



Undergraduate assignment feedback form
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<i>Student Name:</i> Ruxin Zhang (張如心)	
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A Study of the Influence of Motto on People

Word Count: 1,535

Respected provost, Miss Deng, and Mister Zhang, good morning. My name is Ruxin Zhang and I would like to share with you the topic on the influence of motto on people.

The presentation will be divided into three parts. The first part is ‘Motivation’, the second part is ‘Analysis’. And finally, I will share with you ‘Self-Reflection’.

Motivation

Let’s start with the first part.

Today I want to share with you the sentence from *The Great Learning* 大學, which is related to the motto of an *ancient sage* 古聖先賢. The original text is that ‘On the washbasin of Tang, the following words were engraved, If you can one day renovate yourself, do so from day to day. Yea, let there be daily renovation.’¹

The reason I chose this sentence is that when I was in primary school, the teacher always asked everyone to choose a famous saying as our own motto. I looked through a book of famous sayings, but I could not choose a single sentence. At that time, I just felt that those famous sayings were too far away from my real life, like clouds in the sky, I could not catch them. When I was in high school, due to the pressure of college entrance examination, students pay more and more attention to their grades and scores. And teachers often say that if you raise one point, your ranking in the province will be more than 1,000 people. Therefore, under the influence of this environment, it has

¹ Original text: ‘湯之盤銘曰：苟日新，日日新，又日新。’ Trans. by James Legge, and I changed bathing tub to washbasin. *The Chinese Classics* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2011), p.361.

become easier and easier to choose a motto, but it has also become more and more utilitarian. However, through learning the course of introduction to *The Great Learning*, I understand the consideration of ancients when choosing a motto, and what role motto plays. Therefore, I have done a little research about it.

Analysis

Now let's move on to the second part.

First of all, the character *tang* 湯 refers to a king of the Shang Dynasty, known as Cheng Tang. And the character *pan* 盤 means the washbasin, which was used by the ancients to wash their face. Then for the character *ming* 銘 refers to the words cast or engraved on metal vessels in ancient times, which is like the motto we are talking about today. The Cambridge Dictionary defines that motto is a short sentence or phrase that expresses a belief or purpose², and motto is always in the most conspicuous place where you can see it as soon as you look up. The purpose is to serve as a reminder and help us bring up pure mindfulness. The inscription that the Cheng Tang engraved on the washbasin is ‘*Gourixin ririxin yourixin* 苟日新，日日新，又日新’³.

Next, the character *gou* 苟 means indeed. It means that we have dirt on our face, and we use this washbasin to hold water to clean our faces and wash away the dirt. So, this is *Gourixin* 苟日新. We washed our faces today, and tomorrow will become today again. Therefore, you still have to wash your face. So, this is *Ririxin* 日日新. *Yourixin* 又日新 is to further aggravate this tone, we have to wash off the dirt on our faces every day, and then our new and clean faces appear.

² Cambridge University Press (2021) MOTTO|meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/motto>, accessed 29 May 2020

³ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *The Variorum of the Four Books* 四書章句集注(Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983), p.5.

Therefore, this sentence uses the example of washing our face to illustrate the process of developing our own *Mingde* 明德, which means the intelligent moral power of our nature. *Mingde* is at work by our nature, if this is the case, why do we need to develop it? This is because ordinary people often have the idea of selfishness in their minds, so *Mingde* is covered by these non-mindfulness thoughts and becomes *Hunde* 昏德. Therefore, it is necessary to develop *Mingde*, and this process is *Mingmingde* 明明德. Its way is to remove this selfishness and desire that cover our *Mingde*, we should clean them every day and let them decrease day by day. It is like furniture at home, if it is not cleaned frequently, the dust will fall on the surface, so you should clean it often. One of the purposes of this is to wash away the original dust, and gradually get rid of the old bad habits. Another purpose is to clean new dust at any time to prevent dust accumulation. In other words, we must purify the new pollution caused by receiving bad information from the outside world every day, and this kind of moral cultivation cannot be interrupted for a day. In fact, if we do this for a long time, it will become integrated with our lives, just like washing your face and brushing your teeth every day.

