

**SELECTIONS FROM THE TWENTY-FOUR EXEMPLARS OF FILIAL  
PIETY**

**Introduction**

The Confucian classics provide the sophisticated reader with a wealth of moral teachings and examples. However, they are not well adapted to telling ordinary people how to put those abstract moral principles into practice in their daily lives. With the advent of printing in the Song dynasty (960-1276), writers had an opportunity to rectify this by composing books of moral instruction meant for a mass audience. The excerpts below are from a popular tract widely circulated from the Yuan through the Qing dynasties in many different editions.

**Document Excerpts with Questions** (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufano, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 139-141. © 2000 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

*Selections from The Twenty-four Exemplars of Filial Piety*

**11. *Mosquitoes Gorged Freely on His Blood***

Wu Meng of the Jin dynasty was eight years old and served his parents with extreme filiality. The family was poor, and their bed had no mosquito net. Every night in summer many mosquitoes bit him, gorging on his blood. But despite their numbers he did not drive them away, fearing that they would go and bite his parents. This is the extreme of love for parents.

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**17. *Playing in Colored Clothes to Amuse His Parents***

Old Master Lai of the Zhou dynasty was extremely filial. He respectfully cared for his two parents, preparing delicious food for them. He was over seventy, but he never mentioned the word "old." He wore five-colored motley and played children's games at his parents' side. Often he carried water into the room and pretended to slip and fall; then he would cry like a baby to amuse his parents.

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**22. *Carving Statues to Serve As Parents***

When Ding Lan of the Han dynasty was young his parents passed away. He was unable to care for them, and yet was aware of how they had toiled to bring him up. So he carved wooden

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on  
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statues of them and served them as if they were alive. After a long time his wife ceased to revere them, and in jest she pricked one of their fingers with a needle. It bled, and when the statues saw Lan, they wept. Lan discovered the reason and brought forth his wife and divorced her.

**Questions:**

1. What is the nature of the filiality being taught in these vignettes?
2. Is it likely that anyone would literally behave in the manner described? If not, then what is the point of the stories? Why not write something more realistic?
3. Why would elite men take the time and effort to produce such literature for the instruction of commoners? Why should they care whether commoners understand filiality?

**Longer Selection**

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**3. *A Bitten Finger Pains the Heart***

Zeng Shen of the Zhou dynasty had the honorific name Ziyu. He served his mother with extreme filiality. One day when Shen was in the mountains gathering firewood a guest came to the house. His mother had made no preparations and she kept hoping that he would return, but he did not. Then she bit her finger, and at the same time Shen suddenly felt a pain in his heart. He shouldered his firewood and returned home; kneeling, he asked his mother what the matter was. His mother said, "A guest came unexpectedly and I bit my finger to make you aware of it."

**8. *Acting As a Laborer to Support His Mother***

Jiang Ge lived in the Eastern Han dynasty. His father died when he was young, and he lived alone with his mother. Disorders broke out, so he fled, carrying his mother. Again and again they encountered bandits who wanted to force him to join them. But Ge burst into tears and told them that he had his mother with him. The bandits could not bring themselves to kill him. They took up residence in Xiapei. Impoverished and without shirt or shoes, he hired himself out as a laborer to support his mother. He gave her whatever she needed.

**10. *Breast-Feeding Her Mother-in-law***

Madame Zhangsun was the great-grandmother of Cui Nanshan of the Tang dynasty. When she was old and toothless, every day Cui's grandmother, Madame Tang, after combing her hair and washing her face, entered the main hall and breast-fed her. Although the old lady did not eat a grain of rice, after several years she was still in good health. One day she fell sick, and young

and old gathered about her as she announced, "There is no way that I can repay my daughter-in-law's goodness to me. If the wives of my sons and grandsons are as filial and respectful as this daughter-in-law, it will be enough."

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**12. *Lying on Ice Seeking for Carp***

Wang Xiang of the Jin dynasty was young when his mother died. His stepmother, named Zhu, was unloving toward him and constantly slandered him to his father. Because of this he lost the love of his father. His stepmother liked to eat fresh fish. Once it was so cold the river froze. Xiang took off his clothes and lay on the ice to try to get some fish. Suddenly the ice opened and a pair of carp leaped out. He took them home and gave them to his stepmother.

**13. *Burying His Son on Behalf of His Mother***

The family of Guo Ju in the Han dynasty was poor. He had a three-year-old son. His mother reduced what she ate to give more food to him. Ju said to his wife, "Because we are very poor, we cannot provide for Mother. Moreover, our son is sharing Mother's food. We ought to bury this son." When he had dug the hole three feet deep he found a great pot of gold. On it were the words "Officials may not take it, commoners may not seize it."

**16. *After He Had Tasted Dung, His Heart Was Anxious***

Yu Qianlou of the Southern Qi dynasty was appointed magistrate of Zhanling. He had been in the district less than ten days when suddenly he became so alarmed that he began to sweat. He immediately retired and returned home. At that time his father had been sick for two days. The doctor said, "To know whether this illness is serious or not, you only need taste the patient's dung. If it is bitter, it is auspicious." Qianlou tasted it, and it was sweet. He was deeply worried. When night came, he kowtowed to the Pole Star [the Star of Longevity], begging to die in his father's place.

**17. *Playing in Colored Clothes to Amuse His Parents***

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22. *Carving Statues to Serve As Parents*

When Ding Lan of the Han dynasty was young his parents passed away. He was unable to care for them, and yet was aware of how they had toiled to bring him up. So he carved wooden statues of them and served them as if they were alive. After a long time his wife ceased to revere them, and in jest she pricked one of their fingers with a needle. It bled, and when the statues saw Lan, they wept. Lan discovered the reason and brought forth his wife and divorced her.

23. *Weeping on Bamboo Made Them Sprout*

Meng Zong of the Three Kingdoms period had the honorific Gongwu. When he was young his father died, and his mother was old and very sick. In the winter she wanted to eat soup made of bamboo shoots. Zong, not knowing how to get them, went into a bamboo grove, leaned against a big bamboo, and wept. His filial piety moved Heaven-and-earth. Instantly the ground broke open and several bamboo shoots appeared. He picked them and took them home to make soup for his mother. When she had eaten it she was cured.