



Meanings of traditional Chinese leisure: Perspectives from etymology, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

Based on previous studies on traditional Chinese leisure thought, this paper presents an in-depth study of the etymology of leisure, 休閒, to explore the origins, meanings, and interrelationships of related words and the literature on these topics. The paper then discusses the connotations of traditional Chinese leisure from three perspectives: Confucian leisure based on morality and etiquette, Taoist naturalist leisure, and Buddhist leisure based on the wisdom of emptiness and the spiritual realm. Lastly, the paper points out that traditional Chinese leisure embodies the wisdom of the implementation of Tao in daily life, and illustrates Tao's influence on Chinese leisure from earlier to current generations in four aspects: the attitude of following and imitating nature; the pursuit of the Golden Mean and the harmonious realm; the passive, quiet, introverted leisure style; and the ideal life that integrates work and leisure.

KEYWORDS

Leisure; etymology;
Confucianism;
Taoism; Buddhism

With the on-going exploration of the new knowledge that non-Western ideas may bring to the world leisure academia, traditional Chinese leisure research has increasingly become an indispensable part of contemporary world leisure research and has attracted the attention of many scholars (e.g., Ito et al., 2014; Iwasaki et al., 2007; John & Valeria, 2000; Johnson et al., 2018; Shaw & Henderson, 2005). Many scholars have made important foundational contributions to the study of traditional Chinese leisure. While some have investigated the meaning of “leisure” and the relationship between Confucian and Taoist leisure (Liu et al., 2008), various scholars have proposed that Confucian leisure is a theory of social harmony, Taoist leisure is a theory of social criticism, and Buddhist leisure is a type of perspectivism (e.g., Hu & Chen, 2004). A few have indicated that the emphasis of Taoist thought on nature, freedom, inaction, a lack of desire, and natural realms plays an important role in traditional Chinese health preservation, outdoor life, and art (Kong, 2019; Simpson & Cocks, 2017; Wang & Stringer, 2000). Other scholars have examined the contemporary value of leisure from the perspective of Buddhist mindfulness and psychotherapy (Arai, 2017; Aronson, 2010; Batchelor, 1997; Boorstein, 1995). Based on a sizable number of original studies, this paper presents a detailed and in-depth investigation of “leisure” from the perspective of etymology, and provides an extensive exploration of traditional Chinese leisure culture from the three most representative ideologies of ancient China—Confucianism’s

morality and etiquette, Taoism's naturalism, and Buddhism's wisdom of emptiness. Finally, this paper provides a summary of the influence of traditional Chinese leisure on later generations, to form an overall picture of traditional Chinese leisure and to provide a leisure sample from the East.

Systematic study of the etymology of leisure, 休閒/休閒 (xiuxian)

休 (xiu) first appeared in numerous oracle bone inscriptions in the Shang dynasty (1600 BCE–1046 BCE), mostly in the form of 𠂔; its original meaning, that people stop working and rest under a tree, was later extended to mean “good” and “beautiful.” For example, the sentence that you should extend good fortune 子其延休 or obtain the good/beauty bestowed by Heaven 承天之休 repeatedly appeared in Chapter 3 of *The Oracle Bone Inscription at East of Garden Village* 花園莊東地甲骨 excavated in the Yin Ruins 殷墟, which is located in Anyang, Henan Province. Initially, 休 indicated the dual well-being of the body and mind and was related to the goodness and beauty of conduct.

閒 (xian) first appeared in *The Inscription of the Bell Fu* 馱鐘銘 in the late period of the Western Zhou dynasty (1046 BCE–771 BCE) in the form of 𠂔, which depicts the view of looking out at the moon over a door. In the late Warring States period (403 BCE–221 BCE), the character took the form of 𠂔 in *The Inscription of the Pot of Madam Zeng* 曾姬無恤壺銘, and took the form of 𠂔 in *The Territory Map on the Bronze Plate of the Tomb of Zhongshan King* 中山王銅板兆域圖; these characters were said to represent different images of the moon shining into a house. After the Qin dynasty (221 BCE–207 BCE), the 閒 form gradually stabilized. The dictionary *Shuowenjiezi* 說文解字 by Xushen 許慎 (58 CE–147 CE) in the East Han dynasty (25 CE–220 CE) explained that 閒 means watching the moon through a gap in the door. Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735 CE–1815 CE) provided a classical explanation in his famous book *Annotation of Shuowenjiezi* 說文解字注: “there is a gap in the door, and the moonlight can enter.” “閒 means having a little free time, so it is called leisure 閒暇 (xianxia)” (Duan, 2013, p. 595). With its original meaning of a gap in space, 閒 can also indicate a gap (free time) between two periods of work, which is the original word that forms the basis of the modern term for leisure 休閒/休閒. For the meaning of leisure, at the least in the Western Jin dynasty (266 CE–316 CE), 閒 could be replaced by 閑; for example, in the article titled *Fu of Leisurely Living* 閑居賦 written by Pan Yue 潘岳 (247 CE–300 CE), 閑 replaces 閒 in the phrase of “clear, spacious and leisurely 清穆敞閑.” After the Tang dynasty (618 CE–907 CE), it was increasingly replaced by 閑. Although 閒 has always been the original and normative form of “leisure” and is still used in Hong Kong and Taiwan, it has completely fallen out of use in mainland China and has been replaced by 闲 (the simplified and popular form of 閑).

閑 (閑, xian) was first observed on *The Inscription of Food Utensil Tong* 同簋 in the middle of the Western Zhou dynasty. Its original meaning was fence and stable, such as in the phrase “guarding the king's fence 守王閑” in the Confucian classic *Zhouli* 周禮. Its meaning can be extended to “norm or rule” as a noun or “to block or prevent” as a verb, such as in the phrases “great virtue not going beyond the rules 不逾閑” (Zhu, 2005, p. 206) in *Analects* 論語 and “making rules for the family 閑有家” (Zhou, 1991,

p. 130) in *Zhouyi* 周易. Around the time of the Han and Jin dynasties, 閑 conveyed the meaning of “leisure” and could replace 閒 (see the preceding paragraph). As will be discussed, 閑 also served as a simplified word for 嫺, and correspondingly conveyed its meaning of skillful and elegant, which are also incorporated into the meaning of “leisure” in China.

