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# Chinese Proverbs

## 中国谚语

A Collection of 100+ Ancient Sayings  
with Pinyin, Translations & Cultural Meanings

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What's Inside:

- 100+ Carefully Selected Proverbs
  - Chinese Characters & Pinyin
  - English Translations
  - Cultural Context & Meanings

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## Introduction

Chinese proverbs represent centuries of accumulated wisdom, distilled into memorable phrases that capture essential truths about human nature, relationships, and the art of living.

Unlike simple idioms, these proverbs often carry the weight of history behind them - some originated in ancient philosophical texts like the Analects of Confucius or the Tao Te Ching, while others emerged from the practical wisdom of farmers, merchants, and ordinary people navigating daily life.

What makes Chinese proverbs particularly fascinating is their compression. In just a handful of characters, they manage to convey insights that might take paragraphs to explain in English. This efficiency reflects a cultural preference for indirectness and suggestion over explicit statement - the proverb points toward truth rather than delivering it directly.

This collection includes proverbs across several themes: love and relationships, life wisdom, time and patience, success and money, and humor. Each entry includes the original Chinese characters, pinyin pronunciation for learners, an English translation, and a brief explanation of the cultural context.

Whether you're studying Chinese language and culture, seeking inspiration for a tattoo with meaning, or simply curious about how another tradition articulates universal human experiences, these proverbs offer a window into Chinese thought.

We hope this collection brings you wisdom, insight, and perhaps a few smiles.

## Love & Relationships

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有缘千里来相会，无缘对面不相逢

Yǒu yuán qiān lǐ lái xiāng huì, wú yuán duì miàn bù xiāng féng

"Those with destiny will meet even if separated by a thousand li; those without destiny will not recognize each other even when face to face"

Affinity transcends distance while its absence defeats proximity. Fate determines whether paths cross, regardless of geographical closeness.

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只羡鸳鸯不羡仙

Zhǐ xiàn yuān yāng bù xiàn xiān

"True love is worth more than immortality"

Only envy mandarin ducks, do not envy immortals. Mandarin ducks mate for life and are always seen in pairs. Immortals transcend human attachment but live forever. The proverb values earthly love over eternal life.

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千里姻缘一线牵

Qiān lǐ yīn yuán yī xiàn qiān

"True love transcends distance and circumstance"

A marriage match of a thousand li is drawn together by a single thread. Even across vast distances, fate connects destined lovers through an invisible bond.

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## 一日不见，如隔三秋

Yī rì bù jiàn, rú gé sān qiū

"One day without seeing you is like being separated by three autumns"

A single day of separation feels as long as three years

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## 衣带渐宽终不悔，为伊消得人憔悴

Yī dài jiàn kuān zhōng bù huǐ, wèi yī xiāo dé rén qiáo cuì

"My clothes grow loose yet I regret not; for her I have wasted away to emaciation."

Clothes (衣) belt (带) gradually (渐) loose (宽) ultimately (终) not (不) regret (悔), for (为) her (伊) waste/consume (消) obtain (得) person (人) haggard/emaciated (憔悴). The belt loosening indicates weight loss from lovesickness.

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## 情人眼里出西施

Qíng rén yǎn lǐ chū Xī Shī

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder"

In a lover's eyes, Xi Shi appears. Xi Shi was one of ancient China's legendary Four Beauties, whose name became synonymous with supreme feminine beauty. The proverb means that love makes the beloved appear as beautiful as the most beautiful woman in history.

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## 愿得一心人，白头不相离

Yuàn dé yī xīn rén, bái tóu bù xiāng lí

"I wish to find someone of one heart, so we may grow old with white hair and never part"

Wish (愿) obtain (得) one (一) heart (心) person (人), white (白) head (头) not (不) mutually (相) separate (离). The phrase paints a portrait of two people whose hair turns white together, bound by a single shared heart.

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## 一日夫妻百日恩，百日夫妻似海深

Yī rì fū qī bǎi rì ēn, bǎi rì fū qī sì hǎi shēn

"One day as husband and wife brings a hundred days of grace; a hundred days as husband and wife runs deep as the sea"

Even brief marital bonds create lasting obligations; longer bonds create immeasurably deep connections

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## 愿得一心人，白头不相离

Yuàn dé yī xīn rén, bái tóu bù xiāng lí

"Longing for a soulmate to grow old with"

Wish to obtain a one-heart person, white-headed not separate from each other. The 'one-heart person' is one whose heart beats as one with yours. White hair represents the journey into old age. To not separate means a lifetime together.

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## 不是冤家不聚头

Bù shì yuān jiā bù jù tóu

"Only true adversaries are fated to encounter each other"

If not enemies/nemeses, would not gather together. The 'yuanjia' is a destined opponent, someone bound to you through conflict. 'Jutou' means to meet or gather. The proverb suggests that certain relationships are karmically inevitable.

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## Life Wisdom

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### 初生牛犊不怕虎

Chū shēng niú dú bù pà hǔ

"Youthful inexperience breeds fearless confidence"

A newly born calf does not fear the tiger. The young creature, unaware of danger, charges forward with confidence born not of courage but of ignorance.

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### 秋后的蚂蚱，蹦跶不了几天

Qiū hòu de mà zha, bèng da bù liǎo jǐ tiān

"A grasshopper after autumn cannot jump around for many days"

After autumn (秋后) grasshopper (蚂蚱), jump (蹦跶) not (不) can (了) few (几) days (天). As winter approaches, the grasshopper—once lively and powerful—faces inevitable decline. Its days of jumping are numbered.

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### 人生苦短，及时行乐

Rén shēng kǔ duǎn, jí shí xíng lè

"Human life is brief and filled with hardship, so seek pleasure while you can"

Human life is bitter and short; in timely fashion, pursue happiness. The phrase acknowledges life's difficulty and brevity while advocating for the deliberate cultivation of joy.

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## 好死不如赖活着

Hǎo sǐ bù rú lài huó zhe

"A good death is not as good as a messy life"

Good (好) death (死) not as good as (不如) messy/wretched (赖) living (活着). The character 赖 suggests something inferior, struggling, or barely getting by.

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## 活在当下

Huó zài dāng xià

"Exist fully in the here and now"

Live at this very moment. The phrase urges presence—not dwelling on the past or worrying about the future, but inhabiting the only time that actually exists: now.

