

The Soil and the Tree

THESIS: A Renaissance Man's suppression and hardship are the "soil" that eventually grow into a "tree" of the outer display of human achievement. How does this describe Dr. Ming Wang, a modern Renaissance Man, compared to the Renaissance men of the Renaissance Era?

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The Renaissance Era[1] was a rare period of time in human history, in which never before and after the fact, has there been such an explosion in artistry and creative development at such incredible speed in a few hundred years. There are modern Renaissance men and women, as well, whose achievements, though may be to the degree or as high level, of those of the Italian Renaissance masters, do nonetheless share much in common with that of the Italian Renaissance masters, namely they have also achieved extraordinarily across a wide spectrum of human endeavors in modern time.

Regarding Italian Renaissance men, whenever one is asked who best represents the Renaissance Era: the brilliant, inventive, and imaginative creations of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Leon Battista Alberti, and countless more usually come to mind. They all were artists, architects, and poets who were used their vast humanistic knowledge to create a new world around him for the better. Through these geniuses, the title Renaissance Man was born, which describes a human being who has wide interests and expertise in numerous fields of study. Moving forward through time, the same stage is taken by men like Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Ben Franklin, meaning the term “Renaissance Man” does not label people from the Renaissance Era only. Today, there are modern Renaissance Men also, who walking the Earth, using their skills and intellect to change the world, and in this paper, I want to highlight one particular individual, Dr. Ming Wang, MD, PhD.

“Men can do all things if they will.”[3] Jacob Burckhardt quotes the Renaissance humanist Leon Battista Alberti in the “The Development of the Individual” section of his book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*[4]. Dr. Wang surely follows through this revolutionary saying as he demonstrates an impressive array of achievement across a wide field range of human endeavor in art, music, dance, medicine, scientific research, and world-class

laser eye surgery. He graduated *magna cum laude* from Harvard Medical School and MIT and is one of the only few cataract and LASIK surgeons in the world today who holds a doctorate degree in laser physics. He has performed over 55,000 procedures, including on over 4,000 doctors. Dr. Wang is the only surgeon in the state who performs 3D laser vision procedures. He published 9 textbooks, holds several U.S. patents for his invention of new biotechnology to restore sight and has performed the world's first laser artificial cornea implantation. He has founded a 501c(3) non-profit charity, Wang Foundation for Sight Restoration which to date has helped patients from over 40 states in the U.S. and 55 countries with all sight restoration surgeries performed free-of-charge. Dr. Wang was named the Kiwanis Nashvillian of the Year for his lifetime dedication to help blind orphan children from around the world. In addition, Dr. Wang is a musician who plays the Chinese violin er-hu and has collaborated with the country music legend Dolly Parton, an excellent ping pong player and nationally ranked amateur ballroom dancer who was a finalist of U.S. national championship in international style 10-dance. In a word, Dr. Wang is truly a modern renaissance man.

While most people do indeed appreciate the extraordinary artistic achievement of the Italian Renaissance, only few actually understand why there was such an extraordinary level of human achievement and why it took place then. What I want to say in this paper, is that these amazing human achievement in the Renaissance era did not happen by chance, it actually grew organically from long periods of suppression of human creativity, the most known being the Dark Ages[2] before the Renaissance began. To understand human creativity and achievement of the Renaissance, is to understand the extraordinary level of suppression, and how human beings dug into the deepest parts of their souls, fought against such repression, persisted, through extraordinary determination and hard work, survived the hardship, grew, matured, excelled, and

were triumphant at the end, with the creation of such highest level of human artistic achievement that the world had never seen before or since.

Our modern Renaissance man, Dr. Ming Wang, also had endured tremendous and unbearable hardship as well. He survived, barely by the skin of his teeth, the devastating and terrifying Cultural Revolution[5] when he was a child living in China. “Like a grand tapestry, it was perhaps all of these interconnecting events and experiences that brought about dramatic changes in my life, and have been woven into a picture that I am grateful for and treasure more than words can say.”[6] Dr. Wang describes in his autobiography *From Darkness to Sight*, the story this Renaissance Man tells of how never giving up will eventually lead to happiness through all life’s trials and tribulations.