闲 (xian), as a popular character for 閑, first appeared in Wang Xizhi 王羲之’s (303 CE–361 CE) calligraphy work *Preface to the Sacred Religion*, 聖教序: “as for Buddhist scriptures, I am not skilled with them 至於內典, 尤所未闲” (Huai, 2016, p. 25) in the Eastern Jin dynasty (317 CE–420 CE). From then on, 闲 was gradually used in later generations. It should be noted that 閒, the original and orthodox word for leisure, and its substitute word 閑, have now been replaced by 闲 in mainland China.

嫺 (xian), a character not considered in academic circles until now, was interpreted in the dictionary of *Yu Pian* 玉篇 of the Liang dynasty (502 CE–557 CE): “嫺 ... is simplified as 閑” (Gu, 2020, p. 648). The dictionary *Liushutong* 六書統 in the Yuan dynasty (1206 CE–1368 CE) interpreted the meaning of 嫺 as the skillful and easy pace of the horse 馬步習也. According to classics, such as *Guoyu* 國語 of the Pre-Qin period, *Zhengzitong* 正字通 of the Ming dynasty (1368 CE–1644 CE), and the *Kangxi dictionary* 康熙字典 of the Qing dynasty (1636 CE–1912 CE), the word 姦 (jian, three women) means beauty, and based upon it, 嫺 means “elegant or graceful (footstep or appearance).” As the simplified and more modern character for 嫺, 閑 is widely used in Pre-Qin literature to express: the skillfulness and elegance of horse skills and related military exercises, that involve chariots, flags, bells, drums, and even general skills. For example, *Zuozhuan* 左傳 describes people who are not skilled in education and discipline 不閑於教訓; *The Book of Songs* 詩經 states that four horses are all skillful in pace 四馬既閑, the chariots are skillful in military drill 臨冲閑閑, and the mulberry planters are working skillfully, leisurely and with graceful footsteps 桑者閑閑.

嫺 and 嫺 (xian) are both important characters closely related to leisure. According to the *Kangxi dictionary*, 嫺 is the same as 嫺. Both characters first appeared in the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–8 CE) and conveyed two meanings. The first was skillful, such as in the phrase “skilled in conversation 嫺於辭令” in the historical book of *Shiji* 史記. The second was elegant and quiet, such as in the phrase “beautiful and elegant 妖冶嫺都” in *Shiji*. Interestingly, these two meanings of 嫺 and 嫺 are the same as those of 嫺 and have been integrated into the meaning of leisure. In terms of form, 嫺 (嫺) was replaced with 閒 (閑) and became common in the Han dynasty and thereafter. Both 嫺 and 嫺 are now abbreviated as 嫺 in mainland China.

As a phrase, 休閒/閑 first appeared in *The Inscription of the Tripod of the King of State E* 鄂侯馭方鼎 in the late Western Zhou dynasty in a sentence that states “Yu Fang rests 馭方休閑.” According to the dictionary *Shuowenjiezi*, 闌 (lan), with the same meaning, “wood blocking the door” and similar pronunciation to 閑, can often replace 閑 in ancient China. For example, 闌逸 (leisurely and carefree) replaced 閑逸 in *The History of the Southern Qi Dynasty* (479 CE–502 CE) 南齊書; and 無闌 (no leisure) replaced 無閑 in Sushi’s 蘇軾 (1037 CE–1101 CE) poems. Since the Wei and Jin dynasties (220 CE–420 CE), the use of 休閒/閑 has gradually increased; it can be used as a noun, verb, or adjective and has rich meanings: (1) rest, do not work; (2)

Table 1. Etymology of 休閒/閑.

Etymology	Original meaning, earliest source and time	Core meaning	Explanation related to leisure
休	Rest under the tree after work; <i>Oracle Bone Inscriptions</i> ; Shang dynasty (1600 BCE–1046 BCE)	Rest, good, beautiful	休 is associated with goodness, beauty, and the human mind, indicating the positive value of 休閒.
閒	Moonlight shines through the gap in the door, leisure; <i>Inscription of the Bell Fu</i> ; late period of the Western Zhou dynasty (1046 BCE–771 BCE)	Gap, leisure, skillful, elegant	閒 is associated with quietness and goodness; as the original and orthodox word for leisure in the Western Jin dynasty (266 CE–316 CE), it was replaced by 閑.
閑	Fence and stable; <i>Inscription of Food Utensil Tong</i> ; middle of the Western Zhou dynasty (1046 BCE–771 BCE)	Block, norm, rule, prevent, leisure, skillful, elegant	In the pre-Qin period, 閑 replaced 𨾏 as its simplified form; in the Western Jin period, 閑 began to replace 閒.
闲	The running script and popular form of 閑; Calligraphy of Wang Xizhi, East Jin dynasty (317 CE–420 CE)	The same as 閑	闲 is currently also used as the simplified form of 閒 and 閑 in mainland China.
𨾏(閑)	The pace of the horse is skillful and easy; <i>Book of Songs</i> ; Pre-Qin period (before 221 BCE).	Skillful, elegant	𨾏 is one of the sources of 閑, indicating the relationship between leisure, skills, and elegance.
嫺/嫺	Skillful, elegant; <i>Shiji</i> ; Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–8 CE)	Skillful, elegant	嫺/嫺 has the same meaning as 𨾏 and can be replaced with 閑 and 閒.
休閒/閑 (閑)	Rest; <i>Inscription of the Tripod of the King of State E</i> ; Late Western Zhou dynasty (1046 BCE–771 BCE)	Rest, retirement, live comfortably, realm of a lofty/wonderful state of life	It is both a lifestyle and an ideal of life in harmony with the Tao and has many cultural and philosophical meanings.

retirement; (3) comfortable living conditions; and (4) realm of a lofty and wonderful state of life, such as in the famous saying, “the taste of leisure is first-class 休閒等一味” (Sushi, 2009, p. 1053) proposed by Sushi. The etymology and the meanings of leisure 休閒/閑 are summarized in Table 1.

