

Dead in Translation - The Attack On Asia's Socio-Cultural Originality

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Dear Friends, First off, I am truly sorry for your loss. The "Qingming Jie" back in April looked and sounded too Sinitic; we finally had to replace it with the unambiguous, well-spirited "Tomb Sweeping Day". Sooner or later all is caught in translation.

It wasn't always meant to be. There are 1,3 billion Chinese stomping the earth, and also tens of billions of their ancestors romping the heavens. On Qingming Jie, those living and the dead come together for business. Yet, "Qing" and "ming" never quite made it into Western press. Why?

Although I agree that translating Qingming Jie as "Tomb Sweeping Holiday" is all sweet and caring, it rather suspiciously sounds Western, doesn't it? Some European missionaries (with their newspeak of saints, religion, and God) even translated Qingming Jie as "All Souls Day", which then, of course, makes it perfectly resemble a Roman Catholic Holiday. We see we learn. Why not turn the table and planetize Chinese names instead? Pinyin with a vengeance, anyone?

As Confucius once said: If the names are not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. It's known as the rectification of names, and it could well save Qingming Jie, if not an awful lot more.

Just as the German language is biblical, based on Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible, and Germany's descend from the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation, so is the Chinese language first Confucian and Daoist, and second Buddhist in spirit. Accordingly, German translations of Chinese key concepts are, and undoubtedly always will be, utterly misleading, if not outright diminishing East Asia's socio-cultural originality. Same is true in English.

The whole business of "Qing" and "ming", of course, is laden with unintended double entendres. When the tombs' pylons shine "clear" and "bright", that isn't just a Chinese metaphor for spring cleaning, but also the clearing of one's conscience. We all want to be remembered as good and caring family.

Yes, I do believe that the Chinese do not do enough to promote their own socio-cultural originality to the West. They, like the Japanese and Koreans perhaps, keep it all to themselves, so to speak, which is not always a good thing. I dread to think it is rather too passive.

The fact that I know Qingming Festival, or Dragon Boat Festival, or Chunjie, the Chinese New

Year, is purely a function of my living here. In fact, had I not come to China, I would have never learned that China is a wenming; that is has shengren and junzi, that is aspires datong, and that Confucianism isn't a religion but is rujiao.

Although I must admit it isn't absolutely vital that "Qingming Jie", which has existed since the Zhou Dynasty in the 11th to 3rd centuries BC, survives and escapes Westernization. But some of you must be feeling watched by your ancestors shaking their heads, saying: "Tz, tz, tz, Brother Lee, You've really let us down there."

China's ancestor worship is presumably a direct corollary of its filial piety, Xiao. The Chinese show great respect for their parents and grandparents. Theoretically, this may be extended to the grandparents of their grandparents, then the next five hundred generations back to the sage who invented gunpowder, paper cut, and the back scratcher; and, ultimately, to the Yellow Emperor himself -Huangdi No. One.

Many Westerners cling to the superstition that the Chinese are superstitious. Some long noses may even believe that the Han still use oracle bones to communicate with their ancestors or ask them for signs of approval for marriage or immigration to the U.S.A. They also believe that the Chinese eat dogs and reuse tea bags. Ok, they do reuse tea bags. But the rest, bear with me, is grossly exaggerated.

It is certainly true that the sphere of family, jia, blends perfectly into everyday life and speech of the Chinese diaspora. Not even the One-child-policy of the 70th -meant to cut down population growth- could mute "family-language": The kids, though now solitary little emperors, still call all their friends "brother and sister" and all their parent's friends "Auntie and Uncle", and so on.

While the practice of ancestor veneration, jing-zu, bai-zu or ji-zu (depending on your geography), isn't universally just a Chinese reflex, yet all those masterful idiosyncrasies certainly are: its fengshui for burial sites, the quirks of po and hun, the obscurities of yin and yang, even the Buddhist finicky of 'ghost money', all make the Chinese Qingming Jie very unique and strike me as very un-European. And, according to my sources, diyu -hell- in China isn't so bad at all.

Indeed, we in Europe bury our corpses in coffins and sink them into the earth, mostly located in our city's churches' backyards. We don't think of it as pollution. And while we do not offer wine and fruits, we are always ready to eat suchlike for picnic or barbeque at the gravesite. And, yes, we walk our dogs over cemeteries, and not for sight-seeing.

Loyalty for family isn't particular keen in the West either. Chinese society is based on a family-value system, but Western societies are based on interest-groups. We prefer to lock away our helpless and unproductive elderly in nursery homes. As to the afterlife, the prospect of forever reuniting with one's ghastly family folks sounds horrible to the Western self-indulgent individualist.

Let us think carefully for a moment about who do we want to be remembered. Not what, but who. No matter what China is going to become, a semi-capitalist society, the world's next superpower, the inventor of great technologies, you will never be truly original if you always try to please or imitate the West.

Allow me to close with an anecdote. The scholar Albert Grünwedel spent his productive life

translating the entire Sinitic tradition into the Germanic-biblical one, then went crazy and committed suicide. End of anecdote.

All translation is rather morbid.

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