First impressions can be deceiving: if one was to observe Dr. Ming Wang dancing a waltz, most likely they would see an older gentleman guiding his partner simply across the dim-lighted floor, expressing a beautiful posture and flawlessly like a smooth river current. They presumably think this is someone who has danced as a hobby and has honed his skills over many years. However, in Dr. Wang’s eyes, he doesn’t care what his “outer display” presents, and instead he only focuses on the “inner quality” of his dance, meaning it’s not the glamour, excessive movement, and fancy footwork that’s important—it’s the meditation, focus, logic, and elegance one puts in the routine that is crucial. It is the dream-like state of his dance when one can see the passion and sensitivity Dr. Wang takes to perform from his heart. One would soon learn by reading Dr. Wang’s autobiography that “Just like in the ballet *Giselle*, in which the young man was condemned to continue dancing until he collapsed and died, I danced constantly, consumed by the ever-present fear that I would be deported if I was not good enough dancer to get into the communist song and dance troop.”[7]

Two over-the-phone interviews were held with Dr. Wang: the first on March 31st and the other April 11th regarding how he envisioned himself as a modern Renaissance man. Dr. Wang's definition of a Renaissance Man isn't too far off from the original. There are three parts: one) the person must have a wide range of interest and achievement in different fields, two) the person is inspiring, creative, and different to the people around him, and three) a person's level of achievement is to the level of success that person has.[8]

When asked if there was any difference between a modern Renaissance Man and a Renaissance Man from the Renaissance Era, his reply consist of how there was no fundamental difference between the two, only a difference in the form of expression and the skill-set in technology used. For example, Filippo Brunelleschi, a Renaissance Man from the 15th Century responsible for the Dome of Florence's Santa Maria del Fiore, invented a device called an ox-hoist specifically for the Dome's creation, the finest piece of technology at its time. As for Dr. Wang, he invented the world's first amniotic membrane contact lens, which became revolutionary in the surgical world of eye surgeons.

Coincidentally, the Renaissance Era is Dr. Wang's favored time of history, because of Italy's uniqueness and, most importantly, the tremendous suppression of a thousand years exploding with creativity. The suppression Dr. Wang refers to is the era that occurred before the Renaissance: the Middle Ages. "The most significant difference between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was the shift in focus from the...community to...the individual." [9] Dr. Wang describes three steps that led to the Renaissance explosion. First, there must be a very long period of time of extraordinary suppression and locked-in oppression (the Dark Ages is a sufficient example). It was during the Dark Ages that Europe was "...suffering from diseases and poverty. They were also suffering from problems such as lack of employment and education,

health care, a stable home, and basic necessities of life. These problems sometimes led to numerous deaths of both children and adults due to lack of health care provided.”[10] Second, all that bottled-up suppression is compressed like a spring, until BOOM! An explosion of humanistic discoveries, science, and art spread abundantly across the land (this begins during the 1300s). Lastly, the individual must strive on their own by using their own efforts— “Renaissance achievements does not come to you from a spoon.”[11]

Dr. Wang’s journey as a suitable Renaissance Man can be described by the same three steps of the Renaissance as well. The suppression of the Dark Ages correlates with Dr. Wang’s experience during the Cultural Revolution. He matured through poverty, the threat of deportation, and even the risk of losing his life. His father Zhen-sheng Wang, who was also a doctor, was Dr. Wang’s inspiration throughout his entire life: “...whenever I thought of giving up, I would hear my father’s voice saying ‘Don’t give up. Go for it.’”[12] This leads to the second step, as the Cultural Revolution came to an end, Dr. Wang saw the opportunity that he could still have a future and the impossible, bottled-in feats that eventually, just like a spring, exploded with success and brought him to America. The last step is similar to the second one: Dr. Wang worked extra hard all on his own (with some guidance over the years) to achieve his goals. He wasn’t going to be given or “fed” the information willingly or easily.