As a form of hieroglyphs, the above-mentioned characters contain rich meanings associated with leisure in ancient China. Taking the image of people resting under a tree, 休 conveys the beautiful harmony between humans and nature. 閒 represents the scene of people looking up at the moon and moonlight spilling into the room, which can be simple poetic tranquility or idleness, or an ideal background for leisure activities, such as chatting, drinking, composing poems and so on; 閑, as a replacement for 閒, has the meaning of obstruction and regulation, implying the inherent moral requirements of leisure. 𨾏 combines the beauty of women with the horse, a noble or even sacred animal in ancient China, indicating that skillful and elegant horse riding, as recreational activity or enjoyable work, can be leisure, which breaks the dichotomy between leisure and work, and reflects the unique understanding of leisure in ancient China. Similar to 𨾏, as combinations of female images and 閒 (閑) in their glyphs, 嫺 (嫺) imply that ideal leisure should be elegant or dexterous. 休, 𨾏, 嫺, and 嫺 all convey meanings of beauty and good, implying the goodness of virtue or the pleasure of mind contained in leisure. In contrast, the antonym of leisure, “busy 忙 (mang),” demonstrates the complexity of things that need to be done and the uneasiness or anxiety of the mind. The dictionary *Yupian* proposed that “busy” is the same as “worried 忙 (mang).” According to the dictionary *Zihui* 字彙 of the Ming dynasty (1368 CE–1644 CE), “busy” means fearful, pressing, and tedious. Based on the above detailed discussion of the variations and the meanings of 休閒, we can make a further brief classification

Table 2. A classification of human leisure/non-leisure.

Basic state	Specific classification	Explanation	Classical examples
Leisure	Happy idleness	Freedom and the state of having nothing to do, being at ease	Sitting in the moonlight idly and happily, meditating, enjoying seclusion.
	Leisure activities	Ordinary leisure activities outside of work	Drinking, fishing, feasting, enjoying music, painting, enjoying poetry, collecting, traveling.
	Leisure integrated with work/Work as leisure	Integration of work and leisure, common among those engaged in specific skills and art	Cheerful working of the mulberry planters with leisurely and graceful footsteps (<i>The Book of Songs</i>), Following one's will to do anything without exceeding the rules (<i>Analects</i>), Chef Ding's dismembering of an ox (<i>Zhuangzi</i>).
Non-leisure	Work with pressure	Work without happiness for making a living	Engaging in labor-intensive work or various official work tasks
	Boring idleness	Freedom and the state of having nothing to do, but without happiness	Idly bored or idly worried.

into three forms of leisure, which will also serve as the framework for analyzing the three main thoughts about leisure.

The first form refers to happy idleness, which means having nothing to do but being at ease, such as quietly sitting under a tree after work or bathing in the moonlight at night, the original meanings of 休 and 閒. The second form refers to people's engagement in leisure activities, such as playing games, singing, dancing, drinking, and feasting in their free time, which would be more romantic and poetic on a moonlit night and is a direct extension of the meanings of 娛 and 閒. The third form is leisure integrated with work, which may refer to the original happy life in which leisure is not separated from work, but more often refers to people's internalizing work with a leisure mindset, or deriving leisurely happiness from work, especially when engaging in artistic creation or a skillful technique, e.g., riding a horse gracefully, which is the meaning of 娛 and 嫻 (嫻).

Conversely, non-leisure activities can be divided into two categories. The first refers to working for one's livelihood with a sense of passiveness, pressure, and being controlled, e.g., labor-intensive work on a farm before resting under a tree in the daytime or before going back home in a moonlit night, which is the opposite to the meanings of 休 and 閒. The second refers to boredom associated with idleness, worthlessness, and loneliness, e.g., even though beautiful moonlight shines down on them, someone may still be idly bored or worried, the opposite of the meanings of 休, 閒, 閑, 娛, 嫻 and 嫻. Table 2 provides a classification of leisure/non-leisure and various classical examples.

In short, leisure includes various forms of harmony: free time and space (e.g., under a tree or in a quiet house); subjects (people) and objects (e.g., trees, moonlight, and horses); and body and mind; which are closely related to goodness, morality, esthetics, freedom, and elegance. In ancient China, only the Tao has such rich meanings; in a sense, leisure is an ideal way to live in pursuit of the Tao in one's daily life, especially during free time. If the investigations of etymology and semantics reveal the Chinese people's initial and fundamental understanding of the Tao of leisure, then to achieve a

more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Chinese leisure, we need to further investigate it from the perspectives of the three most important and influential cultural traditions in ancient China.

The Confucian perspective: Leisure based on morality and etiquette

Leisure and morality

For Confucianism, the Tao means “Morality,” which indicates fundamental human nature and constitutes the foundation of leisure. This meaning can be understood in three ways.

First, morality is a noumenal basis of leisure. Based on morality, Confucians believe that leisure is a part of human nature. For example, Xuncius 荀子 (313 BCE–238 BCE), a representative of Confucianism in the Warring States period, once said, “it is today’s human nature” that “when we are tired, we want to rest... An old man should be retired, is there anything more safer and pleasant than rest?” (Wang, 1954, p. 224). Confucians further believed that one’s acquisition (得, de) of morality inevitably leads to self-satisfaction or self-contentedness (自得, zide); namely, once people have profound moral cultivation, they can be satisfied, content, or complacent, and can engage in leisure at any time and place (Zhu, 2005). Both Confucius (551 BCE–479 BCE) and his disciple Yan Hui 顏回 (521 BCE–481 BCE) lived happily in poor situations; Confucius was so immersed in and enjoyed studying/working so entirely that he forgot to eat and to worry, and so he was unaware of the coming of old age (Zhu, 2005). It is amazing and worthy to note here, that at the foundation of the acquisition of morality, Confucius’ study, work, and leisure were integrated.

