



Ancient Renaissance

Ancient Traditions for Today's World

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By Carolina Avendano



Photo by Carolina Avendano Duque/SAIT

The relationship between men and women in traditional Chinese culture is based on the harmony between Yin and Yang. Yang represents masculinity and strength, which is tempered and balanced by the feminine nature of Yin.

YIN AND YANG — MEN AND WOMEN COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER

It is common to hear the Chinese phrase *Nán zūn nǚ bēi* (男尊女卑), which in modern times has been interpreted as “Male superior, female inferior.” However, this idiom dates back thousands of years to ancient China, a time when traditional Chinese characters harbored different and deeper meanings.

When the traditional Chinese language was replaced by Simplified Chinese a few decades ago during the Cultural Revolution, the interpretation and meaning of many words was changed. This caused modern Chinese to misinterpret traditional culture and develop misconceptions about their ancestors, such as the idea that the ancients were sexist and suppressive.

What was the original meaning of this idiom and how did the ancients view the relationship between men and women?

Harmony between genders in ancient China

The relationship between men and women in traditional Chinese culture is based on the harmony between Yin and Yang. Yang represents masculinity and strength, which is tempered and balanced by the feminine nature of Yin. If in a marriage both try to be Yang or Yin, harmony is lost.

Women guided their actions based on the Three obediences and Four Virtues set forth by Confucianism. They were to obey

their fathers before getting married, their husbands after getting married, and their sons after their husband’s death.

As for their daily conduct, they placed emphasis in the cultivation of the four virtues: Feminine conduct (*Fùdé* 婦德), Feminine Speech (*Fùyán* 婦言), Feminine bearing (*Fùróng* 婦容) and Feminine Works (*Fùgōng* 婦功).

In her treatise *Lessons for Women*, the Chinese historian and philosopher Ban Zhao, elaborated on these womanly virtues:

“Exhibit tranquility (*Yōu* 幽 / *Qīng* 清), unhurried composure (*Xián* 閒/閑), chastity (*Zhēn* 貞), and quietude (*Jìng* 靜)... This is what is meant by a woman’s virtue.”



Photo by Carolina Avendano Duque/SAIT

A marriage is harmonious when the husband embodies his yang nature and the wife embraces her yin characteristics.

“Choose words [carefully] (*Zé cí* 擇辭) when speaking. Never utter slanderous words. Speak only when the time is right... This is what is meant by a woman’s speech.”

“Wash (*Guàn huàn* 盥浣) clothes that are dusty and soiled, and keep one’s clothing and accessories always fresh and clean. Bathe regularly, and keep one’s body free from filth and disgrace. This is what is meant by a woman’s bearing.”

“Concentrate on one’s weaving and spinning. Love no silly play nor laughter. Prepare wine and food neatly and orderly to offer to the guests. This is what is meant by a woman’s work.”

On the other hand, men were required to embody the virtues of a true gentleman (*Jūn zǐ* 君子), guided by the teachings imparted by Confucius. The sayings and ideas of this outstanding Chinese philosopher were compiled by his followers in what was later titled *The Analects* of Confucius. Quotes from this classic book serve to illustrate the virtues that almost every man in ancient China aspired to embody:

“He whose deeds speak louder than his words is a *Jūn zǐ*.”

“A *Jūn zǐ* has no fears or concerns for his conduct is upright”

“*Jūn zǐ* does not pursue self-interest. Growing spiritually is his greatest aspiration.”

“A *Jūn zǐ* gives his best in his daily endeavors and guards his speech.”

“He who seeks no recognition and looks for fault within himself is a *Jūn zǐ*.”

With men being noble, respectful and upright; and women being modest, respectful and persevering, harmony will naturally prevail within families and, consequently, in society.

8 TIMELESS LESSONS FROM THE GREEK STOIC EPICTETUS

Born a slave in about A.D. 55 in Heirapolis, Phrygia (present day Pamukkale, Turkey) Epictetus was a Greek philosopher who favored simple language and practical lessons over clever theorizing. Following in the footsteps of the great sages, he placed self-improvement and character refinement as the purpose of human life, exhorting his disciples to progress spiritually through the concrete circumstances of everyday life.

For Epictetus, happiness and personal fulfillment were the natural consequences of acting morally. Thus, a happy life was synonymous with a virtuous life. This article highlights some of Epictetus’ most memorable lessons compiled in the book “*The Art of Living*”, with the aim of reviving his extremely practical guidance to become a better and happier version of ourselves.

1. KNOW WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL AND WHAT YOU CAN’T

According to Epictetus, happiness and freedom can only be achieved when we understand that not everything is under our control. When we want to have free rein over things that are beyond our control — such as how others regard us, whether we are born into a well-to-do family or not, or the type of body we have — we become frustrated, anxious and fault-finding.