And the role of the motto here is just like the Polaris, pointing out the direction of our progress and efforts in the dark night. It is not just like a reminder when people see it, but more importantly, when people encounter things in their life, they can use these mottos to replace those distracting thoughts in their minds. For example, when people are annoyed by unsatisfactory things in life, once they think of ‘Look into yourself whenever you fail to achieve your purpose.’⁴ and their negative emotions can disappear immediately. Generally speaking, these mottos are usually very concise, which can often leave a deep impression on people. As psychologist Meg Selig said, ‘Complicated ideas get lost in space; simple mottos can help you remember what’s really important in an instant.’⁵

⁴ Original text: ‘行有不得，反求諸己。’ Trans. by D.C. LAU, *Mencius* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979), p.153.

⁵ Meg Selig, (2015), *9 Reasons You Need a Personal Motto*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/changepower/201508/9-reasons-you-need-personal-motto>,

In *The Great Learning*, it is said that ‘ From the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides.’⁶ As one of the ancient wise Chinese emperors, the Cheng Tang did not dare to relax in self-cultivation. He also engraved inscriptions on the washbasin to remind himself. It can be seen that the ancients were good at using various ways to remind themselves, and when they chose their motto, they also took self-cultivation as the starting point, rather than to help them satisfy their desires and gain fame and fortune.

Moreover, the ancients’ vigilance for self-cultivation was not only reflected in text reminders, but also in some artistic expressions. For instance, in ancient *courtyard houses* 四合院, the entrance is usually carved with plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, and chrysanthemum. To remind and warn oneself to keep the good character. Another interesting example is that when you enter the temple, you will first see *the hall of heavenly kings* 天王殿, and in the middle of the hall is a statue of *Maitreya Bodhisattva* 彌勒菩薩. This is to remind us that no matter what we encounter, we should be tolerant of others and face it with an optimistic attitude and a bright smile. It is not only Chinese architecture, but also the design of western churches also has the intention of artistic teaching. The vivid sculpture on the lintel of the church, and the biblical stories displayed on the stained glass all educate people to end wrongdoings and practice virtuous conduct. On the contrary, the functions of modern products are more practical, and basically no longer have the function of reminding themselves and educating others. Even if some products still have some words printed on the surface, most of their contents are some good wishes, or even just some simple network catchwords, which cannot help people improve themselves.

Self-Reflection

30 May 2021.

⁶ Original text: ‘自天子以至於庶人，壹是皆以修身為本。’ Trans. by James Legge, *The Chinese Classics* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2011), p.359.

Let's now move on to the last part.

As an article said, 'Our mottos reflect our insides.'⁷ I remember when I was in high school, I often pasted some mottos on my desk, but those mottos cannot help me to improve myself, but to motivate me to improve my grades and rankings, and even to invisibly increase my sense of competition. Of course, it naturally cannot play its due role in the end. Through my own experience, I understand what is mentioned in *The Analects of Confucius* 論語, 'In ancient times, men learned with a view to their own improvement. Nowadays, men learn with a view to the approbation of others.'⁸ The *ancient sages* were considered for all sentient beings, so they were always thinking about how to improve themselves and reminding themselves through various methods. This is because they know the truth that 'We need to find our mistakes every day and correct them immediately. If we have no mistakes to correct on this day, it is that we have no progress on this day.'⁹ Therefore, they try to wash away their inner dirt every day, hoping to discover their own mistakes and correct them, for fear that there will be no difficulties and challenges to improve themselves.

In conclusion, a good motto does not depend on how gorgeous or philosophical the language is, or how positive the content is. It should be able to help people to look inside, wash away their inner dirt, and restore their true nature. The most important thing is that people can remind themselves even when they encounter ordinary things in daily life, making it internalized in the mind and externalized in action.

This is my presentation, if there is any mistake in the content, any suggestions and advice would be appreciated, thank you very much.

⁷ Ken Wert, *Mottos that Inspire Greatness: The Power of Personal Mottos, Part III*, <http://meanttobehappy.com/mottos-that-inspire-greatness-the-power-of-personal-mottos-part-iii/>, 30 May 2021.

⁸ Original text: '古之學者為己，今之學者為人。' Trans. by James Legge, *The Chinese Classics* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2011), p.285.

⁹ Original text: '一日無過可改，則一日無步可進。' Trans. By myself, *LiaoFan's Four Lessons* (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2001), p.26.

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