Second, moral practice has the nature of leisure. Confucius summed up the moral concepts of respect, loyalty, faith, righteousness, wisdom, courage, and humility handed down from the Zhou dynasty as benevolence 仁 (ren), whose practices include wanting to be benevolent, feeling at ease when implementing benevolence, and feeling happy when being benevolent. Moral practice includes the characteristics of self-initiation, natural presentation, and tranquil happiness. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130 CE–1200 CE), a significant Confucian of the Song dynasty (960 CE–1279 CE), praised that we do not perceive the practice of benevolence at all, just as when we have the right belt, we forget our waist, and when we have the right shoes, we forget our feet (Zhu, 1986).

Third, morality establishes norms for leisure. Confucius opposed all forms of greed, playing wantonly with things, and eating all day long, for they may result in the loss of moral intentions. Mencius (372 BCE–289 BCE) proposed that “now the country is in leisure, at this time, one who seeks pleasure wantonly is seeking disaster” (Zhu, 2005, p. 252) and “people should have morality; those who just eat fully, wear warmly, live comfortably but have no education, they are close to beasts” (Zhu, 2005, p. 276).

Happy idleness: Self-satisfaction of individual discretion/sitting in stillness when alone

When one is alone, Confucians are alert to one’s indulgence due to the lack of external supervision and advocate prudent behaviors to cultivate morality and achieve self-contentedness. Ideally, people should sit in stillness and meditation. The Confucian

classic *Liji* 禮記 proposed that human nature is quiet. In the Song dynasty, Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤's (1017 CE–1073 CE) famous article *Taijitushuo* 太極圖說 emphasized that focusing on stillness with the mind of justice and benevolence would set the standard for human behavior. Confucians believed that individual discretion is important for one's physical and mental health, relaxation, and happiness. This is what Confucians call “self-satisfied 自慊”, meaning since the mind is settled, there is no restlessness. Individual discretion or sitting in stillness was highly praised by Zhu Xi, Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811 CE–1872 CE) and other Confucians, and had influence in ancient times as well as today.

Leisure activities: Playing with things to adapt to temperament in daily life; festival celebrations

In daily life, Confucians advocate that people appreciate flowers, collect, play chess, enjoy music, compose poems, and engage in other elegant leisure lifestyles (Huang, 2013; Li, 2014; Zhang, 2007), which are classic forms of “playing with things to adapt to one's temperament” (Zhu, 2005, p. 99) suggested by Zhu Xi. People often engage in leisure activities by appreciating or cultivating morality. For example, out of the benevolence to nature, Confucians expressed much affection for hills, rivers, trees, grass, birds, animals, etc., and endowed them with human virtues to achieve moral enlightenment, develop their personalities, and disseminate moral concepts. This endowing of nature with human virtues while appreciating it, is called morality comparison (比德, *bide*), and becomes the basic way to achieve leisure delight in nature. Confucius believed that the wise man is joyful with water and the benevolent man is joyful with mountains; and in watching that the pine and cypress wither late in cold weather, he derived great pleasure from perceiving that moral character manifests when one is in a difficult situation. In the Song dynasty, Zhou Dunyi appreciated that the wind and the moon are boundless and the court grass is green, Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032 CE–1085 CE) enjoyed looking for spring, while Shao Yong 邵雍 (1012 CE–1077 CE) named his residence a “cozy and happy nest” and wrote many famous poems for chanting. From different perspectives, all these leisure activities are based on morality.

Festivals, important scenes of etiquette, include colorful folklore leisure activities. For example, eating sweet dumplings and watching lanterns at the Lantern Festival on lunar January 15th, enjoying flowers at the Flower Festival in lunar February, eating rice-pudding and participating in dragon boat races at the Dragon Boat Festival on lunar May 5th, girls creating needlework to request elegant skills and good luck from the textile goddess, young boys and girls dating on Qixi Valentine's Day on lunar July 7th, eating moon cakes and enjoying the moon on lunar August 15th, Mid-Autumn Day, climbing mountains, seeing chrysanthemums and drinking chrysanthemum wine during the Chongyang Festival on September 9th, and setting off firecrackers, having reunion dinners with family members, and paying New Year's greetings to relatives and friends during the Spring Festival, are all typical leisure activities with special connotations. Furthermore, nearly every person celebrates the completion of one's first month as a baby, birthday, capping ceremony (initiation rites), marriage ceremony, and even funeral ceremony, as well as many other celebrations or commemorations in one's life,

by participating in various leisure activities. These festivals and celebrations, filled with plenty of moral and etiquette connotations, constitute the most important system for Chinese entertainment and leisure.

Leisure integrated with work: Following one's will to do anything without exceeding the rules; the playing of six arts

In Confucianism, the highest ideal is to integrate leisure with moral accomplishment. From the discussion above, morality is the noumenal basis of leisure; once a person has profound morality, they can enjoy leisure at any time, place, and when doing anything (including work affairs). In this sense, Confucius's "following one's will to do anything without exceeding the rules" (Zhu, 2005, p. 56), Confucius and Yan Hui's finding a happy life in a poor situation, and Zeng Dian 曾點's (546 BCE-unknown, a disciple of Confucius), joy in the Wuyu 舞雩 stage in late spring are all free, joyful, relaxed, and desirable ways of leading leisure lives, which can be regarded as classical forms of integrating leisure and work, and the loftiest goals of moral cultivation for Confucians.

More specifically, the six arts refer to etiquette, music, archery, chariot driving, calligraphy, and mathematics. As the famous Confucian idiom "playing in arts" shows, on the basis of morality, they are not only ways for Confucians to improve their social skills, but also forms of leisure. Etiquette and music were the most representative of the six arts. Etiquette embodies differences in hierarchy and social order. Music represents the harmony and happiness of society. Confucius believed that the ideal society of etiquette and music was the society of Great Harmony (大同, Datong).