2. CHARACTER MATTERS MORE THAN REPUTATION

According to Epictetus, reputation is a vain pursuit, given that it depends on the opinion of others, something beyond our control. He asserts that, despite the advantages of having a good reputation — such as being able to help friends, holding a powerful position and being invited to fancy parties — all of this is worthless if it comes at the expense of one’s moral character, the only thing over which we have control and the only aspect in which we can make a real difference.

3. SELF-MASTERY IS OUR TRUE AIM

The Greek philosopher explained that self-mastery is possible when we are honest with ourselves and clearly recognize both our aptitudes and our flaws. When we identify the talents that divinity has bestowed upon us and when we listen to

our special calling within the divine order, we will naturally develop in those areas in which we are destined to excel.

4. ACT WELL THE PART THAT IS GIVEN TO YOU

According to Epictetus, we are all assigned roles in life by the divine. Thus, whether



Photo by Carolina Avendano Duque/SAIT

5. APPROACH LIFE AS A BANQUET

Epictetus exhorted his students to avoid extravagance and embrace self-restraint. He compared life to a banquet. When food is served, a person should help himself in moderation. When a dish passes him by, he should cherish what is already on his plate. And if a dish is yet to come, he should patiently wait for his turn.

6. BLAMING IS POINTLESS

Blaming others for their own misfortunes is a habit of small-minded people. Re-proaching oneself is the usual approach of average people. Yet the wise person forgoes the futility of finger-pointing and takes hardship as an opportunity to work on himself.

7. NOTHING BELONGS TO US

The Stoic philosopher believed that nothing is truly ours and that everything we possess will eventually return to where it came from. He uses the example of a deceased child whose death is not a loss to its parents, but the child’s return to his or her place of origin.

Epictetus advises that in case of material loss — like when a bad person takes our belongings — we should refrain from feeling wronged and instead see it as the return of things to the place from whence they came. Only then would we see loss in the proper light.

8. HARMONIZE YOUR ACTIONS WITH THE WAY LIFE IS

According to Epictetus, inner peace is achievable when a person’s actions are carried out to the best of his or her ability. When one devotes oneself wholeheartedly to the activity at hand, without forcing circumstances or pursuing results, one’s performance is impeccable, leading to self-realization and serenity.

This way, even if difficulties — which Epictetus describes as a natural part of the divine order — arise, one’s inner world will remain undisturbed, for one will have achieved the end of one’s being: the ultimate fulfillment of one’s duty in the world.



Photo by Giovanni Avendano

Falun Dafa's fifth meditative exercise reopens both the body and mind by entering deep tranquility. Through the cultivation of body and mind, character is refined and physical health is improved.

FALUN DAFA – AN ISLAND OF CALM IN A BUSY WORLD

The last few decades have brought significant technological advances to human society. While development and inventions are aimed at simplifying our lives – and how convenient things have become! – our minds have grown increasingly complex. Just try to sit quietly for a few minutes and you will see how your mind instantly fills with all sorts of thoughts, all of them trying to get your attention.

Yoga and meditation have become a top choice for those who, amidst the hustle and bustle of daily life, wish to achieve inner calm and peace of mind. Among the many practices introduced to the West, Falun Dafa, a self-cultivation practice rooted in traditional Chinese culture, has become one of the fastest growing meditation disciplines today, practiced by millions of people worldwide.

Cultivating the body through gentle qigong exercises

Qigong (pronounced chee-gong) or energy practice, is a system of coordinated movements and meditation developed in China thousands of years ago as part of Traditional Chinese Medicine. It aims to cultivate and balance qi – translated as life energy – as a means of spiritual elevation

and health improvement.

Falun Dafa, also known as Falun Gong, is a qigong practice of the Buddha School. It consists of five easy-to-learn meditative exercises that increase energy and vitality. Suitable for modern lifestyles,

Falun Dafa practice has shown to bring health benefits such as strengthening the immune system, improving clarity of mind, and supporting emotional regulation.

these exercises can be performed anytime, anywhere and in any order. Consistent practice has been shown to bring health



Photo by Faluninfo.net

The fourth Falun Dafa exercise called “Falun Cosmic Orbit” rectifies all abnormal conditions in the body and circulates energy widely.

benefits such as strengthening the immune system, improving clarity of mind, and supporting emotional regulation.

Character improvement at the core of the practice

Introduced to the public in China in 1992 by its founder Mr. Li Hongzhi, Falun Dafa rapidly gained popularity for its emphasis on character improvement. In addition to cultivating the body, Falun Dafa emphasizes the refinement of one's heart or mind nature (心性) through its deeply rooted moral philosophy.

