

Illustrated Version

Ancient Chinese Wisdom

# GEMS OF CHINESE CLASSICS

ZHANG CIYUN

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# Introduction

Throughout China's long history, classic texts have played a vital role in shaping the country and influencing the daily lives of its people. They have provided academic learning, practical advice and instructions on how to live in harmony with man and nature. They have also given expression to hopes and dreams, joys and sorrows.

In this series of short articles, originally published in a weekly column in the English-language Shanghai Daily, we introduce classic texts spanning more than 3,000 years and covering everything from medicine, mathematics and military strategy to religion, literature, arts and travel.

These articles, written by Editor-in-Chief Emeritus Zhang Ciyun, are the stories of China's classic texts: their indelible mark on the country and their enduring influence as seen in adaptations of modern writing and textbooks for students across the country.

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三才經





## 三字经 (sān zì jīng)

### Three Character Classic

#### Making characters as easy as 1-2-3

“Three Character Classic” was one of the most popular texts for elementary education in China for more than 700 years until the middle of last century. Almost all children at school used to be required to recite the text of 1,248 Chinese characters in three-character verses for easy memorization.

Many historians have attributed this text to Wang Yinglin (1223-1296), a famous scholar of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). But they say that the version we see today was revised by later scholars because it contains content about history after the Southern Song Dynasty.

As a writer and scholar of Chinese classics and history, Wang obtained the title of “Presented Scholar,” a graduate of the Imperial Palace examination, at the age of 18. Three years later, he was appointed as an official of today’s Quzhou City in his home province of Zhejiang in eastern China. The highest office Wang ever held was the Director of the Board of Rites in the Imperial Court.

It was said that Wang authored “Three Character Classic” in order to spread Confucian classics and knowledge of Chinese history among children. Therefore, he wrote the text both short and simple and arranged it all into three-character verses, very suitable for reading and reciting.

As a result, even today, more than 60 years after it stopped being used as a text for primary schools, many people in China can still

recite some of its most readable verses.

“Three Character Classic” is divided into six parts, each focusing on a specific topic. It begins with four verses about the core belief of Confucianism:

“People at birth,  
All innately kind.  
Natures are alike,  
But habits different.”

Then, it goes on to preach traditional Chinese values, such as to follow filial piety, to observe the proprieties, to respect teachers and to be diligent and to study hard.

It even mentions an ancient episode concerning Kong Rong (153-208 AD), a Han Dynasty writer and descendant of Confucius. As a boy of 10, Kong was asked to divide two pears between his younger brother and himself. Kong gave the bigger one to his brother while keeping a smaller one for himself.

The story has been told for centuries in China to encourage young students to take after Kong’s humbleness and generosity.

In addition to teaching children the basics of math, Chinese language, music and science, the text also lists titles of important Chinese classics in Confucianism and works of other ancient philosophers.

The text tells students that before one begins to study Chinese history, he or she must first become versed in those classic master works.

After expounding all kinds of knowledge and principles, the classic text tells students in conclusion that people studying and

working hard will be eventually rewarded, while those who waste their time on play will regret of it one day.

Because of its rich content, beautiful verses and simple style, it was translated into Mongolian and Manchu languages during the Yuan and Qing dynasties. In the early years of Meiji Reign (1868-1912), it was widely used as a text in private schools in Japan. Later, it was also translated into English, French and Italian.

Now, it has been listed by UNESCO as one of its recommended children's readings worldwide.

Later, people also tried to imitate the writing style of "Three Character Classic" to spread knowledge of specific subjects and religions. So, for many hundreds of years, a good number of books have been published in China in the "three-character" style.

Titles include: "Three Character Classic for Females," "Three Character Classic of Geology," "Three Character Classic of Medicine," "Three Character Classic of Military," "Three Character Classic of Buddhism" and "Three Character Classic of Taoism."



## 千字文 (qiān zì wén)

### Thousand Character Classic

#### 'Alphabet song' builds character

"The Thousand Character Classic" was used as a Chinese "alphabet song" in elementary education for more than 1,400 years. Together with the "Three Character Classic" and the "Hundred Family Surnames," it was an integral part of the ancient "enlightenment" textbooks. Even today, many educated Chinese people can still recite some of its most popular phrases.