The great Tao prevails, and the world is for the public. We should select the virtuous and the capable and adhere to the principle of good faith and harmony... So conspiracy does not arise and thievery does not act, so people will not shut up when they are out, which is called Great Harmony. (Wang, 2001, p. 287)

Godbey (2008) provided a classic definition of leisure: "Leisure is living in relative freedom from the external compulsive forces of one's culture and physical environment to be able to act from internally compelling love in ways that are personally pleasing, intuitively worthwhile and provide a basis for faith" (p. 14). For Confucianists, partaking in the six arts embodies one's freedom and internal compelling love and can be understood as leisure, while Zeng Dian's happiness of singing and dancing in the late spring breeze on the Wuyu stage with his friends can be regarded as a scene in the ideal society of great harmony.

The Taoist perspective: Leisure based on naturalism

Leisure and the natural Tao

Taoists deeply felt sorrow, bitterness, and the meaningless bustle of life and believed that the natural Tao, as the noumenon and the highest value of the world, leads to leisure. Tao is "bland and tranquil, limpid and clear, harmonious and leisurely" (Zhuangzi, 1983, p. 575), and the "following" of or "adherence" to the Tao is also called going comfortably (適, shi), which means an enjoyable leisure life. Zhuangzi (circa 369 BCE–286 BCE), one of the most important and representative Taoist scholars, proposed

the classic proposition “the great wisdom is leisurely” (Zhuangzi, 1983, p. 41), encouraging people to imitate the ancient Tao-master who was happy in both poverty and prosperity, and to pursue leisure.

Specifically, Tao has two meanings: First, is to say/speak in words. Taoists criticize rulers’ use of secular words as tools to enforce cruel rules, but advocate two kinds of words. On the side of indifference, Taoists advocate non-words or silence, which leads to the politics of inaction (do-nothing) and the quiet observation and appreciation of the world. On the positive side, Taoists advocate “false, carefree, absurd, and groundless words” (Zhuangzi, 1983, p. 884) or poetic and humorous words filled with exaggeration, singularity, and metaphor, similar to the natural and authentic words Heidegger (1959/2004) espoused and “the unspeakable” Wittgenstein (2009, p. 204) advocated, which creates magnificent images and expresses colorful thoughts. *Zhuangzi*, a book with the same name of Zhuangzi who wrote it, is one of the most humorous and charming works in China, and had a profound impact on the humorous speech style and leisure lifestyle of Chinese skits, crosstalk, romantic poems, and *quyi* (melodious art) in later generations.

The other, more fundamental meaning of Tao, is to travel a natural and poetic road in life; as Heidegger (1959/2004) said, “the guiding word of Laozi’s poetic thinking is called Tao, which basically means road” (p. 191). The Taoist naturalistic ideas of nature, life, tranquility, inaction, simplicity, modesty, reduced desire, uniformity, balance, harmony, and heavenly happiness had a complicated and profound impact on later leisure practices in China.

Happy idleness: Void and quiet life; forgetting in the realm of Taoshu **道術; seclusion**

Both void and quietness are characteristics of Tao; leading an extremely void and quiet life is the goal of Taoists. At the beginning, Taoists ask people to reduce, and even surrender, their desires to five sounds, five colors, and five flavors. Finally, Taoists aspire for people to achieve a state of “sitting and forgetting 坐忘,” “fasting of the mind 心齋,” and “I lost me 吾喪我,” which is not only a course of self-cultivation, but also leisure with extreme happiness.

Further, Taoists yearned for the ideal society of Taoshu, namely, achieving Tao in society. Its typical form is the small country with few people or the world with established ethics, where rulers govern with inaction, completely eradicate wars, avoid onerous decrees and heavy taxes, and do not engage in hypocritical benevolence and etiquette, where people regard food as delicious, clothing as beautiful, residence as safe, custom as pleasurable, can see neighboring countries, hear sounds of chickens and dogs, and do not communicate with each other until they are old and dead (Laozi, 1984), where mountains have no tunnels, rivers have no boats and bridges, birds and animals can be taught to travel together, birds’ nests can be seen by climbing, folks do not know what others do when they are in or out, and people are happy with the food in their mouths and go out to play with a full stomach (Zhuangzi, 1983). People are so happy and carefree that they can forget about each other, just like happy fish in rivers and lakes.

Unfortunately, in the view of Taoists, there was no Tao in the world at that time. Zhuangzi advocated seclusive leisure of a happy and comfortable life in nature free from social restrictions, and believed “if there is no Tao in society, people should cultivate virtue for leisure” (Zhuangzi, 1983, p. 306). Zhuangzi (1983) admired fishing in the sea, catching turtles in the river, and resting in the mountains and forests. Even when the King Wei of Chu 楚威王 (unknown–329 BCE) wanted him to be his prime minister, Zhuangzi flatly refused and said he would rather live as a turtle dragging his tail in the mud. The leisure tradition of seclusion in China was most influenced by Taoism.

Leisure activities: Playing games; wandering/traveling

The Dutch scholar of cultural history, Johan Huizinga (1944/2014), proposed that “the real pure game is one of the main cornerstones of civilization” (p. 5). According to the dictionary *Guangya* 廣雅• *Shigu* 釋詁 in the Wei dynasty (220 CE–265 CE), wandering (遊, you) means playing games 戲也. Zhuangzi’s thought is largely about freely playing games or wandering/traveling, which are just two meanings of *Xiaoyaoyou* 逍遙遊, and are regarded as Zhuangzi’s spiritual theme and key leisure activities.

In terms of playing games, there are many vivid descriptions in *Zhuangzi*, such as fishing, catching cicadas, drinking wine, playing guqin, painting, swimming, and singing, all of which are non-utilitarian games engaged in exclusively for happiness. For example, the craftsman called Shi 石 wields his axe with great strength to create wind to very skillfully blow white dust off the nose of his partner. Both the chopper and his partner are calm and enjoying their fantastic demonstration, which is not a job or something utilitarian, but a game they are willing to devote themselves to exclusively for their interests and inner happiness. This understanding of playing games maintains a leading role in various hobbies, interests, and artistic pursuits in later generations.

