



English Learning for Curious Minds



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Episode #128

The Art of War

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[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The Art of War, probably the most famous book about military strategy in the world, and one that was written almost two and a half thousand years ago.

[00:00:38] We'll talk about who actually wrote the book, because that's not a simple answer.

[00:00:43] We'll also talk about what's in the book, what you can learn from it, and at the end we'll try to figure out what you, as a learner of English, can take from this book and apply to your own English learning.



The Art of War

[00:00:58] This is actually the second episode about 'war' - there was a member-only one that came out a couple of days ago, episode 127, which was on the [ethics](#)¹, and [morality](#)² of war, of when a war can be considered 'just' and right.

[00:01:15] So, you can listen to the two episodes independently, but they do go quite nicely together.

[00:01:20] That one is available exclusively on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:26] Before we get right into The Art of War, I want to quickly remind you that you can get all of the bonus episodes, like the one on Just War, plus the subtitles, the transcript, and the key vocabulary for this episode and all of our other ones over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:45] This is also where you can check out becoming a member of Leonardo English and join a community of curious minds from all over the world, doing meetups, exchanging ideas, and generally improving their English in a more interesting way.

[00:02:00] So if that is of interest, and I can't see a reason why it wouldn't be, then the place to go to is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:02:10] OK then, The Art of War.

¹ moral rules for deciding what is right and wrong

² a set of standards for deciding what is right and wrong



The Art of War

[00:02:14] You have probably heard about this book, you will probably have seen quotes from it on social media.

[00:02:21] But unless you have read it, you might not know what's actually in it, and the story of how it became quite so popular.

[00:02:30] There are very few other books that have been around for quite so long that have remained so popular that are non-religious.

[00:02:40] And it's quite an achievement that a book that was written almost two and a half thousand years ago, when the world was completely different, is still used today by millions of people to help them think about how to live their lives, how to act in the [workplace](#)³, and how to compete in the modern world.

[00:03:02] Indeed, one of the most interesting things about The Art of War is that, although it is about 'war', the lessons in it can be [applied](#)⁴ to so many different aspects of life.

[00:03:16] So on one level The Art of War is more about The Art of Life than war, and the lessons in it are universal, no matter whether you were living in the second century BC in China or you're doing what you're doing now, listening to a podcast episode and improving your English.

³ the place where people work

⁴ if you apply a lesson, you use that lesson



The Art of War

[00:03:37] To [kick things off](#)⁵, I should start by saying that there is probably as much about The Art of War that we don't know as we do know.

[00:03:47] The author is thought to be a Chinese general and military [strategist](#)⁶ called Sun Tzu, who lived around the 5th century BC.

[00:03:58] On a practical note, Sun Tzu isn't actually his real name, that just means 'Master Sun'.

[00:04:07] His birth name was Sun Wu, so if you hear someone referring to Sun Tzu, Sun zi, or Sun Wu, it's all the same person.

[00:04:18] We'll [stick](#)⁷ with Sun Tzu for the purposes of this episode.

[00:04:22] When Sun Tzu was alive China was in a period called the Warring States, 'warring' means 'at war'.

[00:04:31] Sun was from the Wu state of China, which is in modern day Zhejiang province, to the east of the country, near to Shanghai.

[00:04:41] In modern China, this part of the country is one of the wealthiest, a heart of industry and power.

⁵ start

⁶ someone with a lot of skill in a particular subject

⁷ keep doing what you are doing



The Art of War

[00:04:50] But during the Warring States era it was far from it. It was very much a [peripheral](#)⁸ state, with the most important states to the north, closer to Beijing.

[00:05:03] You'll note that I haven't given specific dates for really anything here, because we simply don't know.

[00:05:11] Historians believe that Sun Tzu existed around this time, and that he started writing down his thoughts on military strategy.

[00:05:21] Since the 5th century BC the text has been changed, edited by numerous different actors who added and removed parts of it.

[00:05:32] So even if it were Sun that first wrote it, the text that you would read today is almost certainly not the original written by Sun.

[00:05:43] But that doesn't make it any less interesting, or any less worthwhile reading.