Similar to our modern Renaissance man Dr. Wang, the Italian Renaissance masters over five-hundred years ago had also have to suffer and have to overcome extraordinary hardship, following the same three steps of the Renaissance, and implicating that suppression also played a major role in the uprising of these great individuals. For example, Leonardo da Vinci was known to break laws in the name of science: “Dissection was completely illegal unless one was a physician, which da Vinci was not...His deviance led to a better understanding of the human

body and is an important footnote in medical and art history.”[13] Filippo Brunelleschi established himself as a one-man show when he backed out the partnership with his rival Lorenzo Ghiberti, another Renaissance Man, for the design of the Baptistry bronze doors, because he would never accept a tie: “Filippo withdrew from the competition when his demand for complete control was refused...”[14] This selfish act would follow him for the rest of his life in the rest of his world-renown projects. Some men’s suppression are never conquered: for example, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, despite of his great achievements in the world of classical music, his homosexuality constantly haunted him throughout his life...and when it was made public, “The homosexual was now defined not by his acts but by his character, a character that was certified to be diseased, hence necessarily alien to that of healthy, 'normal' people.”[15] This ultimately led to the great composer to committing suicide.

Despite all the suppression these men and hundreds of others endured, they are remembered as great Renaissance men of history, because they did not succumbed to these hardships and give in. They pushed themselves through the tragedy and emerged with triumph, hence the second and third steps of the Renaissance. This was *why* these men did what they did: they were held down and compressed like a spring until suddenly they were released with explosive speed, leading to human growth, progress, and inspiration. As Dr. Wang would say, “Without suffering, there would be no Renaissance, no creativity...It is not all as colorful as it seems—dig deep into the souls to learn the truth.”[16] Throughout the centuries, Renaissance men have evolved ahead of the Earth, the world is always two steps behind, and it all began in the Renaissance Era—Burckhardt describes in his book “the typical Renaissance man as ‘the first-born among the sons of modern Europe.’”[17]

Burckhardt also defines an objective and subjective treatment Renaissance Men unveiled during the Renaissance Era, where as normal people were only conscious of how others classified each other, the treatment, or effort, allowed one to classify himself. "...an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side...asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such."^[18] Dr. Wang had his own insight on objective outcome and subjective effort. "I define my goal in life by subjective effort...not by objective outcome"^[19] To Dr. Wang, the objective outcome is outer display of achievement and is less important, and subjective effort is one's inner quality and is more important.

The objective outcome, in Dr. Wang's words, is the consequence(s) of the subjective effort you put in. Objective outcome corresponds with the outer display of what you have done because that is what people see. They see the finish product of Dr. Wang's efforts to provide Tennessee businesses assistance to sell products to China (having founded the Tennessee Chinese Chamber of Commerce [TCCC]), starting the nonprofit foundation (the Wang Foundation for Sight Restoration) that provides sight restoration surgeries free of charge for patients who would never be able to afford them, and even contribute his musical talent for country music legend Dolly Parton^[20].

People want to study Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical structure of the human body. They want to awe at Filippo Brunelleschi's Dome towering alongside the Santa Maria del Fiore. They want to hear the emotional and exciting scores of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. People want to see the "tree" and ignore how it got there in the first place. They do not ask the question "How did the tree grow so tall?"

Subjective effort and inner quality are the answers. Dr. Wang defines subjective effort as how you put the effort, and how much, to achieve your goal(s). “Life is about enjoying the process of achieving my goal.”[21] Dr. Wang says in his second interview, as he thoroughly justified the idea of self-acknowledgement, whether it’s failure- or achievement-wise. Dr. Wang defied the odds when he became one of four high school seniors who was allowed to attend college out of fifty million people! “After years of struggle with so little hope, I never believed that I would actually be able to go to college, so the moment felt surreal.”[22] Dr. Wang attended the University of Science and Technology of China (USTC), majoring in chemical physics, having a fascination for lasers. As he studied them, he was “filled with a sense of magic and possibility...believed science and technology could be the source of wondrous transformation, and the science of lasers quickly became my passion.”[23]