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## 敲锣卖糖，各干一行

Qiāo luó mài táng, gè gàn yī háng

"Beating gongs to sell candy, each person does their own trade"

Beat (敲) gong (锣) sell (卖) candy (糖), each (各) do/work (干) one (一) trade/profession (行). Candy sellers traditionally announced themselves by beating gongs—each merchant focused on their own specialty.

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## 一朝被蛇咬，十年怕井绳

Yī zhāo bèi shé yǎo, shí nián pà jǐng shéng

"Once bitten by a snake, you fear the well rope for ten years"

After being hurt once, you become afraid of even harmless things that resemble the source of pain

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## 敬酒不吃吃罚酒

Jìng jiǔ bù chī chī fá jiǔ

"Refusing a polite offer only to face a harsher alternative"

Refuse the respectful wine, only to drink the penalized wine. In Chinese culture, wine offered with both hands represents honor and hospitality. Refusing such courtesy invites coercion instead.

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## 树欲静而风不止

Shù yù jìng ér fēng bù zhǐ

"The tree wants to stay quiet, but the wind won't stop blowing"

Tree (树) wants (欲) quiet/still (静) but (而) wind (风) not (不) stop (止). A tree cannot control the wind blowing through it, just as we cannot control external circumstances.

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## 半路里杀出个程咬金

Bàn lù lǐ shā chū gè Chéng Yǎojīn

"An unexpected challenger emerges midway"

Half (半) road (路) in (里) kills (杀) out (出) a Cheng Yaojin (程咬金). Cheng Yaojin—the infamous Tang dynasty general with his three axe techniques—suddenly appears on the road, disrupting all plans.

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## Time & Patience

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### 岁月不饶人

*suì yuè bù rǎo rén*

"Time shows mercy to no one"

Years and months do not spare people

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### 一日之计在于晨，一年之计在于春

*Yī rì zhī jì zài yú chén, yī nián zhī jì zài yú chūn*

"The plan for a day lies in the morning; the plan for a year lies in spring"

Morning is the crucial time for daily planning; spring is the crucial time for yearly planning

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### 一寸光阴一寸金

*Yī cùn guāng yīn yī cùn jīn*

"An inch of time is worth an inch of gold"

One (一) inch (寸) of light and shadow (光阴) [is] one (一) inch (寸) of gold (金). The 'inch' here refers to a traditional Chinese unit of measurement.

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### 一寸光阴一寸金，寸金难买寸光阴

*Yī cùn guāng yīn yī cùn jīn, cùn jīn nán mǎi cùn guāng yīn*

"An inch of time is an inch of gold, but an inch of gold cannot buy an inch of time"

Time is as valuable as gold, yet gold cannot purchase time

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## 欲速则不达

Yù sù zé bù dá

"Haste does not bring success"

Desire (欲) speed (速) then (则) not (不) reach/achieve (达). The character 达 means to reach a destination or achieve a goal.

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## 十年磨一剑

Shí nián mó yī jiàn

"Ten years to sharpen a sword"

Ten (十) years (年) grind/polish (磨) one (一) sword (剑). The verb 磨 means to sharpen, polish, or hone through persistent effort.

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## 光阴似箭

Guāng yīn sì jiàn

"Time flies like an arrow"

Light and shadow (光阴) are like (似) an arrow (箭). The characters 光阴 literally mean 'light and shadow,' representing day and night, or time itself.

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## Wisdom & Philosophy

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### 千里之行始于足下

Qiān lǐ zhī xíng shǐ yú zú xià

"Even the greatest endeavors begin with modest first actions"

A journey of one thousand li (Chinese miles) starts beneath one's feet. The vast distance is not traversed by wishing but by the concrete act of stepping forward.

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### 听君一席话，胜读十年书

Tīng jūn yī xí huà, shèng dú shí nián shū

"Listening to one conversation with you surpasses reading books for ten years"

Listen (听) gentleman/sir (君) one (一) mat/session (席) speech (话), surpasses (胜) reading (读) ten (十) years (年) books (书). The phrase 席话 refers to the words spoken during one sitting together.

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### 既来之，则安之

Jì lái zhī, zé ān zhī

"Since you have come, be at peace with it"

Already (既) come (来) [particle marking completion] (之), then (则) settle/be at peace (安) [object marker] (之). The phrase suggests accepting one's circumstances—having arrived somewhere, one should settle in and find contentment.

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## 十年树木，百年树人

Shí nián shù mù, bǎi nián shù rén

"It takes ten years to grow trees, but a hundred years to rear people"

Ten (十) years (年) plant (树) trees (木), hundred (百) years (年) plant (树) people (人). The verb 树 means to cultivate or establish.

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## 光脚的不怕穿鞋的

guāng jiǎo de bù pà chuān xié de

"Those with nothing to lose fear nothing"

Barefoot people don't fear those wearing shoes

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## 酒香不怕巷子深

Jiǔ xiāng bù pà xiàng zi shēn

"Good wine fears no deep alley"

Wine (酒) fragrance (香) not fears (不怕) alley/lane (巷子) deep (深). The image is of a wine shop hidden in a deep alley whose excellent product nonetheless attracts customers through its aroma alone.

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## 饱汉不知饿汉饥

Bǎo hàn bù zhī è hàn jī

"The well-fed man does not know the hungry man's hunger"

Full/satisfied (饱) man (汉) not (不) know/understand (知) hungry (饿) man (汉) hunger (饥). The phrase observes that those whose needs are met cannot truly understand those whose needs are unmet. Satiety creates blindness; fullness prevents empathy. The satisfied literally cannot imagine what want feels l...

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## 鲤鱼跳龙门

Lǐ yú tiào lóng mén

"The carp leaps over the Dragon Gate"

Carp (鲤鱼) leaps/jumps (跳) Dragon Gate (龙门). The Dragon Gate is a legendary waterfall on the Yellow River where, according to myth, carp that successfully leap upstream transform into dragons.

