

Ancient Chinese Tales about Valuing Virtue above Material Gain

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A lot of virtuous men in ancient China valued virtue and loyalty above material gain. They thought little of their own fortune while being enthusiastic about giving charity to others. They were content with a simple, minimal lifestyle and would try their best to help people in need unconditionally, even strangers.

Ni Shan was a man from the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.) He lived in Sha County, Fujian Province. He was very smart and enjoyed studying. He also enjoyed helping people. Each time he left home, he would carry money with him. When he ran into a destitute man in need, he would leave money in the man's home. He was indifferent as to whether his charitable act was known or not.

Ni Shan attended the qualification examination for government officials repeatedly but he was never

able to pass it. Some people laughed at him. "You give charity to the poor people almost every day. Why does a virtuous man like you repeatedly fail the examination? Perhaps God is blind after all?" Ni Shan was not discouraged by the scornful remarks. He kept on giving money to poor people as usual.

One year the country suffered from a famine. Many people died of hunger on the streets. Ni Shan established a rice porridge kitchen to feed the hungry men and saved the lives of over 10,000 men. In the following year, Ni Shan attended the qualification examination again. This time many people in his hometown dreamed of a color flag being raised in front of Ni Shan's home with the message, "Accumulated great virtue by giving hungry men rice porridge." That year Ni Shan won first place on the qualification examination and later became a member of the Imperial Cabinet.

Tan Yuanchun was a literary giant in the time of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.). His father was a very kind person. He once made a trip to Xiangyang. One morning when the boat had just sailed off, Tan heard a man crying in distress on the shore. He had the captain pull the boat to the shore. He then

approached the man only to find that he was a low-level employee in the local government and that he had accidentally lost a large amount of money that belonged to the government. The man was unable to pay back the money he had lost, so he wanted to drown himself. Tan calmed him down and told him, "Your money is not lost. I have found it." Next he packed a bag of money and gave it to the man. The man said, "This is not the money I have lost. How could I take your money?" Tan said, "Just take the money. There is no need to say anything."

There was another virtuous man from the Ming Dynasty named Wen Zhengming. He once called on and stayed at a rich friend's mansion. One day an old friend of Wen Zhengming called on him at the rich man's mansion. The friend looked around the luxurious mansion. When he spotted a gold wine cup (resembling a modern shot glass) on the table, he picked it up right away, concealed it in his sleeve, and fled from the scene. Wen Zhengming knew his friend had stolen the gold cup. When Wen met the owner of the mansion, he immediately told him, "I needed cash for emergency and I didn't have time to ask for your permission. I have already asked my servant to take your gold wine cup and pawn it for

cash. I hope you don't mind that I did that without asking you first." The owner did not get upset. Wen added, "Could you tell me the weight of the gold cup or the value of it? If I cannot get the gold cup from the pawn shop in a few days, I will pay you back in cash." The owner agreed. After Wen Zhengming returned home, he sold some of his farm land to pay for the cup, but he did not tell the owner that his friend had stolen the cup.