[00:05:49] Perhaps it makes it even more so.

[00:05:51] Indeed, when one thinks of some of the most widely read books in the world, especially the religious texts, the majority of those were written by multiple different people over extended periods of time.

[00:06:05] The book remained a popular military strategy [manual](#)⁹ in China, but it wasn't until the 18th century, almost two thousand years after it was first written, that it

⁸ on the edge

⁹ book with instructions



The Art of War

reached the West, after having been translated by a French Jesuit [missionary¹⁰](#), a man called Jean Joseph Marie Amiot.

[00:06:26] There are rumours that The Art of War was prized by Napoleon, that he thought very highly of it, and that he used it as a guide for his military campaigns.

[00:06:38] But his decision to invade Russia in the winter suggests that he might not have read the chapter on understanding the weather conditions on the battlefield before he [set off¹¹](#).

[00:06:51] It wasn't until the start of the 20th century that the book was translated into English, first with the title of The Book of War, with the translation of the title only later being commonly accepted as The Art of War.

[00:07:09] In fact, the literal translation from the Chinese would be "Master Sun's Military Methods", so you could say that The Art of War is a lot more [catchy¹²](#).

[00:07:21] Since then it has been translated into [dozens¹³](#) of different languages, and has been [credited¹⁴](#) by all sorts of military and non-military leaders for their successes.

¹⁰ someone who is sent to a foreign country to teach their religion

¹¹ start on a trip

¹² easy to remember

¹³ (informal) a lot

¹⁴ believed to be responsible for (something positive)



The Art of War

[00:07:33] So, enough of the [backstory](#)¹⁵, what is actually in The Art of War, and what can you learn from it?

[00:07:42] I should say that it's actually a very short book, and you can probably read the entire thing in under an hour.

[00:07:50] If you read it, you might be surprised to find that it seems a little bit [disorganised](#)¹⁶, a little bit [disorderly](#)¹⁷.

[00:08:00] The book is divided into 13 different chapters, each of which discusses a different element of military strategy.

[00:08:09] But, as you might have guessed, it doesn't really go into specific detail of how to fight a battle, how many soldiers are needed or what [formations](#)¹⁸ should be used against different types of enemies.

[00:08:23] The lessons in The Art of War are all related to strategy, and how to think.

[00:08:30] This is why it has remained so popular, and why sports coaches, politicians, and business leaders often [swear by](#)¹⁹ the lessons in it.

¹⁵ things that happened before the main story

¹⁶ not well organised

¹⁷ badly organised

¹⁸ (military) how soldiers are divided in different groups

¹⁹ if you swear by something, you believe it is very important



The Art of War

[00:08:41] There are several [themes](#)²⁰ in the book that are worth mentioning, and of course, if these are of interest I would certainly recommend actually reading the book yourself.

[00:08:52] The first lesson is that, although the book is about war, war and [conflict](#)²¹ should be avoided with [diplomacy](#)²² if at all possible.

[00:09:03] Sun Tzu writes that fighting should be a [last resort](#)²³, and if there are diplomatic ways to avoid a battle, then these should be preferable.

[00:09:14] A quote you may have heard from this is "To win 100 battles is not the [height](#)²⁴ of skill, to [subdue](#)²⁵ the enemy without fighting is."

[00:09:24] So Sun is saying here that the best way to beat your enemy is by avoiding the [battlefield](#)²⁶ [altogether](#)²⁷.

²⁰ main subjects

²¹ fighting

²² the job of managing the relationships between countries

²³ if something is a last resort, you do it because there are no other options

²⁴ if something is the height of something else, it's the most extreme example of it

²⁵ to prevent something from happening

²⁶ the place where a battle is fought

²⁷ in total



The Art of War

[00:09:33] I guess that might not be what you'd expect to find in a book called The Art of War, right?

[00:09:40] The second [theme](#)²⁸ that I want to mention is the importance of preparation.

[00:09:46] Now, this is by no means revolutionary, Sun didn't invent the idea that it was important to be prepared.