## 此处不留爷，自有留爷处

Cǐ chù bù liú yé, zì yǒu liú yé chù

"If this place doesn't keep me, there will naturally be a place that will"

This (此) place (处) not (不) keep/retain (留) me/ye (爷), naturally (自) have (有) keep/retain (留) me/ye (爷) place (处). The pronoun 'ye' (爷) is an assertive, slightly arrogant self-reference, like saying 'yours truly' or 'the great me.' The phrase declares that if one place rejects me, another will value ...

## 精诚所至，金石为开

Jīng chéng suǒ zhì, jīn shí wéi kāi

"Where utmost sincerity arrives, metal and stone open."

Essence (精) sincerity (诚) that which (所) arrives/reaches (至), metal (金) stone (石) become/act as (为) open (开). The proverb declares that concentrated sincerity can crack open even the hardest substances—metal and stone, traditionally the most unyielding materials.

## 百闻不如一见

Bǎi wén bù rú yī jiàn

"Direct experience outweighs secondhand knowledge"

Hundred (百) hearings (闻) not as good as (不如) one (一) seeing (见). No matter how many times you hear about something, a single direct observation reveals more truth.

## 近水楼台先得月

Jìn shuǐ lóu tái xiān dé yuè

"A pavilion near the water gets the moonlight first"

Near (近) water (水) pavilion/terrace (楼台) first (先) obtains (得) moon (月). The image is of a waterside structure receiving the moon's reflection before buildings further inland.

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## 得饶人处且饶人

Dé ráo rén chù qiě ráo rén

"Where you can spare others, do spare them"

Obtain/get (得) spare/forgive (饶) person (人) place/situation (处) should/let us (且) spare/forgive (饶) person (人). In any circumstance where showing mercy is possible, one should extend that mercy—a call to leniency grounded not in weakness but in wisdom.

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## 八仙过海，各显神通

Bā xiān guò hǎi, gè xiǎn shén tōng

"When the Eight Immortals crossed the sea, each displayed their unique magical abilities"

Eight (八) immortals (仙) cross (过) sea (海), each (各) shows (显) divine (神) powers (通). The immortals did not rely on a single boat but each used their distinct supernatural gifts to traverse the waters.

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## 一人得道，鸡犬升天

Yī rén dé dào, jī quǎn shēng tiān

"When one person attains the Way, chickens and dogs rise to heaven"

When someone achieves great success or spiritual enlightenment, even their family members, friends, and associates benefit by association

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## 尺有所短，寸有所长

Chǐ yǒu suǒ duǎn, cùn yǒu suǒ cháng

"Everyone has strengths and weaknesses"

A Chinese foot (chi) sometimes falls short; a Chinese inch (cun) sometimes runs long. Even standardized units of measurement have contexts where they prove inadequate or surprisingly sufficient.

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## 三句话不离本行

Sān jù huà bù lí běn háng

"People cannot help talking about their profession"

Within three sentences, one does not depart from one's own line of work. Try as one might to discuss other matters, professional habits of thought and speech inevitably surface.

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## 大智若愚

Dà zhì ruò yú

"Great wisdom appears like foolishness"

Great (大) wisdom (智) seems like (若) foolishness/stupidity (愚). The four characters encapsulate a paradox that runs through both Eastern and Western philosophy.

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## 不鸣则已，一鸣惊人

Bù míng zé yǐ, yī míng jīng rén

"Silent until the moment of spectacular revelation"

If it does not sing, that is all; but once it sings, it amazes everyone. The bird that makes no sound is simply a quiet bird—but when it finally calls, the world stops to listen.

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## 宁为玉碎，不为瓦全

Nìng wéi yù suì, bù wéi wǎ quán

"Better to die with honor than to live in disgrace"

Rather be jade broken than tile whole. Jade, though shattered, retains its essential nature as precious stone; a tile, though intact, remains merely baked clay. The proverb values integrity over survival, quality over quantity of existence.

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## 赔了夫人又折兵

Péi le fū rén yòu zhé bīng

"Double defeat—losing everything in a failed scheme"

Lost the lady and also broke the army. A reference to a scheme that backfired spectacularly, costing both the bait and the forces meant to secure the prize.

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## 羊毛出在羊身上

Yáng máo chū zài yáng shēn shàng

"The wool comes from the sheep's own body"

Sheep (羊) wool/hair (毛) comes out (出) at (在) sheep (羊) body (身) on (上). The phrase observes that the wool you shear must grow from the sheep itself—you cannot obtain wool without a sheep, and the sheep can only produce what its body naturally generates.

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## 三个臭皮匠，顶个诸葛亮

Sān gè chòu pí jiàng, dǐng gè Zhūgě Liàng

"Three cobblers with their wits combined equal one Zhuge Liang"

Three (三个) smelly/stinky (臭) leather craftsmen (皮匠) can equal (顶个) Zhuge Liang—the legendary strategist. The term 臭皮匠 literally means 'smelly tanner,' a humble profession.

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## 过了这个村，没了这个店

Guò le zhè ge cūn, méi le zhè ge diàn

"Opportunities are fleeting; seize them when they appear"

After passing this village, this shop will be gone. In the vast Chinese countryside, villages were far apart and shops rarer still. The traveler who did not stop might find no other chance for miles.

## 见怪不怪，其怪自败

Jiàn guài bù guài, qí guài zì bài

"When you see something strange, do not be surprised; the strange thing will defeat itself"

See (见) strange/odd (怪) not (不) surprised (怪, here meaning 'to find strange'); its (其) strangeness (怪) naturally (自) will fail/defeat (败). The repetition of 怪 is a rhetorical device—the first instance functions as a noun, the second as a verb, the third returns to noun form.

## 船到桥头自然直

Chuán dào qiáo tóu zì rán zhí

"When the boat reaches the bridge, it will naturally straighten"

Boat (船) arrives (到) bridge (桥) head/end (头), naturally (自然) straight/straighten (直). The phrase observes that a boat approaching a bridge at an awkward angle will naturally align itself as it passes through—the current, the bridge's guidance, and the boat's momentum combine to straighten the passag...

## 塞翁失马，焉知非福

Sài wēng shī mǎ, yān zhī fēi fú

"When the old man from the frontier lost his horse, how could he know it was not a blessing?"

Frontier (塞) old man (翁) lost (失) horse (马), how (焉) know (知) not (非) blessing (福)? The story asks: when bad things happen, how do we know they won't lead to good outcomes?