真 善 忍

ZHEN

*Being True,
Being Honest,
Truth, Real,
Truthfulness*

SHAN

*Being Kind
and Benevolent,
Having Compassion,
Being Good,
Goodness*

REN

*Self-Discipline,
Self-Restraint,
and Patience,
Enduring Hardship,
Being Forgiving
and Tolerant*

By applying Zhen 真, Shan 善, Ren 忍 in their daily lives, Falun Dafa practitioners aspire to become truthful, kind and tolerant people.

For over five millenia, Traditional Chinese culture emphasized the cultivation of virtue and the attainment of the Dao, or the Way. Falun Dafa aims to revive this lost heritage, guiding practitioners to take up a spiritual path and cultivate themselves to achieve internal and external harmony.

Falun Dafa teaches that the most fundamental characteristic of the universe can be summarized in three principles: Truthfulness, Compassion and Forbearance (or in Chinese, Zhen 真, Shan 善, Ren 忍). Practitioners worldwide aspire to apply these principles in their daily life to become truthful, kind and tolerant people.

What does it mean to be a Falun Dafa practitioner?

Becoming a Falun Dafa practitioner requires no membership or fees. In fact, the founder of the practice, Mr. Li Hongzhi, has established the strict requirement that the practice must be taught free of charge and available to everyone. Taking up the practice is completely voluntary, and one can come and go as one pleases.

A Falun Dafa practitioner's greatest aim is to achieve spiritual perfection by letting

When wronged or mistreated, a genuine Falun Dafa practitioner does not fight back or complain, but holds himself to a high standard by responding with unconditional kindness.

go of unhealthy attachments and negative thoughts. In daily life, this manifests in his or her efforts to become an honest and selfless person.

When wronged or mistreated, a genuine

adherent does not fight back or complain, but holds himself to a high standard by responding with unconditional kindness. Conflicts that weigh on the mind and irritate

Falun Dafa is practiced in more than 130 countries by people from all walks of life. Although millions of people continue to benefit from this practice around the world, it remains banned in China, where its adherents have been persecuted since 1999.

one's heart are cherished as the best opportunities to cultivate Forbearance or Ren 忍.

In all circumstances, Falun Dafa practitioners put others first and consider the interests of others before their own. In following their Master's teachings, they renounce selfishness and the pursuit of personal gain to cultivate an altruistic way of being

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rooted in Compassion or Shan 善.

Falun Dafa practitioners also strive to tell the truth and do things truthfully. In refining their thoughts, words and actions; they make consistent efforts to assimilate to Truthfulness or Zhen 真. For practitioners, daily interpersonal conflicts and ordinary troubles are precious opportunities to become a better person.

Always free and open to everybody

Today, Falun Dafa is practiced in more than 130 countries by people from all walks of life. Falun Dafa instructional videos and books are available on the Internet for free, as well as online classes taught by volunteers.

In-person practice sites can be found in most cities around the world, where practitioners gather to perform the peaceful exercises and, at the same time, kindly teach them to anyone interested in learning.

Although millions of people continue to benefit from this practice around the world, it remains banned in China, where its adherents have been persecuted since 1999.

Li Hongzhi, who now resides in the United States, has received more than 340 awards and proclamations worldwide – from Canada, China, Australia, Russia, Japan and the U.S. – for his contribution to people's spiritual and physical health. He has also been nominated for the 2001 Sakharov Prize For Freedom of Thought, as well as for the Nobel Peace Prize four times.



Photo by Carolina Avendano Duque/SAIT

THE WABI SABI OF ARTISAN BREAD

Wabi sabi (侘寂) is a world view rooted in Zen Buddhism that believes that life is made of three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect. Thus, this philosophy proposes that everything that exists – including humans, nature and objects – is authentic in nature and its beauty cannot be replicated.

This philosophy has its origin in Japanese culture and its meaning can be found in the words wabi – the beauty of simplicity, and sabi – the passing of time and subsequent deterioration. Wabi sabi celebrates what is simple, modest and aged; and finds beauty in asymmetry, roughness and imperfection.

However, contemporary ideals seem to go in the opposite direction from this centuries-old philosophy. Current aesthetics place perfection as the main goal, and praise youth, symmetry and

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longevity as the most desirable traits. This has resulted in laborious efforts to achieve and preserve perfection, adopting methods to deny and resist the inevitable deterioration of things.



Photo by Carolina Avendano Duque/SAT

Wabi sabi teaches that there are three principles of beauty: Imperfection, impermanence and incompleteness. These characteristics, manifested in traditional forms of art, are also present in artisan bread.