Eventually, Dr. Wang’s herculean and passionate effort led him to America. “Reflecting on my life up to that point, I was amazed that not only had I survived the devastating Cultural Revolution, and gotten into college in the toughest year to do so in China's history, but now I was fortunate enough to be going to America for my graduate studies! How had I made it this far?”[24] Immediately arriving in America in 1982, he stunned the University of Maryland with the highest scores in the chemistry department’s history in the past twenty years on subject matter tests designed to determine what graduate level classes students will take. However, being an immigrant, Dr. Wang faced embarrassment and discrimination. Did that hold him down—it only strengthened and encouraged him to do better and improve his skills in speaking English and studying. “I would be forced to prove myself again and again.”[25]

Although the Renaissance Era didn’t have lasers and traveling to America was nonexistent[26], the Renaissance men had their own trials and tribulations to reach what people

would remember them for forever. Niccolo Machiavelli, a political Renaissance Man, used his useful observation skills at his own risk to establish the ideal Prince and government. Francesco Petrarch created his works based on his own self-acknowledge to be remembered as an individual human being and the feats he took to secure it, such as when he climbed Mount Ventoux. This is the “soil” that grows the tree people see. The more fertilized or “enrich with effort” the soil, than the higher and more beautiful the tree grows. Soil gives life to the roots, which eventually blossoms. “Without the soil, there would be no tree.”[27] Dr. Wang states. People tend to see the achievements and outer quality (the tree) of Dr. Wang and the Renaissance men before him and ignore the inner quality and the *base* where it all began (the soil). Dr. Wang ends the topic on the objective outcome and subjective effort with “The extraordinary range of a Renaissance Man: from the deepest depth of suffering...the seeds placed in the soil...to the highest level of achievement...the beautiful blossomed tree...that subject effort, not objective outcome, is what matters most. *Why* you do something is more important than *what* you have actually done.”[28]

Something people tend to envision in a Renaissance Man’s success is the fame, glory, and fortune they inherit for their accomplishments. As Dr. Wang puts it, we are “...constantly being judged...by the people around you.”[29] Filippo Brunelleschi scored the reputation as the genius who reinvented architecture. Niccolo Machiavelli is referred to the father of modern political science. Leonardo da Vinci is as historians describe as the prime exemplar of the “Universal Genius” and is widely considered one of the most diversely talented individuals to have ever lived. It is safe to assume that these men and other Renaissance men reaped in riches and stardom in their times, and their glory depended on the many fields they specialized in, but nonetheless received it greatly.

However, did they want it all? Burckhardt analyzes a couple of Renaissance men from the Renaissance Era on their view of fame, glory, and fortune. First, Petrarch “admits that he wishes for fame in the times to come, but would rather be without it in his own day”[30] in his letter *To Posterity*. Another example is Machiavelli, who “amid all these preparations outwardly to win and secure fame, the curtain is now and then drawn aside, and we see with frightful evidence a boundless ambition and thirst after greatness, independent of all means and consequences.”[31] When these men passed on, “it was the point of honour for the different cities to possess the bones of their own and foreign celebrities.”[32]

While most Renaissance men longed for fame, glory, and fortune, Dr. Ming Wang calls them a “secondary position...only temptations.”[33] When asked if any of the three rewards ever cross his mind and/or inspired him to strive farther in life, Dr. Wang falls back on subjective effort and inner quality, saying it was number one priority to him. With thirty-one years of education, would one not at least consider rewarding himself with wealth? Even though he resists, he admittedly acknowledges wealth, fame, and glory would be nice. But unlike Petrarch, who dreamed of the commodities of his efforts before he received them, Dr. Wang’s childhood and teenage years had him contemplating how he would survive the Cultural Revolution, avoid the terror of deportation, receive illegal education, and endlessly study for the slimmest chance of attending college... “I do not want to impress others...I just want to improve myself as a person...something good I should do to reach inner strength...If fame, glory, and fortune came along, great!”[34]