## 不经一事，不长一智

Bù jīng yī shì, bù zhǎng yī zhì

"Without experiencing a matter, one does not gain wisdom from it"

Not (不) experience (经) one (一) matter/event (事), not (不) grow (长) one (一) wisdom (智). The structure is beautifully balanced: each experience yields its corresponding measure of understanding.

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## 英雄无用武之地

Yīng xióng wú yòng wǔ zhī dì

"A hero has no place to display his martial prowess"

Someone with great ability lacks the opportunity or platform to demonstrate or apply their talents

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## 万事俱备，只欠东风

Wàn shì jù bèi, zhǐ qiàn dōng fēng

"Everything is prepared, only the final crucial element is missing"

Ten thousand things are all prepared, only owing the east wind. The image is of complete preparation save for one essential natural force—the wind that will carry fire ships toward the enemy fleet.

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## 百尺竿头，更进一步

Bǎi chǐ gān tóu, gèng jìn yī bù

"Even from the top of a hundred-foot pole, take one step further"

Hundred (百) foot (尺) pole (竿) top (头), more (更) advance (进) one (一) step (步). Having climbed to the very pinnacle of achievement, one should still strive to advance further.

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## 吃一堑，长一智

*chī yī qiàn, zhǎng yī zhì*

"Fall into a moat, grow in wisdom"

Eat a setback, grow an increment of wisdom

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## 命里有时终须有，命里无时莫强求

*Mìng lǐ yǒu shí zhōng xū yǒu, mìng lǐ wú shí mò qiáng qiú*

"What is destined to be yours will eventually be yours; what is not destined cannot be obtained through force"

Fate/destiny (命) inside (里) have (有) time (时) eventually (终) must (须) have (有), fate inside not have (无) time do not (莫) forcefully seek (强求). If something is in your fate, it will eventually arrive; if it is not, no amount of striving will bring it.

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## 只许州官放火，不许百姓点灯

*Zhǐ xǔ zhōu guān fàng huǒ, bù xǔ bǎi xìng diǎn dēng*

"Only officials are allowed to set fires; common people are not permitted to light lamps"

A satirical indictment of double standards where those in power may commit grave offenses while ordinary people are forbidden even minor conveniences

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## 不为五斗米折腰

*Bù wèi wǔ dòu mǐ zhé yāo*

"Refusing to compromise one's integrity for material gain"

Not (不) for (为) five (五) pecks (斗) of rice (米) bend (折) waist (腰). One should not lower oneself—literally bend at the waist in supplication—for mere salary or material compensation.

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## 顺其自然

Shùn qí zì rán

"Follow nature's course; let nature take its course"

Follow/accord with (顺) its (其) self (自) nature/natural state (然). The phrase advocates alignment with the inherent direction of things, a surrender to processes larger than individual will. It is not passive resignation but active attunement—the wisdom of working with rather than against the grain o...

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## 五十步笑百步

Wǔ shí bù xiào bǎi bù

"The pot calling the kettle black"

A soldier who fled fifty steps laughing at one who fled a hundred. Both are deserters; the difference in degree does not constitute a difference in kind. The shorter retreat is merely more cowardly in its cowardice—claiming virtue by comparison to greater vice.

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## 人心不足蛇吞象

Rén xīn bù zú shé tūn xiàng

"Human greed knows no bounds, like a snake trying to swallow an elephant"

Person heart not sufficient snake swallow elephant. The proverb paints an image of impossible consumption—a snake, no matter how ambitious, cannot physically contain an elephant. Yet human desire attempts similarly absurd feats of acquisition.

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## 踏破铁鞋无觅处，得来全不费工夫

Tà pò tiě xié wú mì chù, dé lái quán bù fèi gōng fu

"Wearing out iron shoes searching without finding, then it comes without any effort at all"

Tread/wear out (踏破) iron (铁) shoes (鞋) no (无) seeking (觅) place (处), obtain (得) come (来) entirely (全) not (不) expend (费) effort/work (工夫). The proverb presents a dramatic contrast: exhaustive searching versus effortless discovery.

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## 照葫芦画瓢

Zhào hú lu huà piáo

"Copying the gourd to draw the dipper."

According to (照) gourd (葫芦) draw (画) dipper/ladle (瓢). When painting a dipper (which was traditionally made from a dried gourd), one simply copies the shape of a gourd—producing an accurate but entirely uncreative copy. The proverb describes mechanical imitation without understanding or innovation.

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## 路遥知马力，日久见人心

Lù yáo zhī mǎ lì, rì jiǔ jiàn rén xīn

"A long journey tests a horse's strength; time reveals a person's true character"

Road distance knows horse power; days long see person heart. Just as only a lengthy journey can prove whether a horse has true stamina, only extended acquaintance can reveal someone's genuine nature.

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## 小不忍则乱大谋

Xiǎo bù rěn zé luàn dà móu

"If you cannot endure small things, you will disrupt great plans"

Small [matters] not endured, then [will] disorder great plans. The calculus is strategic: momentary impulses must be subordinated to long-term objectives. What feels unbearable in the present often proves trivial in retrospect, but the reaction it provokes can destroy what years of effort have built...

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## 覆巢之下无完卵

Fù cháo zhī xià wú wán luǎn

"When a nest is overturned, no eggs remain whole"

Overtured (覆) nest (巢) beneath (之) under (下) no (无) whole/intact (完) eggs (卵). The phrase paints a stark image: when disaster strikes a family or collective at its foundation, individual members cannot escape unscathed.

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## 杀鸡焉用牛刀

Shā jī yān yòng niú dāo

"Why use an ox-cleaver to kill a chicken?"

Kill (杀) chicken (鸡) why use (焉用) ox (牛) knife (刀)? The phrase questions the deployment of excessive force or talent for a trivial task. A cleaver meant for butchering oxen is unnecessarily large and powerful for dispatching a mere chicken.

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## 大意失荆州

Dà yì shī Jīngzhōu

"Carelessness caused the loss of Jingzhou"

Great (大) negligence/carelessness (意) lost (失) Jingzhou (荆州). The phrase refers to a famous historical incident where a moment of inattention led to catastrophic loss.

