*Yan Zi\**

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\* A work attributed to Yan Zi (Yan Ying), who lived in the sixth century B.C. However, some claimed he was not the author.