Zhuangzi’s (1983) thoughts about traveling or wandering contain three typical forms. The first form of traveling is wandering in society based on the concept of the use of uselessness. Zhuangzi observed that cinnamon trees are edible and cut down, and lacquer trees can be used and cut down. Similarly, people may be hurt if they can be used by others. Zhilishu 支离疏 was a physically deformed, ugly person without any talent or a use for the world; and just because of these characteristics, he was exempted from compulsory labor and was given food from the government. Therefore, he could leisurely wander in the world and lead a safe and satisfied existence throughout his life.

The second form of traveling is wandering or traveling leisurely in nature, which was one of Zhuangzi’s (1983) ideal lifestyles, free of social responsibility or constraints. Taoists not only want to travel along great rivers, but also to travel in the fog of heaven. They suggest that people should observe the grand beauty of heaven and earth, the rhythm of the four seasons, and the principle of all things in a silent way to achieve an understanding of the origin and integrity of the poetic nature. These views had rich implications for sightseeing, wandering, or traveling in later generations; for example, the famous Xie Lingyun 謝靈運’s (385 CE–433 CE) landscape travel poems of the East Jin dynasty and Xu Xiake 徐霞客’s (1587 CE – 1641 CE) travel notes from the Ming dynasty all contain vivid Taoist color.

The third form of traveling is the highest wandering or game of the artistic mind, in which people will “enjoy leisure without river and sea” and “enjoy so many beauties from the indifferent without limit” (Zhuangzi, 1983, p. 393). Finally, people will achieve heavenly happiness, which is beyond reality, integrating subject and object, enabling them even to forget both things and the self. Zhuangzi’s (1983) bewilderment about whether he turns into a butterfly or a butterfly turns into himself when dreaming, and his watching happy fish on Hao bridge 濠梁, and Hongmeng 鴻蒙 happily jumping and patting his thighs like a sparrow when wandering in the world, are all typical symbols of the wandering game of the artistic mind that may give inspiration to modern meditation and hypnosis.

Leisure integrated with work: Entertaining with things by technique

Taoists held a complicated view of technology. While they criticized mechanical technology that would destroy the nature of things and disturb pure human nature, just as Zhuangzi (1983) said “as long as there is something about machinery, there is a mechanical mind” (p. 318), they also believed that technology based on involvement of the human body (we might as well use *technique* to refer to it) was a way to access the Tao and leisure. *Zhuangzi* is one of the most discussed works on this type of technique in the pre-Qin period. For example, when chef Ding dismembered an ox, he followed the law of heaven by being in tune with the rhythm of ancient songs “Sanglin 桑林” and “Jingshou 經首”; his dismembering operation was similar to singing and dancing. In *Zhuangzi*, there are numerous stories involving such technique; for example, the man who painted for the monarch was so absorbed and happy in painting that he took off all his clothes, and those who boat very skillfully would be relaxed and enjoy themselves wherever they are on the river. By engaging in such technical operations or art creation, the joyful devotion, pleasant feeling, hearty peak experience, and sense of achievement shows that leisure can be embodied in technical work and technique can be integrated with leisure. Thus people can be entertained with things 與物爲娛 (Zhuangzi, 1983), instead of objectifying and instrumentalizing nature, which leads to an esthetic leisurely life in the world.

The Buddhist perspective: Leisure based on the wisdom of emptiness

Leisure and emptiness (Sunyata)

Emptiness is the most profound wisdom or Tao of Buddhism. Buddha was liberated because he realized that “life is suffering” and “all dharmas are empty.” According to Buddhism, all phenomena in the world, without exception, are illusions formed by the combination of karma and the continuous flow of birth and death. The emptiness includes ego emptiness and Dharma emptiness. *The Prajna Heart Sutra* 般若心經 proposed that the five aggregates (Form, Feeling, Perception, Impulse, and Consciousness), which are the most basic elements of all phenomena, are all empty. Huineng 慧能 (638 CE–713 CE), the representative of Chinese indigenous Buddhism Zen, further advanced that “regarding no mind 無念 as the principle, formlessness 無相 as the noumenon, and no-dwelling 無住 as the foundation” (Hui, 2012, p. 39). Mastering the wisdom of

emptiness can eliminate all of one's dedications to fame and wealth and enable one to be free from all forms of attachment, trouble and pain, and to achieve ultimate happiness, called "self-ease 自在." It can also enable enlightened Chinese talents to consciously pursue the realm of emptiness, such as empty areas in landscape paintings, empty pavilions in garden architecture, the sound outside the strings of an instrument and the full sounds of open valleys in music; all these highlight the infinity of the universe and the leisure sentiment in open space.

Happy idleness: Sitting meditation for Satori 開悟

Zen Buddhism suggests that absolute reality (e.g., emptiness) does not have to be gradually achieved through reading works, communication with others, or interaction with things; rather, people can "directly see absolute reality from their own hearts" (Hui, 2012, p. 71). This view emphasizes strong subjectivity and current experience. The typical form is Zen meditation 參禪, which is a practice method to achieve immediate enlightenment in the meditation room of a temple (just like Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree) by burning incense, sitting in meditation, controlling the will, and transcending happiness and worries to reach the realm of ultimate enlightenment and happy leisure experience. It can then be extended to Satori enlightenment and leisure through allegorical words, cases, gestures, actions, or things with unique subtleties. Zen master Fuxi 傅翕 (497 CE–569 CE) states, "People can ride a buffalo on their own feet and with a hoe in their bare hands. When they cross a bridge, it is the bridge, not the water that is flowing" (as quoted in Daoyuan, 2019, p. 798). People with Buddhist enlightenment can appreciate from Fuxi's poem that absolute reality is empty, phenomenon is a combination of karma, and people should eliminate daily obsessions; undoubtedly, the leisure of Zen meditation by Satori is mysterious.