[00:09:54] But a [recurrent](#)²⁹ [theme](#) in the book is that the person who is best prepared, who knows the [territory](#)³⁰, who understands the enemy's strengths and weaknesses, and perhaps most importantly, who has a well-trained army, will be [victorious](#)³¹.

[00:10:12] There's a quote that you may have heard here, and that's "it is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be [imperiled](#)³² in a hundred battles; if you do not know your enemies but do know yourself, you will win one and lose one; if you do not know your enemies nor yourself, you will be [imperiled](#) in every single battle."

²⁸ the main subject

²⁹ happening multiple times

³⁰ the area of land

³¹ if you are victorious, you have won (e.g. a battle)

³² put in danger



The Art of War

[00:10:36] Our third, and final ‘general’ lesson here from The Art of War that is worth pointing out is the importance of being adaptable, of analysing the situation at every possible moment and changing as required.

[00:10:52] Sun writes that a good leader should be constantly ready and adaptable to change, and that change actually presents opportunities.

[00:11:02] Indeed, Sun writes that a strong leader should try to hide their plans, hide their strategy so that it is hard for the enemy to make a plan.

[00:11:13] And similarly, a good leader should be ready to adapt at all times to fit the situation.

[00:11:20] There is evidently a lot more great advice in The Art of War, but these are three of the most important themes that I want to point out to give you a taste for it.

[00:11:32] Now, here’s the part where we try and see if there’s anything we can take from The Art of War about learning English, and about language learning.

[00:11:42] As far as I can see, nobody has ever done this before, perhaps because it is a little **tenuous**³³, the connections are a little unusual, but I think there are a few things that we can learn from The Art of War and apply to our approach to learning languages, and that you can apply to your own attitude towards learning English.

[00:12:04] So, let’s give this a go.

³³ not strong



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[00:12:16] Firstly, here's a direct quote from The Art of War:

[00:12:12] “Do not repeat the tactics which have gained you one victory, but let your methods be regulated³⁴ by the infinite variety³⁵ of circumstances³⁶.”

[00:12:31] When it comes to fighting a battle, the point here might be obvious - you shouldn't just do the same thing over and over, because the enemy will realise what you are doing, and you should be prepared to adapt to different situations.

[00:12:46] Now, can we take anything from this and apply it to learning English?

[00:12:51] I think perhaps we can...

[00:12:53] When many people learn a language, they just do one or two things, and assume that because they have got to a certain level with these one or two things, they will continue to improve at the same level.

[00:13:07] But that is rarely true.

[00:13:09] What might have worked to get you to a certain point, developing a certain skill, probably won't get you to the next level, it probably won't help you get to where you want to get to next.

³⁴ controlled

³⁵ different types

³⁶ the conditions that affect a situation



The Art of War

[00:13:23] And having a variety of different tools you can use, or tactics, as Sun Tzu would say, will mean that you are much better prepared.

[00:13:32] So instead of just being a master of Duolingo or [bingeing](#)³⁷ TV shows on Netflix, make sure you write in English, you listen to English podcasts like this one, that you do things like [Shadowing](#)³⁸, and [expose](#)³⁹ yourself to different styles of English.

[00:13:42] Make sense?

[00:13:43] I think it does.

[00:13:45] Our second English learning lesson from The Art of War is, and again this is a direct quote, “Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy are the noise before defeat.”

[00:14:01] The military lesson here is that if you have a plan, but no tactics to [execute](#)⁴⁰ it, you might win but it’ll take a long time.

[00:14:10] If you just have some tactics but no plan, then you will lose.

[00:14:15] Instead, you need both - a plan of action and tactics about how to achieve it.

³⁷ spending large amounts of time doing

³⁸ an activity used by linguists to improve their speaking

³⁹ if you expose yourself to something, you make it possible to experience it

⁴⁰ do, complete



The Art of War

[00:14:22] If we think about how this might apply to learning anything, including learning English, it's that you'll have the best results with tactics, so we can [interpret](#)⁴¹ tactics here as different tools to improve your English, but you will also benefit from an overall plan, a strategy of how to approach your learning.

