

## Fables — Pearls of Wisdom

Fables go back to the 14th century BC and the earliest storytellers in India and Egypt. Eight centuries later, Aesop, the father of Greek fables, perfected the genre in ancient Greece. In China, the Warring States period (475-221 BC) saw the flowering age of the fable. Representatives of various schools of thought used fables to strengthen their arguments before powerful patrons, and many notable Chinese fables are attributed to Mengzi (Mencius), Zhuangzi and Hanfeizi.

In its broad sense, a fable is a short narrative devised to illustrate some useful lesson or some moral truth. The message or moral can be implicitly conveyed, or it can be spelled out by the author at the end. In the old days, the fable was a popular mode of conveying serious instruction, often in a comic guise. Whether in the East or the West, a short story illustrating the human foibles at work in a contemporary situation was a far more effective and safer means of warning powerful leaders than levelling open criticism at them.

Most of Aesop's fables involve animals. The birds and beasts act and talk much like human beings, but generally keep the principal traits associated with each animal: the fox its cunning, the lion its fierceness, and so on. By clothing men in the guise of animals, the fabulist could lampoon human folly safely. The reader is left to draw his own conclusion as to what is right and what is wrong. For example, in *The Dog and the Shadow*, a greedy dog drops and loses the bone he is carrying when he sees his reflection in the water because he wants the reflected bone as well as the real one. With *The Hare and the Tortoise*, the arrogant hare speeds by the slow tortoise, then takes a nap, waking just in time to see the tortoise cross the finish line first.

Many of Aesop's popular fables have become idioms — the lion's share; sour grapes; a dog in a manger; a donkey in a lion's hide; a wolf in sheep's clothing; and the goose that lays the golden eggs, to name just a few. Many of his morals have become epigrams handed down through generations, such as "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and "united we stand, divided we fall".

Aesop's shrewd observations of human nature have found many parallels in the fables of other nations. For example, *Master Dongguo and the Wolf of Zhongshan* (東郭先生與中山狼) is the Chinese parallel to *The Farmer and the Serpent*. Both the Serpent and the Wolf repay good with evil. *A Donkey in a Lion's Hide* finds its variant in the Chinese fable depicting how the fox makes himself feared by walking in the company of the tiger (狐假虎威). Similar to *The Lion and the Boar*, the Chinese fable *The Struggle between the Snipe and the Clam* (鷓蚌相爭) illustrates the

fact that when two parties struggle and fight with each other, it is often a third party that will benefit.

As with Western fables, Chinese fables also include tales featuring animals like the Frog, the Fox, the Donkey, the Hare and the Goat. The animals depicted interact with each other in a human manner, as for example in *The Frog in the Well and the Sea Turtle* (井底之蛙與海龜). In addition, there are a large number of narratives with human protagonists: the tales *Old Fool Moves Mountain* (愚公移山) and *Breaking Arrows* (折箭) lend substance to the concept of persistence and strength in unity respectively. Other examples include *Waiting for More Rabbits to Bump into the Tree* (守株待兔), which warns against laziness and greediness. *Without the Lips, the Teeth Will Freeze* (唇亡齒寒) stresses the interdependence of things.

Like Aesop's fables, ancient Chinese fables have been perceived as relevant and worth repeating for many centuries. These terse, concise stories have become so popular and well known that many of them have made their way into the Chinese language. Apart from those mentioned earlier, fables like *The Frog in the Well* (井底之蛙), *Draw a Snake and Add Feet to It* (畫蛇添足), and *Tugging the Seedlings to Help the Plant Grow* (揠苗助長) have become idiomatic sayings. These and many others have served to enrich the Chinese language, and the morals of these tales are still relevant today.

Isaac Bashevis Singer once said, "Aesop's fables teach lessons both in life and literature that are valid today and will remain so forever". Ancient Chinese fables deserve such recognition as well.



Tradition is a guide and not a jailer.

W. Somerset Maugham