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## 人生如梦

Rén shēng rú mèng

"Life is like a dream"

Person/human (人) life/birth (生) like/as (如) dream (梦). The phrase observes the dreamlike quality of human existence—its transience, its unreliability, the way its certainties dissolve upon examination. What seems most solid proves most ephemeral; what feels most real reveals itself as appearance.

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## 一问三不知

Yī wèn sān bù zhī

"Asked one question, ignorant of three things"

When asked about something, you don't know the beginning, middle, or end

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## 天无绝人之路

Tiān wú jué rén zhī lù

"Heaven never blocks all paths for a person; there is always a way out"

Heaven/sky (天) not (无) cut off/terminate (绝) person's (人) road/path (之路). The cosmos does not completely cut off any person's road—no matter how desperate the situation, some path forward remains. There is always an exit; there is always hope.

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## 狗咬吕洞宾，不识好人心

Gǒu yǎo Lǚ Dòngbīn, bù shí hǎo rén xīn

"The dog bites Lu Dongbin, not recognizing a good person's heart"

Dog (狗) bites (咬) Lu Dongbin (吕洞宾), not (不) recognizing/known (识) good/kind (好) person (人) heart (心). The phrase describes someone who mistakes kindness for malice and repays help with hostility.

---

## 物以类聚，人以群分

Wù yǐ lèi jù, rén yǐ qún fēn

"Things gather by category; people divide by groups"

Objects cluster according to their kind; humans separate into groups according to their nature. The observation is neutral—neither condemning nor celebrating—but it carries an implicit warning: you will become like those you associate with, so choose your companions carefully.

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## 授人以鱼，不如授人以渔

Shòu rén yǐ yú, bù rú shòu rén yǐ yú

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime"

Give (授) person (人) fish (鱼), not as good as (不如) give (授) person (人) fishing (渔). The character 渔 (fishing) differs from 鱼 (fish) only by the water radical, transforming the gift of food into the gift of skill.

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## 兼听则明，偏信则暗

Jiān tīng zé míng, piān xìn zé àn

"Listen to both sides and you will be enlightened; trust only one side and you will be in the dark"

Simultaneously (兼) listening (听) then (则) clear/bright (明); partially/biasedly (偏) believing (信) then (则) dark/obscure (暗). The proverb contrasts the illumination of comprehensive hearing with the shadow of one-sided credulity.

---

## 有志者事竟成

Yǒu zhì zhě shì jìng chéng

"For those with determination, success will eventually follow."

Have (有) will/ambition (志) person (者) matter/affair (事) finally/eventually (竟) accomplish (成). The proverb declares that a person possessed of willpower will ultimately achieve their goals.

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## 一叶障目，不见泰山

Yī yè zhàng mù, bù jiàn Tài Shān

"A single leaf blocks the eyes, and one cannot see Mount Tai"

A small obstacle can obscure something vast and important

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## 宰相肚里能撑船

Zǎi xiàng dù lǐ néng chēng chuán

"A prime minister's belly is capacious enough to sail a boat."

Prime minister (宰相) belly/stomach (肚) inside (里) can (能) pole/punt (撑) boat (船). The belly of a great statesman is so vast that boats can be navigated within it—a metaphor for extraordinary magnanimity and tolerance.

---

## 有眼不识泰山

Yǒu yǎn bù shí Tài Shān

"To have eyes yet fail to recognize Mount Tai."

Have (有) eyes (眼) not (不) know/recognize (识) Mount Tai (泰山). The phrase describes someone who, despite having the physical ability to see, fails to recognize greatness, importance, or a person of significance right before them.

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## 人非圣贤，孰能无过

Rén fēi shèng xián, shú néng wú guò

"People are not sages; who can be without faults?"

Person not sage worthy, who can without fault. The proverb acknowledges a fundamental asymmetry in human experience: we are judged by standards we cannot possibly meet. Sages and worthies—the perfected beings of Confucian imagination—exist as ideals, not as expectations for ordinary mortals.

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## 千里送鹅毛，礼轻情意重

Qiān lǐ sòng é máo, lǐ qīng qíng yì zhòng

"It's the thought that counts—the sentiment matters more than the gift"

Sending a goose feather from a thousand li away; the gift is light, but the affection is heavy. A humble present, carried across vast distance, carries weight beyond its physical measure.

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## 桃李满天下

Táo lǐ mǎn tiān xià

"Peaches and plums fill the world"

Peaches (桃) and plums (李) fill (满) heaven/earth (天下). The phrase describes a teacher whose students have spread throughout society, carrying their influence into every corner of the world. The peaches and plums are the students—numerous, fruitful, and widely distributed.

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## 活到老，学到老

Huó dào lǎo, xué dào lǎo

"Live until old age, learn until old age"

Live (活) to/until (到) old (老), learn (学) to/until (到) old (老). The parallel structure creates a powerful equation: living and learning are inseparable processes that should continue throughout one's entire lifespan.

## 不管白猫黑猫，抓住老鼠就是好猫

Bù guǎn bái māo hēi māo, zhuā zhù lǎo shǔ jiù shì hǎo māo

"Regardless of whether it's a white cat or black cat, if it catches mice, it's a good cat"

No matter (不管) white (白) cat (猫) black (黑) cat (猫), catch (抓) seize (住) mouse/rat (老鼠) then is (就是) good (好) cat (猫). The phrase prioritizes practical results over ideological purity or external appearance.

## 远水不救近火

Yuǎn shuǐ bù jiù jìn huǒ

"Distant water cannot quench a nearby fire."

Far (远) water (水) not (不) save/rescue (救) near (近) fire (火). Water that is far away, no matter how abundant, cannot help when flames are consuming what is close at hand.

## 林子大了，什么鸟都有

Lín zi dà le, shén me niǎo dōu yǒu

"When the forest is big, there are all kinds of birds"

Forest (林) [diminutive suffix] (子) big (大) [completion marker] (了), what/whatever (什么) bird (鸟) all/even (都) have (有). The phrase observes that in a large enough population, every type of character will appear—good, bad, strange, dangerous. Scale guarantees diversity, including diversity of the unde...

## 聪明反被聪明误

Cōng míng fǎn bèi cōng míng wù

"Cleverness is instead by cleverness misled"

Clever/intelligent (聪明) conversely (反) by (被) clever/intelligent (聪明) harmed/mistaken (误). One's own cleverness becomes the instrument of one's downfall—a recursive trap where intelligence outsmarts itself.