Leisure activities: Enjoying Zen Tea, poems, paintings, calligraphy, and architecture

Since the Tang dynasty, the esthetic taste of Chinese people has gradually changed from an appreciation of the external nature and characters' appearance to the appreciation of the inner spiritual experience. For example, tea was mainly used as a drinkable medicine or nourishing food since it appeared as early as the Western Zhou dynasty. With the rise of Zen in the Tang dynasty, drinking tea became a representative leisure way for monks and scholars to practice Zen principles and an empty mind. The story of Zen master Zhao Zhou 趙州禪師 (778 CE–897 CE) "going to have tea" is classic. Two monks came from afar to ask Zen master Zhao Zhou about the meaning of Zen. The Zen master asked one of them, "Have you been here before?" The monk replied no. "Go to have tea!" said the Zen master. Then, the Zen master asked the other monk, "Have you ever been here?" The monk said yes. "Go to have tea!" said the Zen master. The warden next to the Zen master asked curiously, "How can you let both of them have tea?" The Zen master then called the name of the warden and said, "Go to have tea!" (Zezang, 1994, p. 244). This story suggests that the Zen is not elsewhere, but in

daily life, such as having tea. Since then, a well-known saying has come to exist in Chinese culture that states “Zen and tea are the same flavor.”

More Zen poems describing temple life or the beauty of the mountains and forests in which the monks/scholars lived exist. These poems illustrate the unique, unspeakable Zen insight and wisdom, and the clean, tranquil, indifferent, supermundane, and refined state of mind in which all worries are eliminated and all beautiful possibilities are open. Some examples follow.

Master Hongren 弘忍 (601 CE–674 CE), the fifth patriarch of Chinese Zen, wanted to choose a disciple from Shenxiu 神秀 (606 CE–706 CE) and Huineng as his heir, and ordered each of them to compose a poem to determine who was best. The poem written by Shenxiu was:

The body is a Bodhi tree, the mind is a bright mirror.

Wipe frequently and avoid dust. (Hui, 2012, p. 14)

This poem demonstrates that the human mind is like a mirror, which should be wiped frequently to not be polluted by dust. Wiping the mirror is a metaphor for asking people to discover the truth by reading books and doing things, which is a means of gradual enlightenment to Zen wisdom.

In contrast, Huineng’s poem was:

Bodhi is not a tree, bright mirror is not a platform.

Buddha’s nature is always pure, where dust can be? (Hui, 2012, p. 18)

This poem indicates that everything in the world, including the Bodhi tree, mirror, and human mind, is empty, and it is important to know that the ultimate truth is not found by gradual enlightenment, but by Satori in a flash. Hongren thought that this poem was much better than Shenxiu’s and passed his mantle on to Huineng.

From then on, there were many famous Zen poems, including the following two examples:

A thousand feet of fishing line is deep down,

One wave rises and ten thousand waves follow.

The night is still and the water is cold, and the fish do not eat bait.

The empty ship returns fully with a bright moon. (Puji, 1984, p. 275)

This poem, written by master Decheng 德誠 (unknown–860 CE) in the Tang dynasty, demonstrates the process of a poet-seeking truth. The 1000 feet long fishing line, one wave and thousands of waves, the still night and cool water, and no fish eating the bait, are all metaphors for the hardship and twists of seeking the truth, and the empty ship returning full with the moon symbolizes the final enlightenment and the peace, holiness, and brightness of the mind at that time.

Similarly, the following poem written by a Buddhist nun named Wujinzang 無盡藏 (unknown–676 CE) in the Tang dynasty uses the metaphor of seeking spring to reflect that the poet attempts to find the truth outside, but finally finds it in her own family/mind.

Look for spring every day but find nothing,

Wear straw sandals and search the mountains deep into the clouds.

Come back, smile and sniff plum blossoms,
Spring is already fully on the branches. (Luo, 2012, p. 209)

In terms of paintings and calligraphy, from the time of the Tang dynasty, paintings began to feature more freehand brushwork than magnificent external images of figures, flowers, and birds. Landscape paintings depicted the spiritual realm more, and figure paintings also focused more on people's spiritual states, ideals, and moods. Further, calligraphy began to feature more brushwork to emphasize artistic conception and charm. The calligraphy and painting works of Emperor Hui 徽宗 (1082 CE–1135 CE) of the Northern Song dynasty (960 CE–1127 CE) are representatives of this trend. He once asked the palace painters to paint ancient temples hidden in the mountains; some painted ancient temples on the hillside, some painted temples deep in the jungle, and some painted a corner or a section of the broken wall of the temple. Emperor Hui was not satisfied with any of them. When he saw that someone had painted an old monk drawing water from a clear spring on a high mountain, he greatly appreciated it and regarded it as the best painting. This story vividly illustrates the influence of Zen on paintings and calligraphy at that time.

Unlike the above-mentioned leisure forms, Buddhist architecture is a space for people to live in or travel through. Besides the solemn characteristics of grand temples, Buddhism also enjoys the artistic conception of emptiness and Zen with unique designs of courtyard details and environment. The charming Buddhist architecture should refer to more psychological feelings of the open, clear, and pure empty conception, and is often accompanied by images, such as through a flicker of the shadow of bamboo between curved walls and flowers through windows, or through the bells and evening drums that sound in the shadow of ancient temples and pagodas, which are thought to express an unspeakable spiritual realm (Jiao, 2018; Zhang, 2012).

