

**EXCERPT FROM LEDGER OF MERIT AND DEMERIT**  
**By Yuan Huang**

**Introduction**

The Confucian classics provide the sophisticated reader with a wealth of moral teachings and examples. Buddhism teaches that one generates positive or negative karma (energy) through one's good and bad deeds in this life, and that one's karma then influences one's rebirth. However, these abstract principles, Confucian or Buddhist, need to be translated into more concrete language and practices in order to guide and influence people in their daily lives. With the advent of printing in the Song dynasty (960-1276), writers had an opportunity to rectify this by composing books of moral instruction meant for a mass audience. How is one to achieve merit in this life? In the document excerpted below, Yuan Huang (1533-1606), a successful Ming scholar and official, lays forth a system which all can follow.

**Selected Document Excerpt with Questions**

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 907-908. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

*Excerpt from Ledger of Merit and Demerit*  
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Conduct for which one gains one hundred points of merit:

- Saving a person's life
- Ensuring the fidelity of a woman
- Preventing someone from drowning a child or aborting a baby

Conduct for which one gains fifty points of merit:

- Maintaining the family lineage
- Adopting an orphan
- Burying a corpse no one cares for
- Preventing a person from abandoning a village [because of famine]

Conduct for which one gains thirty points of merit:

- Remonstrating with an evildoer to change his way
- Rectifying an injustice

Conduct for which one gains ten points of merit:

- Recommending a virtuous person for office
- Eliminating something harmful to the people

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on**

***EXCERPT FROM LEDGER OF MERIT AND DEMERIT, BY YUAN HUANG***

Conduct for which one gains five points of merit:

- Remonstrating with a litigant to withdraw a lawsuit
- Saving the life of a domestic animal

Conduct for which one gains one point of merit:

- Praising someone's good deed
- Not joining in someone's bad deed
- Remonstrating with someone from doing evil
- Curing someone's illness
- Providing a meal to a hungry person
- Burying a dead domestic animal
- Saving the life of an insect or watery creature

For every one hundred coins one spends on the following, one gains 1 point of merit:

Constructing a road or bridge; digging a waterway or well to benefit people; repairing or installing a sacred image, temple, shrine, or other sacred place for worship; giving assistance to the poor; donating tea, medicine, clothes, coffins, and so on

Conduct that contributes to demerits is listed in terms generally opposite [to the meritorious deeds above].

**Questions:**

1. Does the author value the practice of resolving disputes through adversarial conflict?
2. What assumptions does the author make about the gender and class of his readers?
3. What philosophies and/or religions do you see evidence of in the author's ledger?
4. What do you think are the author's main values in life?