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## 画虎不成反类犬

Huà hǔ bù chéng fǎn lèi quǎn

"Attempting to draw a tiger but ending up with something resembling a dog"

Draw (画) tiger (虎) not (不) succeed/complete (成) instead/conversely (反) resemble (类) dog (犬). The phrase describes the gap between ambition and execution—reaching for excellence but falling into mediocrity, or worse, caricature.

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## 机不可失，时不再来

jī bù kě shī, shí bù zài lái

"Opportunities cannot be lost; time does not come again"

Opportunity cannot be lost [if you seize it], time does not come again

---

## 水至清则无鱼

Shuǐ zhì qīng zé wú yú

"If the water is too clear, there will be no fish"

Water (水) extremely (至) clear (清) then (则) no (无) fish (鱼). The phrase observes that perfectly clear water—pristine, transparent, without any particles or nutrients—cannot support aquatic life. Fish need some degree of murkiness, some organic matter, some tolerance for impurity.

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## 好了伤疤忘了疼

Hǎo le shāng bā wàng le téng

"People quickly forget past suffering once circumstances improve"

When the scar has healed, one forgets the pain. The physical evidence of injury may remain, but the visceral memory of suffering fades with relief.

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## 一叶障目，不见泰山

Yī yè zhàng mù, bù jiàn Tài Shān

"A single leaf blocks the eyes, and one cannot see Mount Tai"

A small obstacle can obscure something vast and important

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## 行百里者半九十

Xíng bǎi lǐ zhě bàn jiǔ shí

"For those traveling a hundred miles, ninety is only half"

Of those who walk a hundred li, ninety [li] counts as half. The paradox is mathematical and psychological: having completed ninety percent of the journey, you have only reached the halfway point of effort. The final stretch demands more than all that came before.

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## 当局者迷，旁观者清

Dāng jú zhě mí, páng guān zhě qīng

"Those in the game are confused; those watching from the sidelines see clearly"

The one(s) in the midst (当) of the situation/game (局) are confused (迷); the one(s) watching (观) from the side (旁) are clear (清). The proverb observes that proximity to a situation can obscure vision, while distance can bring clarity. Emotional investment, personal stakes, and ingrained habits of tho...

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## 三十年河东，三十年河西

Sān shí nián hé dōng, sān shí nián hé xī

"Thirty years on the east bank, thirty years on the west—the winds of fortune shift with time"

Thirty years river east, thirty years river west. The proverb draws from the physical behavior of the Yellow River, which throughout Chinese history has shifted its course dramatically, leaving settlements that once thrived on one bank stranded on the other as the waters moved.

## 三过家门而不入

Sān guò jiā mén ér bù rù

"Passing by one's own door three times without entering"

Three pass home door and not enter. The proverb commemorates the legendary Yu the Great, who passed his own home three times during his years of flood control work, hearing his wife in labor, hearing his child cry, yet never stopping because the people's suffering demanded his attention.

## 命里有时终须有，命里无时莫强求

Mìng lǐ yǒu shí zhōng xū yǒu, mìng lǐ wú shí mò qiáng qiú

"What is destined to be yours will eventually be yours; what is not destined cannot be forced"

Fate (命) inside (里) have (有) time (时) eventually (终) must (须) have (有), fate (命) inside (里) no (无) time (时) do not (莫) forcefully (强) seek (求). The phrase speaks to acceptance of destiny's timing and distribution.

## 上梁不正下梁歪

Shàng liáng bù zhèng xià liáng wāi

"When the upper beam is not straight, the lower beam will be crooked"

Top (上) beam (梁) not straight (不正), bottom (下) beam (梁) crooked/askew (歪). In traditional Chinese architecture, the upper beam guides the placement of all lower structural elements. If it is misaligned, the entire building suffers.

## 不可同日而语

Bù kě tóng rì ér yǔ

"Things so different they cannot be compared"

Cannot be spoken of on the same day. Two subjects of such disparity that to mention them together would be an absurdity—a violation of logical propriety.

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## 站着说话不腰疼

Zhàn zhe shuō huà bù yāo téng

"Standing and talking doesn't make your waist hurt"

Stand (站) continuous aspect marker (着) speak (说) speech (话) not (不) waist (腰) pain (疼). The phrase captures the physical reality that speaking while standing is effortless, unlike the backbreaking labor of those who must bend, lift, and carry. The speaker, comfortably upright, feels no strain—and th...

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## 不敢越雷池一步

Bù gǎn yuè léi chí yī bù

"Afraid to overstep established boundaries"

Dare not cross the thunder pool by even one step. The thunder pool (雷池) was an ancient body of water; to cross it meant entering forbidden territory. The proverb now describes extreme caution about transgressing limits.

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## 人不可貌相

Rén bù kě mào xiàng

"Do not judge people by their outward appearance"

Person cannot be appearance-judged. A warning against evaluating character, ability, or worth based solely on visible surface characteristics.

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## 身在曹营心在汉

Shēn zài Cáo yíng xīn zài Hàn

"Physically present in Cao's camp, but one's heart remains with Han"

Body (身) is at/in (在) Cao's (曹) camp/camp (营), heart (心) is at/in (在) Han (汉). The phrase describes someone who is physically present in one place while their loyalty and true allegiance lie elsewhere.

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## 少壮不努力，老大徒伤悲

shào zhuàng bù nǚ lì, lǎo dà tú shāng bēi

"If you do not exert yourself in youth, you will regret it in old age"

Young and strong not exert effort, old and great in vain sorrow

---

## 过五关，斩六将

Guò wǔ guān, zhǎn liù jiàng

"Crossing five mountain passes and slaying six enemy generals"

Cross (过) five (五) passes/checkpoints (关), slay/cut down (斩) six (六) generals/commanders (将). The phrase describes a series of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, each requiring not merely passage but triumph through direct confrontation.

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## 难得糊涂

Nán dé hú tú

"It is rare to be confused; hard to attain muddle-headedness"

Hard/rare (难) to obtain (得) confused/muddled (糊涂). The phrase celebrates a paradoxical wisdom: that sometimes the greatest insight is knowing when not to know, when to embrace confusion rather than false clarity. True intelligence includes the ability to strategically suspend its own operation.

