

10 Chinese Proverbs for Everyday Life

Unexpectedly, my past few weeks of reading have revolved around specific topics: I've been reading a lot of war novels, for example, and I've been working through two books focusing on the country of China.

One of my China-related books was [Safely Home](#), a popular novel by Randy Alcorn exploring the purpose of life on earth. It was a helpful book in several ways, and the Chinese proverbs Alcorn cited piqued my interest in further exploring the tradition of Chinese wisdom.

With that in mind, looking to find more gems like the ones in *Safely Home*, I checked out [a book of 700 Chinese sayings](#) from the library. Of those 700 proverbs, these 10 caught my attention—both for their conciseness and their widespread applicability to everyday life.

1. A Lost Inch of Gold May Be Found; a Lost Inch of Time, Never.

Time is a unique commodity: Though immaterial, it can be lost; and though common, it is a precious treasure. While we can seek out objects like gold, silver, or other riches, time cannot be bought. We have only the time allotted to us, and we must use it wisely.

2. Learning Is a Treasure Which Follows Its Owner Everywhere.

It's hard to underestimate the value of learning. [Education](#) goes a long way, both in teaching a person facts (e.g., "In 1492, Columbus sailed...") and in building the cognitive structures necessary for prudent and effective interaction with the world. Like time, learning should not be carelessly cast away. Instead, we must pursue it for the treasure that it

is.

3. We Know Men's Faces, Not Their Minds.

Behind every external face is an internal network of complex thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Often, this complexity should cause us to sympathize with the experience of those around us: After all, who truly knows what others are going through? Always, too, humans' internal complexity should teach us to marvel. The world contains much more than first meets the eye.

4. At Birth We Bring Nothing; at Death We Take Away Nothing.

Hearses don't tote U-Hauls. We have brought nothing into the world, and we will take nothing out of it. Because of this, we would do well to act in life as we would like to have acted at death. Was all our time, energy, and resources invested in things of value, or were they frittered away toward transitory and frivolous pleasures?

5. By Following the Good You Learn to Be Good.

Expertise is born of practice, and virtue is no exception. Those who would become skilled in anything must faithfully practice that thing; and—as [Aristotle would affirm](#)—those who would become honorable must faithfully act as honorable.

6. If You Know Where to Stop and Stop There, You Will Never Be Disgraced.

Virtue does not only consist in doing what ought to be done; it also consists of knowing when to stop doing things. Is somebody no longer listening to you? Then stop pouring words into their ears. Is a task well completed? Then don't worry about achieving the impossible height of perfection.

7. Don't Burn False Incense Before a True God.

Our actions ought to match the reality of the world. In the

case of religion, we ought not to implicitly undermine God's perceived truth, goodness, and beauty with [sloppy music](#) and careless liturgies. The [forms of our worship are significant](#) in understanding who God is, for false incense demeans a true God.

8. If You Are Not Patient in Small Things, You Will Bring Great Plans to Naught.

As [another pithy saying](#) goes, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much." Our great life achievements may consist of the faithfulness of single days, and the greatest tasks may be the ones most seldom noticed. Patience in [life's small tasks](#) is important, as it can build the character and resolve needed for bigger burdens and responsibilities.

9. When a Word Has Once Left the Lips, the Swiftest Horse Cannot Overtake It.

Immediately after being spoken, words escape the realm of our control. Trying to take them back is futile—like stuffing squeezed-out toothpaste back into its tube. The swiftness of the spoken word should give us pause, prompting us to think carefully before speaking and understanding the implications of all that we say.

10. To Learn to Be Industrious Takes Three Years; to Learn to Be Lazy Takes Only Three Days.

As anyone around small children will know, vice doesn't need to be taught. It's easy to complain, grumble, and argue; it's harder to be thankful, cheerful, and wisely compliant. Because of this, we should pay focused attention to cultivating virtue, being willing to expend long effort in becoming the sort of people we ought to be.

The Wisdom of Proverbs

In general, proverbs—Chinese, biblical, or otherwise—are helpful tools in both learning and instructing. Proverbs connect us to the wisdom of ages long past, condensing relevant life truths into statements we can easily repeat and remember. And in the turbulence of modern life, we all could use more of these traditional truths.

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