[00:14:44] You might think that you can just sit down with Netflix, Duolingo, or podcasts and improvements will magically come, but they will come faster and more easily with a detailed plan of how all of the different tools and approaches you are planning to use will fit together.

[00:15:04] And our final lesson from Sun Tzu's The Art of War that we can apply to learning English is, and again, here's a direct quote: "Opportunities [multiply](#)⁴² as they are [seized](#)⁴³."

[00:15:16] When we think about this referring to [warfare](#)⁴⁴ it means: when you see an opportunity, take it if it is sensible as it will probably lead to more opportunities.

[00:15:29] Now, how is he going to claim this relates to learning English, you might be asking yourself?

⁴¹ understand

⁴² increase in number

⁴³ taken quickly

⁴⁴ the activity of war



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[00:15:35] Well, I think we can [interpret](#) it in exactly the same way, that if you see opportunities to [engage](#)⁴⁵ in English, to chat to others in English, to join English communities, when you find an opportunity to use English, take it because it will likely lead to more opportunities, which will themselves lead to more opportunities.

[00:15:59] But there's one huge difference between learning English and The Art of War, and that is that learning a language shouldn't be thought of as a battle.

[00:16:08] There is no enemy, despite how you might feel about phrasal verbs.

[00:16:13] You aren't fighting against anyone, and indeed the magical thing about learning a language is that it isn't a competition, so you might be thinking that you should ignore all of the advice you've just heard.

[00:16:28] But perhaps, just perhaps, there is something that you can take from this 2,500 year old book, and if it does help you with your English learning, then you won't be the first, and certainly won't be the last, to be [guided](#)⁴⁶ by the works of Master Sun.

[00:16:47] Ok then, that is it for The Art of War. I hope you found it an interesting one, and that you learned something new.

⁴⁵ use, communicate

⁴⁶ helped (by someone)



The Art of War

[00:16:56] As I said at the start, this is part 2 of a mini, mini series on war, the previous episode was on the idea of Just War, so if you haven't listened to that yet it's on the website, leonardoenglish.com.

[00:17:09] It is one of our member-only ones, so if you are a member, you'll find it on the website.

[00:17:14] And if you're not yet a member of Leonardo English, then now is the time to change that.

[00:17:20] Membership of Leonardo English gives you access to all of our episodes, so that's more than twice what you get on the podcast apps, plus subtitles, transcripts, key vocabulary, and much more.

[00:17:32] So if that's of interest, the place to go is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:17:38] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:17:44] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Ethics	moral rules for deciding what is right and wrong
Morality	a set of standards for deciding what is right and wrong
Workplace	the place where people work
Applied	if you apply a lesson, you use that lesson
Kick things off	start
Strategist	someone with a lot of skill in a particular subject
Stick	keep doing what you are doing
Peripheral	on the edge
Manual	book with instructions
Missionary	someone who is sent to a foreign country to teach their religion
Set off	start on a trip
Catchy	easy to remember



The Art of War

Dozens	(informal) a lot
Credited	believed to be responsible for (something positive)
Backstory	things that happened before the main story
Disorganised	not well organised
Disorderly	badly organised
Formations	(military) how soldiers are divided in different groups
Swear by	if you swear by something, you believe it is very important
Themes	main subjects
Conflict	fighting
Diplomacy	the job of managing the relationships between countries
Last resort	if something is a last resort, you do it because there are no other options
Height	if something is the height of something else, it's the most extreme example of it
Subdue	to prevent something from happening
Battlefield	the place where a battle is fought
Altogether	in total



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Theme	the main subject
Recurrent	happening multiple times
Territory	the area of land
Victorious	if you are victorious, you have won (e.g. a battle)
Imperiled	put in danger
Tenuous	not strong
Regulated	controlled
Variety	different types
Circumstances	the conditions that affect a situation
Bingeing	spending large amounts of time doing
Shadowing	an activity used by linguists to improve their speaking
Expose	if you expose yourself to something, you make it possible to experience it
Execute	do, complete
Interpret	understand
Multiply	increase in number



The Art of War

Seized	taken quickly
Warfare	the activity of war
Engage	use, communicate
Guided	helped (by someone)

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com