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智者千慮，必有一失；愚者千慮，必有一得

Zhì zhě qiān lǜ, bì yǒu yī shī; yú zhě qiān lǜ, bì yǒu yī dé

"The wise person, after a thousand considerations, will surely make one mistake; the fool, after a thousand considerations, will surely get one thing right"

Wise (智) person (者) thousand (千) thoughts (慮), must (必) have (有) one (一) loss/mistake (失); foolish (愚) person (者) thousand (千) thoughts (慮), must (必) have (有) one (一) gain/success (得). Even the most brilliant mind occasionally errs; even the dullest occasionally stumbles upon truth.

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一朝被蛇咬，十年怕井繩

Yī zhāo bèi shé yǎo, shí nián pà jǐng shéng

"A single traumatic experience creates lasting fear"

One morning bitten by a snake, for ten years fear the well rope. The rope, coiled near the well, bears a passing resemblance to a snake. The traumatized mind cannot distinguish between genuine threat and innocent similarity.

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## Nature & Seasons

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### 瑞雪兆丰年

Ruì xuě zhào fēng nián

"Auspicious snow foretells an abundant year"

Snow that arrives at the right time is an omen of agricultural plenty

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### 朝霞不出门，晚霞行千里

Zhāo xiá bù chū mén, wǎn xiá xíng qiān lǐ

"With morning glow, don't go out; with evening glow, travel a thousand miles"

Morning (朝) rosy clouds (霞) don't (不) go out (出门); evening (晚) rosy clouds (霞) travel (行) thousand (千) miles (里).

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### 蚂蚁搬家蛇过道，大雨不久就来到

Mǎ yǐ bān jiā shé guò dào, dà yǔ bù jiǔ jiù lái dào

"When ants move house and snakes cross the road, heavy rain will arrive soon"

Ants (蚂蚁) move house (搬家) snakes (蛇) cross path (过道), heavy rain (大雨) not long (不久) then will arrive (就来到).

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## Luck & Fortune

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大难不死，必有后福

Dà nàn bù sǐ, bì yǒu hòu fú

"Great calamity not dying, must have later blessing"

Great (大) disaster/calamity (难) not (不) die (死), must (必) have (有) later/future (后) fortune/blessing (福). The structure suggests a cosmic accounting: having survived something terrible, good fortune is owed.

---

一人得道，鸡犬升天

Yī rén dé dào, jī quǎn shēng tiān

"When one person achieves the Way, even their chickens and dogs ascend to heaven"

When one person attains enlightenment or power, even their humblest dependents benefit

---

福无双至，祸不单行

Fú wú shuāng zhì, huò bù dān xíng

"Good fortune never comes in pairs; bad luck never travels alone"

Fortune (福) no (无) double/pair (双) arrive (至), misfortune (祸) not (不) single (单) walk/go (行). Good things arrive singly, but calamities gather in clusters—the universe seems parsimonious with blessings yet profligate with curses.

---

## 瞎猫碰上死耗子

**Xiā māo pèng shàng sǐ hào zi**

"Pure dumb luck; a fortunate accident"

Blind cat (瞎猫) bumps into (碰上) dead mouse (死耗子). A sightless feline, unable to hunt, nevertheless encounters its prey through sheer coincidence—a metaphor for success achieved without skill, merit, or intention.

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## 傻人有傻福

**Shǎ rén yǒu shǎ fú**

"Simpletons have simpleton's luck; fools are blessed"

Foolish/simple (傻) person (人) has (有) foolish/simple (傻) fortune/blessing (福). Those who are simple-minded possess a corresponding kind of luck—the universe seems to watch over the innocent, protecting them precisely because they lack the calculating cleverness that might interfere with fortune's gi...

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## Funny & Witty Sayings

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### 偷鸡不成蚀把米

Tōu jī bù chéng shí bǎ mǐ

"Failed to steal the chicken and lost the rice used as bait"

Steal (偷) chicken (鸡) not (不) succeed (成), lose/consume (蚀) a handful (把) of rice (米). One sets out to gain something through dishonest or risky means, but ends up losing what one already had.

---

### 挂羊头，卖狗肉

Guà yáng tóu, mài gǒu ròu

"Hanging up a sheep's head while selling dog meat"

Hang (挂) sheep (羊) head (头), sell (卖) dog (狗) meat (肉). A merchant displays the appealing head of a sheep to attract customers, but secretly sells the inferior meat of dogs.

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### 此地无银三百两

Cǐ dì wú yín sān bǎi liǎng

"No silver here, three hundred taels"

This (此) place (地) no (无) silver (银) three hundred (三百) taels (两). A sign proclaiming the absence of buried treasure serves only to announce its presence—a self-defeating attempt at concealment that reveals precisely what it seeks to hide.

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## 风马牛不相及

Fēng mǎ niú bù xiāng jí

"Wind, horses, and cattle do not reach each other"

Wind (风) horse (马) ox/cattle (牛) not (不) mutually (相) reach/touch (及). These three elements share no point of contact—complete and utter irrelevance between things being compared or connected.

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## 猫哭老鼠假慈悲

Māo kū lǎo shǔ jiǎ cí bēi

"When the cat cries over the mouse, it is fake mercy"

Cat (猫) cries (哭) [over] mouse (老鼠), fake (假) mercy/compassion (慈悲). The phrase describes someone pretending to show sympathy while actually causing or enjoying the suffering.

---

## 赶鸭子上架

Gǎn yā zi shàng jià

"Forcing a duck to climb onto a roost"

Drive/chase (赶) duck (鸭子) onto (上) shelf/perch (架). A duck, being a waterfowl with webbed feet and a heavy body, is not designed for climbing. Forcing it onto a perch is both unnatural and doomed to awkward failure.

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## 牛头不对马嘴

Niú tóu bù duì mǎ zuǐ

"An ox head does not match a horse's mouth"

Ox (牛) head (头) not (不) match/align (对) horse (马) mouth (嘴). The parts of two different animals are being compared or combined, creating a fundamental mismatch. The phrase describes any situation where elements do not fit together.