The food we eat is a telling case. Wheat, for example, is highly refined in order to obtain a fine-textured and shelf-stable white flour. In the process, the highly nutritious ‘germ’ and the fibrous bran are removed from the grain, lest they interfere in the perfectly golden color and light texture of the factory-made, fluffy pastries and breads that, unfortunately, have little nutrition.

The manipulation of wheat has resulted in bread that is highly processed and less beautiful from a Japanese perspective. This staple food is commonly mass-produced to ensure uniformity from loaf to loaf, and also contains artificial additives to extend its shelf-life. Luckily, the art of bread making is not dead, and we can still find a beautiful loaf in its natural and nutritious

form: artisan bread.

Artisan bread meets the wabi sabi standard:

Artisan bread refers to a style of short shelf-life bread that is usually made by hand using traditional processing techniques. It is commonly offered unpackaged and is characterized for having a distinctive flavor and aroma as well as a simple, asymmetric and rustic look.

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Photo by Keenia Chernaya via Pexels

Japanese handmade ceramic pots are each completely unique and unrepeatably, conforming to the philosophy of wabi sabi that the beauty of the natural world cannot be replicated.



Photo by Carolina Avendano Duque/SAT

Impermanence: A short shelf life

With time, baked products naturally become stale, hard, dry and moldy when left at room temperature. Advanced processing technologies and innovative ingredients have led to significant shelf-life extension. Breads that used to last six or ten days, can remain soft, springy and mold-free for up to three weeks.

Artisan bread, naturally preservative-free, has a shelf life of only four to five days. If stored in the fridge, this bread becomes stale significantly faster, and if frozen, its flavor diminishes in time.

It seems as though no technique can preserve the matchless taste, aroma and texture of a freshly baked artisan loaf. Artisan bread has a wheaty flavor, ranging from mild and lightly sweet to tangy and sour. It has a rustic exterior with a deep golden brown crunchy crust, and a soft interior with large irregular holes. Its texture can range from crunchy to chewy and soft; and its aroma is so particular that its perception becomes an individual experience.

It has been explained by science that smells have the power to evoke memories. Thus, the experience of enjoying bread in its most natural and austere form, has become, to many, a source of nostalgia for earlier times, expressed in the words “like grandma used to make it.”

As expressed by the author Andrew Juniper, “If an object or expression can bring about, within us, a sense of serene melancholy and a spiritual longing, then that object could be said to be wabi-sabi.”

To tell if bread is truly artisan, one can tap a loaf on the bottom. If the sound produced is hollow, it is a sign that the bread is not dense and thus, it is artisan.

Imperfection: The asymmetry of artisan bread

At the core of artisanship is the mastery of a craft. When our hands are used as the main tools to create, precision and accuracy cannot always be achieved. Thus, the result obtained is always different.

The lack of uniformity, far from being a flaw in artisan products, is seen as a source of authenticity. It follows that a bread loaf that is made by hand using longer and more traditional processes, is unique in shape and can hardly be replicated.

Artisan bread loaves have irregular forms and may have uneven glazing. But these ‘flaws’ and ‘mistakes’ demonstrate the imperfect nature of handmade creations, making them consequently unique and beautiful.

Incompleteness: A few simple ingredients

Artisan bakers are commonly depicted as skillful crafters that make delightful creations from incredibly simple ingredients. In fact, artisan bread is made from the simplest ingredients: flour, water, yeast, salt, and most importantly – time.

The label on store-bought loaves often displays a long list of ingredients that many consumers may be unfamiliar with, such as Flour Treatment Agents, Emulsifiers, Preservatives, Reducing Agents and Flour improvers. These ingredients are added, among other reasons, to promote a quicker fermentation process, often at the expense of flavor and character.

The lean formulation of artisan breads ensures a lower sugar and fat content. Whole grain options, especially those made from ancient grains – e.g. kamut,

emmer, einkorn and spelt – offer a higher nutritional value. Moreover, its longer fermentation periods allow the enzymes in the dough to begin to break down the gluten present in most bread flours, thus benefiting the gut.

According to Nathan Myhrvold, author of *The Modernist Cuisine*, bread was “one of the most basic human foods, and at one point in time, it was the primary source of

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calories for all of our ancestors.”

Traditional breads, simple and nutritious, may seem wanting and unsophisticated when compared to the myriad of modern bread options. However, in light of Eastern Wisdom, this incompleteness and simplicity make artisan bread all the more valuable.



Photo by Carolina Avendano Duque/SAT

Artisan bread is usually offered unpackaged – commonly in paper bags or baskets – and consumed immediately after baking for maximum freshness.



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