Dr. Wang focuses on subjective effort and inner quality in his education, his social life, and even his dancing and music. “Dancing is not going to earn me fame, glory, and fortune, but it brings life into my inner self...more understanding about my patients...”[35] As a world-

renown laser eye, who has operated more than 55,000 procedures (more than 4,000 have been on other doctors, being titled the “doctor’s doctor”), Dr. Wang assigns himself with the responsibility of taking the extra mile to take care towards his patients—he treats every patient the same: he is available on call 24/7 and replies to every email he receives for any questions and/or concerns his patients may have, and before and after every surgery he performs, he prays with the patient and their accompanying family and friends.

To go even further into this man’s generosity and compassion towards others, “Ming Wang has taken his ophthalmology expertise to China, where he’s bought an ownership stake in the country’s largest private eye hospital system and trained thousands of eye surgeons.”^[36] His love for his birth country and for his second country has inspired him to provide as much support as he can for both. He comments in his autobiography, “As an American business owner who was born in China, I know both the cultural perspective of the East and the business mindset in the West.”^[37] Dr. Wang travelled to China and in “...his four years there, he has personally taught and certified thousands of surgeons. Traveling the country and lecturing 15,000 ophthalmologists, Wang is having a hand in pulling China forward in health care capability.”^[38]

Fame, glory, and fortune comes regardless if Dr. Wang seeks it or not. Rice Broocks published the book “God’s Not Dead” that illustrated the lives of six individuals and their journeys to finding God. Dr. Wang was one of the six individuals. Dr. Wang’s story was the inspiration for the character Martin Yip in the movie that was released in 2014. “This man [Dr. Ming Wang] — a highly educated person of science — also transitioned from atheism to Christianity while he was a student.”^[39] Dr. Wang has published a hundred articles (the most acclaimed being in the world-renowned *Nature* journal^[40]), and has received many awards for his efforts: the Honor Award from the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the NPR’s

Philanthropist of the Year Award, and an honorary doctorate degree from Trevecca Nazarene University are just to name a handful. Yet, with all this praise and accomplishments enough to spoil a modest man, this Renaissance Man voiced he wants to “...pursue the seeking of essence of life...the originality of life.”[41]

Dr. Wang exclaims that he has never been asked about his thoughts about being a Renaissance Man; this is the first time, and he is greatly honored, confirming that all his insight is from the heart. In summary, what I want to say in this paper, is that we do know that modern Renaissance men and women do share in common with the Italian Renaissance men in that they both have grown extraordinary “trees”. In the case of Dr. Wang, the tree is world-class laser eye surgery, a wide range of interest and a dedication to help those who need the most help. In the case of the Italian Renaissance men, it was the breathtaking level of artistic achievement.

However, the main point of this paper is this: while the modern and ancient Renaissance men and women do share the fact they have grown “trees”, tall and amazing trees (achievement), they ALSO share the fact that they all also have “soil” as well, namely, the extraordinary suffering and struggle that proceeded, and was in fact what was given inspiration to, the extraordinary achievement, the “trees”.

Though the nature of the “trees”, i.e., the type of suffering and hardships, are actually different, between the modern Renaissance man and that of the Italian masters, and the nature of the “trees” that grew out of the soils are different as well, the overall PATTERN of what happened is the SAME, namely, it was those soil (suffering) that proceeded that gave the inspiration and drive that subsequently resulted in the trees (achievement)! Without the soil, the suffering and hardship which shaped a human being’s character and resolve, making him/her dig into the deepest corner of his/her being, to use every ounce of his/her ability, to fight and to

survive, there will be no trees (achievement). Soil preceded the tree, it was what give rise to the tree.