---

## 大水冲了龙王庙

Dà shuǐ chōng le lóng wáng miào

"Great flood washes away the Dragon King's Temple"

Big (大) water/flood (水) washes away (冲了) Dragon (龙) King (王) temple (庙). The Dragon King, master of waters and protector against floods, has his own temple destroyed by the very element he commands.

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## Other Proverbs

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### 天有不测风云

Tiān yǒu bù cè fēng yún

"The heavens have unpredictable winds and clouds"

Heaven/sky (天) has (有) unpredictable (不测) wind (风) clouds (云). 不测 literally means 'cannot be measured'—something unforeseeable.

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### 阎王要你三更死，谁敢留人到五更

Yán wáng yào nǐ sān gēng sǐ, shéi gǎn liú rén dào wǔ gēng

"If the King of Hell wants you dead at the third watch, who dares keep you until the fifth watch"

King of Hell (阎王) wants (要) you (你) third watch (三更) die (死), who (谁) dares (敢) keep (留) person (人) until (到) fifth watch (五更).

---

### 贫贱夫妻百事哀

Pín jiàn fū qī bǎi shì āi

"A poor and lowly couple finds sorrow in everything."

Poor (贫) lowly/humble (贱) husband (夫) wife (妻) hundred (百) matters (事) sorrow/grief (哀). The proverb suggests that poverty brings difficulties to every aspect of married life—that financial hardship transforms small problems into sorrows.

---

## 贫贱不能移

Pín jiàn bù néng yí

"Poverty and lowliness cannot make one waver"

Poor/humble (贫贱) cannot (不能) move/change (移). The character 移 means to shift, move, or change—one's principles should not shift even in poverty.

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## 死有重于泰山，或轻于鸿毛

Sǐ yǒu zhòng yú Tài Shān, huò qīng yú hóng máo

"Death may be heavier than Mount Tai, or lighter than a goose feather"

Death (死) has (有) heavier than (重于) Mount Tai (泰山), or (或) lighter than (轻于) goose feather (鸿毛). Mount Tai is China's most sacred mountain, symbolizing immense weight and significance.

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## 试金之石可试金，金可试人

Shì jīn zhī shí kě shì jīn, jīn kě shì rén

"A touchstone can test gold, and gold can test a person"

Test (试) gold (金) 's stone (之石) can (可) test (试) gold (金), gold (金) can (可) test (试) person (人). A touchstone is a dark stone used to test the purity of precious metals.

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## 金钱不是万能的

Jīn qián bù shì wàn néng de

"Money is not omnipotent"

Money (金钱) is not (不是) ten thousand (万) abilities/capable (能的). 万能 literally means 'ten thousand abilities' or 'all-powerful.'

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## 虎死留皮，人死留名

Hǔ sǐ liú pí, rén sǐ liú míng

"When a tiger dies, it leaves its skin; when a person dies, they leave their name"

Just as a tiger's valuable pelt remains after death, a person's reputation and legacy persist after they are gone

---

## 有钱能使鬼推磨

Yǒu qián néng shǐ guǐ tuī mò

"With money, you can make the devil turn the millstone"

Money has the power to compel even supernatural beings to perform labor

---

## 人为财死，鸟为食亡

Rén wèi cái sǐ, niǎo wèi shí wáng

"Humans die for wealth, birds perish for food."

Person (人) for (为) wealth/treasure (财) die (死), bird (鸟) for (为) food (食) perish/die (亡). The proverb draws a parallel between human pursuit of wealth and avian pursuit of sustenance—both drives that can lead to destruction.

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## 钱不是万能的，没钱是万万不能的

Qián bù shì wàn néng de, méi qián shì wàn wàn bù néng de

"Money is not omnipotent, but having no money is absolutely impossible."

Money (钱) is not (不是) ten-thousand/omni (万) capable (能), no/not have (没) money (钱) is (是) ten-thousand ten-thousand (万万) not (不) capable/possible (能). The doubling of 'ten thousand' creates an emphatic negative—absolutely impossible, utterly unworkable.

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## 鸟之将死，其鸣也哀；人之将死，其言也善

Niǎo zhī jiāng sǐ, qí míng yě āi; rén zhī jiāng sǐ, qí yán yě shàn

"When a bird is about to die, its cry is mournful; when a person is about to die, their words are kind"

Approaching death strips away pretense—birds cry with authentic grief, humans speak with authentic goodness

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## 居安思危

Jū ān sī wēi

"In times of peace, think of danger"

Dwell (居) in peace/safety (安), think (思) of danger/crisis (危). The character 居 means to live or dwell, while 安 and 危 represent opposite states of safety and danger.

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## 落叶归根

Luò yè guī gēn

"Fallen leaves return to their roots"

Fall (落) leaves (叶) return (归) to roots (根). The imagery is of autumn leaves falling and decomposing into the soil, nourishing the tree's roots.

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## 人死如灯灭

Rén sǐ rú dēng miè

"When a person dies, it is like a lamp being extinguished"

Person (人) dies (死) like (如) lamp (灯) extinguishes (灭). The comparison is exact and stark—death ends consciousness as completely as snuffing ends flame.

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## 尘归尘，土归土

Chén guī chén, tǔ guī tǔ

"Dust returns to dust, earth returns to earth"

Dust (尘) returns (归) to dust (尘), earth (土) returns (归) to earth (土). The character 归 means to return or go back to one's origin.

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## 未雨绸缪

Wèi yǔ chóu móu

"Bind the nest before the rain"

Before (未) rain (雨) bind (绸) thatch/mulberry (缪). The phrase originally referred to binding nests with mulberry bark before rain comes.

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## 人生无常

Rén shēng wú cháng

"Life is impermanent"

Human life (人生) has no (无) permanence/constancy (常). The character 常 means constant, eternal, or unchanging.

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## 一文钱难倒英雄汉

Yī wén qián nán dǎo yīng xióng hàn

"One copper coin can bring down a hero"

Even a great hero can be defeated by a trivial amount of money

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人固有一死，或重于泰山，或轻于鸿毛

Rén gù yǒu yī sǐ, huò zhòng yú Tài Shān, huò qīng yú hóng máo

"Every person must die; some deaths are weightier than Mount Tai, others lighter than a goose feather"

Death is inevitable, but its significance varies enormously—from the heaviest mountain to the lightest feather

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## Collection Complete

Total: 148 Proverbs

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