Proverbs and Sayings

Yànyǔ hé géyán 谚语和格言

Traditional sayings are an important means of passing on cultural wisdom. In China an especially rich accumulation of such sayings has been passed on for well over two thousand years. Today, despite political disruptions and an intrusive modernity, traditional sayings still play an active role, passed on largely by grandparents who often care for their grandchildren while both parents work.

All cultures have accumulated bodies of traditional sayings that constitute a common folk wisdom. China in particular has actively preserved an extraordinary number of sayings that many people use to make sense of what happens to them. From a cultural perspective, these sayings transmit fundamental cultural orientations and values. Although familiar sayings may sometimes be taught in school, their primary transmission is oral, reinforced by rhetorical devices that help make phrases memorable, especially to children. For the most part, learning them takes place informally within families and communities. The origins of Chinese proverbs are often ancient, indicating that all the intervening generations have found them useful.

It is difficult to estimate how many sayings have been acquired by people growing up in China (or for that matter in the West). Learning hundreds, perhaps thousands, of sayings was a common preparation for living under premodern circumstances. The sayings provided a pool of ready explanations and/or consolations for myriad events. Taken as a whole, proverbs did not necessarily have a single-minded philosophical orientation, but instead they preserved multiple or even contradictory ways of looking at things. One then chose an appropriate one according to the circumstances.

For example, the English proverb, “A stitch in time saves nine,” encourages people to solve problems when they are still small. A Chinese equivalent, “Xiao shi tou zhen, da shi tou jin” 小时偷针大时偷金, means “If a child can get away with stealing a needle, when he grows up he will steal gold.” This saying calls for the discipline of children when they are young. A more specific application of similar advice in English proverbs might be “As the twig is bent, so the tree shall grow.”

With an opposite implication, however, the proverb, “Look before you leap,” enjoins caution in the face of risk.
Seeing once is better than hearing a hundred times.

百闻不如一见
Bǎi wén bù rú yì jiàn

Origins in China

The origins of proverbs, clearly oral in form, have been recorded in China from the very earliest written texts that date from the first millennium BCE such as the Zuo Commentaries (Zuo Zhuan 左传) and the works of Kongzi (Confucius) or Mengzi (Mencius). Perhaps the best known collection of proverbs in use today is named The Extended Virtuous Words (Zeng guan xian wen 增广贤文), which was first compiled around 1600 during the Ming Dynasty.

Episodes in the lives of famous historical figures are frequently alluded to in Chinese sayings. Their message is often expressed in four-character set phrases known as chengyu 成语. Here is an example from a letter written in 93 BCE by China’s first great historian, Sima Qian (145–86 BCE): “The loss of one hair from nine oxen” or Jiu niu yi mao 九牛一毛. To an outsider, this saying remains cryptic. It is not even a sentence that makes sense as a moral caution. To someone who grew up in China, however, this saying evokes Sima Qian’s explanation for his refusal to commit suicide on the order of the emperor Han Wudi. Instead, he preferred castration so that he could live on to complete his pioneering history of China. His death, says Sima Qian, would have been no more significant than “the loss of one hair from nine oxen.” But living on despite his humiliation would allow him to complete a great work whose importance would outlive the influence of the Emperor who had maltreated him.

An additional source of proverbial sayings is traditional Chinese poetry; this often culminates in a last line or two
that sum up a whole sequence of feelings in a few words. Example: “To extend one’s view to cover a full thousand miles, climb just one more story of the tower.” (Yu qiong qian li mu, geng shang yi ceng lou. 欲穷千里目更上一层楼.) These two lines are quoted from the poem “Climbing Stork Tower” (Deng guan que lou 登鹳雀楼) by Wang Zhihuan (688–742 CE). Because the aim of much traditional Chinese literature has been the teaching of one lesson or other, a short and memorable way of encapsulating the moral in the last line invites later quotation. Thus many features of the Chinese cultural tradition are reinforced through the habit of speaking in short, proverbial sayings.

Not all proverbs and common sayings can be traced back to ancient times. Mao Zedong’s so-called Little Red Book (1966) prolonged the tradition as did stories propagated during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). During Mao’s time these permeated China’s social landscape. Used as inspirational phrases by which to live, these mottos were produced and disseminated as part of a campaign to spread Mao’s revolutionary message: for example, “Revolutionists are guiltless, and rebellions are justifiable.” (“Ge ming wu zui, zao fan you li” 革命无罪造反有理.) Another example is “Revolution is by no means inviting guests to a banquet.” (“Ge ming bu shi qing ke chi fan.” 革命不是请客吃饭.) Today’s young people often say they have never even heard of these sayings.

Despite the disruptions of the Revolutionary period and an encroaching modernity, the survival of traditional proverbs in China seems assured under present conditions. Two-thirds of China’s people still live in rural areas in fairly traditional circumstances. In cities, both parents are likely to work and to leave their child largely in the care of grandparents, who thus have many opportunities to pass on traditional wisdom. In addition, teachers may often incorporate venerable Chinese sayings into classroom instruction, though such sayings may be greeted with a certain amount of ambivalence by the more sophisticated students of today. Nonetheless, in Chinese culture and history, proverbs have provided a rich reservoir of handy mind-tools that allow people to categorize their experience and live with the consequences. They affirm that one can always find ways of coping with misfortune; everything has always happened before. Today these widely known rhetorical patterns also help to preserve and pass on a distinctively Chinese world view: Everything changes and everything that happens is connected. Thus the survival of proverbial sayings constitutes a powerful linkage between the present Chinese generation and all those that came before.

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Further Reading

You think you lost your horse? Who knows, he may bring a whole herd back to you someday.

塞 翁 失 马
Sài wēng shī mǎ