The idea of composing this "alphabet song" arose when Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty (502-549 AD) wanted a suitable book for children in the royal family to learn Chinese characters, but he found it difficult to come by. Most Confucian classics were too recondite for young children, other books too vulgar and superficial.

Therefore, the emperor first ordered a scribe to copy 1,000 unique characters from inscriptions by Wang Xizhi (303-361 AD), one of the finest calligraphers China had ever brought forth. However, those characters, though beautifully penned, were picked randomly and didn't form a readable text, hence, it was very hard for children to memorize.

The emperor then summoned Zhou Xingsi (469-521 AD), a scholar and renowned writer, into the imperial court and asked him to compile the selected 1,000 unique characters into a text for children to read and recite.

As a child, Zhou himself was a very bright and diligent student.

He traveled several hundred miles from his home village in today's Anhui Province in eastern China to Nanjing, now capital of Jiangsu Province, to pursue his studies when he was only 13 years old. Thanks to his arduous endeavors, Zhou later became a renowned writer and he was particularly skilled at recording historical events.

After leaving the imperial court with instructions, Zhou rushed back to his home and locked himself in his study. Then, he wrote down each of the 1,000 characters on a piece of paper and began to work out presumably the world's most difficult crossword puzzle.

It was certainly a brain-racking task to arrange 1,000 different Chinese characters into a text not only readable, but also easy to memorize. However, after burying himself among the 1,000 pieces of paper for the whole night, when the first light of the new day dawned through his study window, Zhou stood up, holding in his hand a newly compiled text that would be read and recited by billions of Chinese children in the following 14 centuries.

Zhou divided the 1,000 characters into 250 four-character phrases with a melodious rhythm. Therefore, it could be sung in an almost identical way of Western children singing the "alphabet song."

Then, the whole text was divided into four parts covering topics including the earth and the sky, mountains and rivers, farming and history, ethics and code of conduct, friendship and loyalty, government and social services, and countryside and idyllic life.

When Zhou handed his work to the emperor that morning, the ruler was pleasantly surprised that it was completed in such a short time, and after reading the text, he became very excited, saying that it was a good job and miracle.

Later, the “Thousand Character Classic” was not only very popular in China, but also well-received in Japan and some other East and Southeast Asian countries.

In the text, “洁” (clean) is the only character that is repeated, but only once. Many Chinese scholars in the following centuries attempted to improve the text to avoid the only repetition, but none of them succeeded.

However, because of its beautiful phrases and 1,000 (999 in fact) unique characters, it also becomes a favorite subject for Chinese calligraphy. Hundreds of famous scholars, calligraphers and even emperors have left behind numerous great works of calligraphy, copying out the “Thousand Character Classic.”





## 百家姓 (bǎi jiā xìng)

### Hundred Family Surnames

#### Family name game through the ages

“The Hundred Family Surnames” is a classic text containing hundreds of common Chinese surnames and is written in rhyme. First compiled in the early Song Dynasty (960-1279), the text became one of the “enlightenment” textbooks in elementary education in China for nearly 1,000 years. Even today, many Chinese children can recite at least part of the text.

It is believed that the text was first compiled by an anonymous scholar living in today’s Hangzhou, capital of east China’s Zhejiang Province. This would explain why the text begins with the four surnames — Zhao, Qian, Sun and Li — which were not the most common at the time, but they were either very important or relevant to the compiler’s hometown.

For instance, the first surname, Zhao, was the family name of the emperors of the Song Dynasty and Qian was the surname of the kings of the State of Wuyue (907-978 AD), which was located in the area where the believed author lived.

In Chinese, “hundred” can simply mean “a lot,” and the original “Hundred Family Surnames” actually contained 411 surnames. This was later expanded to 504, including 444 single-character and 60 double-character surnames.

However, according to historical records, more than 5,600 surnames had been used around China, which include not only single-character and double-character surnames, but also three-,