Leisure integrated with work: Zen in daily life

People always have an ordinary mind in their daily lives. Zen master Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (709 CE–788 CE) of the Tang dynasty emphasized “Ordinary mind is Tao 平常心是道”:

It means that there is no artifice, no right or wrong, no acquisition or abandonment, no interruption or constancy, no ordinariness or sacredness... It is all the Tao when we are walking, sitting, sleeping, responding to opportunities, and dealing with things. (Daoyuan, 2019, pp. 833–834)

“Ordinary mind” in Buddhism refers to a mind of wisdom, emptiness, or Zen in daily life, which enables people be at ease to communicate with others and cope with various things. Zen believes that carrying water and cutting firewood are nothing more than subtle Tao. Zen master Huang Bo 黃檗 (unknown–850 CE) said: “speaking, silence, activity, and quietness, everything with sounds and colors are all Buddhist things” (Zezang, 1994, p. 42). As long as you have a Zen mind, you can enjoy leisure everywhere and all the time, opening a way for everyone to lead a leisure life in our daily, busy real world.

Conclusion

In ancient China, leisure originally had the meaning of free time and non-work activities, and more profoundly, it represented an ideal and happy lifestyle or a life philosophy centered on the Tao, which refers to both a lofty realm and daily life practice. From the perspective of cultural sociology, the classes of ancient Chinese society can be roughly divided into aristocracy, literati and officialdom, and civilians. The concept of leisure discussed here mainly concerns literati and officialdom, who took the implementation of Tao as their own responsibility and who impacted Chinese society and the cultural ideal most significantly. In terms of the leisure ideal, spirit, and its related lifestyle, traditional Chinese leisure thought has extensively influenced Chinese leisure from earlier to current generations, which can be summarized by four points (Dai et al., 2019; Walker & Wang, 2008; Wang & Stringer, 2000).

First, is the leisure attitude of following and imitating nature. Just as the “tree 木” and “moon 月” in the “leisure 休閒” hieroglyph indicates, nature was the basis for leisure in China’s ancient agricultural society. Instead of achieving leisure by exploring, challenging, and struggling with nature (e.g., adventure, crossing jungles, diving) as in Western society, Chinese leisure emphasizes dependence on and obedience to nature. For example, Chinese people deeply enjoy leisure by watching the flow of the river, grass growing in front of the window, eagles flying in the sky, and fish jumping out of the water. It is said that the famous verse “picking chrysanthemums under the eastern fence, and leisurely seeing the south mountain” written by Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365 CE–427 CE), a great poet in the Eastern Jin dynasty, completely embodies the attitude of leisure in Chinese culture.

Second, leisure involves the pursuit of a life centered on the Golden Mean and harmony. Chinese people regard the state of balance and harmony between the body and mind, human beings, and the outer world, namely the Golden Mean, as the goal when engaging in leisure. This balance and harmony is evident not only in peaceful leisure activities such as tea drinking, couplets, riddles, chanting poems, and chess playing, but also in various sports such as martial arts, sword dancing, pitch-pot, Taiji, Qigong, and Daoyin. Certain activities, such as wrestling and polo, were once military training programs in the Qin-Han dynasties, and gradually became skill-oriented and relaxed leisure games in later generations. In general, when engaging in various leisure activities, people do not advocate confrontation and competition, but emphasize the balance and harmony of up and down, left and right, dynamic and static, rigid and soft, physical and mental, internal and external, and a mysterious spiritual harmonious realm of unity between heaven and people.

Third, is the passive, quiet, and introverted leisure style. Typical leisure activities in ancient China, such as guqin, chess, calligraphy, painting, meditation, enjoying flowers, Taiji, and so on, are mostly presented in an individualized relaxed and passive way, without much tension, competition, fierceness, and creativity. In comparison, “Schole” in ancient Greek means not only “leisure,” but also “a learned discussion, lecture” and “a place for lectures, a school” (Liddell & Scott, 2015, p. 788); and the word “recreation” in English means not just “hobby, pastime, leisure,” but also to re-create, namely, “to make something from the past exist again in a new form” (Guo et al., 2014, p. 2100). Adventure activities such as skydiving, mountaineering, bullfighting, rock climbing and

exploration, and competitive sports, such as football, basketball, and rugby, were relatively rare in ancient China. Compared with Western countries, Chinese leisure seems to have not fundamentally changed and still tends to be more passive, gentle, and lacks the spirit of extroverted exploration and creation in general (Chen et al., 2018; Moneta, 2004; Wei & Stodolska, 2015).

Fourth, it is the ideal life that integrates work and leisure (Escande, 2010). In contemporary times, work and leisure are often regarded as different pursuits and are clearly separated. In ancient China, the “following one’s will to do anything without exceeding the rules” (Zhu, 2005, p. 56) of Confucianism, the “entertaining with things” by the technique of Taoism, and the “Zen in daily life” of Buddhism, all communicated that leisure and work can be integrated based on morality, naturalism, and the wisdom of emptiness. This concept of integrating work and leisure can provide meaningful inspiration to better understand the essence and the relationship between leisure and work, to break the modern dichotomy of work and leisure, to create more comfortable and friendly work for people or make the work more leisurely and humane, to improve both achievement and pleasure in work, and to introduce more creativity and enjoyment into our lives.

Based on the study of traditional Chinese leisure culture, more discussions on the transformation of leisure concepts and activities in modern China are needed, such as the concept of harmony between humans and nature (even heaven), the activities between prudent behaviors and group leisure, idleness and busyness, quiet style and active style, and elegant and vulgar forms. Additional reflections on the related core meaning and categories of Western leisure studies are also needed, such as freedom, flow, and the relationship between leisure and work. These research topics are rich in content and academic value, and will remain so in the future.

In brief, although in the past century or so, leisure research has expanded, it is still mainly based on the Occidentalocentric tradition. As discussed above, traditional Chinese leisure as a culture and philosophy that delineates how to lead a happy daily life in pursuit of Tao, has influenced the leisure ideal and related style of Chinese people in recent generations, and is an indispensable part of the human community to better understand leisure concepts and practices from a broader perspective. A more specific exchange of ideas or comparison of Chinese and Western leisure thoughts and the development of contemporary leisure theory and practice is extremely meaningful work that depends on the joint efforts of more scholars from the East and the West. We humbly and sincerely appeal to the academic community to participate in this study.

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