To truly understand a Renaissance man, ancient or modern, is to *not only* understand the achievement (the trees), *but also, and perhaps even more importantly*, understand what actually give rise the trees (the soil). The common theme between the modern Renaissance Man like Dr. Wang and the Renaissance men of the Renaissance Era is not only the extraordinary human achievement, but also, the achievement is like a tree—it must have rich soil in order to grow tall and beautiful. The soil represents the suppression and hardship one must endure to build and shape their character, and it is inspired to a singular focus to conquer the suffering by embracing the inner quality of life and strive for subjective effort. The result is the tree, blossoming from the explosion of human creativity and achievement, that have been suppressed and bottled for so long, until it finally has the chance to come out, to be free, to truly express and create, for the whole world to awe the outer display and appreciate its beauty. This is the complete picture of a Renaissance Man.

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[1] Era between the 1300s and 1600s, where the transition from the Middle Ages to modernization occurs at a rapid pace.

[2] The period in western Europe that occurs after the fall of the Roman Empire (c. 500) and concludes in the 1100s—there were Germanic tribes plundering villages and towns throughout Europe, along with drastic setbacks in politics, economics, and society.

[3] Jacob Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (London, 1878), 103.

[4] Written in 1860 by Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, it details and describes the classic Renaissance historiography.

[5] From 1966 to 1976, its goal was to eliminate higher education—universities were shut down and those with higher education were ranked at the bottom of the social ladder and/or deported across the country into the poorest regions, left to work through hard labor and poverty. Also known as the “Cultural Holocaust” over 20 million lives were destroyed by the deportation program alone.

[6] Dr. Ming Wang, *From Darkness To Sight* (Dunham Books, 2016), 19.

[7] Ibid 225.

[8] Dr. Ming Wang, interview by author, Murfreesboro, March 31, 2019.

[9] “What Is the Difference Between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance?,” IAC Publishing, LLC., accessed on 13 April 2019, <https://www.reference.com/history/difference-between-middle-ages-renaissance-7b68f2f24d138f31>.

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[12] Dr. Ming Wang, *From Darkness To Sight*, 135.

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[17] Jonathan Jones, “Jacob Burckhardt: The Renaissance Revisited,” *The Guardian*, 9 July 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/jul/10/jacob-burckhardt-civilization-renaissance-italy>

[18] Jacob Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 98.

[19] Dr. Ming Wang, interview by author, Murfreesboro, April 11, 2019.

[20] Dr. Wang provided harmony and melody with his er-hu, the perfect instrument to express longing, for Dolly Parton’s Album *Those Were the Days*. The song he played for is called “The Cruel War”.

- [21] Dr. Ming Wang, interview by author, Murfreesburo, April 11, 2019.
- [22] Dr. Ming Wang, *from Darkness To Sight*, 89.
- [23] Ibid 91.
- [24] Ibid 99.
- [25] Ibid 114.
- [26] The Americas would not be discovered until 1492 by explorer Christopher Columbus.
- [27] Dr. Ming Wang, interview by author, Murfreesburo, March 31, 2019.
- [28] Ibid.
- [29] Dr. Ming Wang, interview by author, Murfreesburo, April 11, 2019.
- [30] Jacob Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 105.
- [31] Ibid 109.
- [32] Ibid 106.
- [33] Dr. Ming Wang, interview by author, Murfreesburo, April 11, 2019.
- [34] Ibid.
- [35] Ibid.
- [36] Roy Moore, "Ming Wang Makes Middle Kingdom Move," *Nashville Business Journal* (16 June 2006)https://www.wangvisioninstitute.com/article_nbj_june2006.htm
- [37] Dr. Ming Wang, *From Darkness To Sight*, 252.
- [38] Roy Moore, *Nashville Business Journal*.
- [39] Jessica Bliss, "Ming Wang inspired 'God's Not Dead' Film Character," *Tennessean*, 2 April 2019,<https://www.tennessean.com/story/entertainment/2014/04/02/ming-wang-inspired-gods-dead-film-character/7206647/>
- [40] First published in 1869, it contains some of the most recognizable scientific journal articles in the world.
- [41] Dr. Ming Wang, interview by author, Murfreesburo, April 11, 2019.