

Language Imperialism, Concepts and Civilization: China versus The West

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If you are an American or European citizen, chances are you've never heard about shengren, minzhu and wenming. If one day you promote them, you might even be accused of culture treason.

That's because these are Chinese concepts. They are often conveniently translated as "philosophers," "democracy" and "civilization." In fact, they are none of those. They are something else. Something the West lacks in turn. But that is irritating for most Westerners, so in the past, foreign concepts were quickly removed from the books and records and, if possible, from the history of the world, which is a world dominated by the West. As the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel once remarked, the East plays no part in the formation of the history of thought.

But let us step back a bit. Remember what school told us about the humanities? They are not the sciences! If the humanities were science, the vocabularies of the world's languages would add up, not overlap. Does that surprise you?

I estimate that there are over 35,000 Chinese words or phrases that cannot properly be translated into the English language. Words like yin and yang, kung fu and fengshui. Add to this another 35,000 Sanskrit terminology, mainly from India and Buddhism. Words like Buddha, bodhisattva and guru.

In a recent lecture at Peking University, the renowned linguist Gu Zhengkun explained that wenming describes a high level of ethics and gentleness of a people, while the English word "civilization" derives from a city people's mastery over materials and technology.

The correct Chinese translation of civilization should be chengshijishu-zhuyi. Wenming is better, but untranslatable. It has been around for some thousand years, too, while Europe's notion of "civilization" is a late 18th-century "invention."

Tourists and imperialists do not come to be taught. They call things the way they call things at home. Then they realize that the names are not correct.

In many countries, adopting Chinese terminology is a taboo. Even the most noble-minded thinkers, such as the Nobel laureate Hermann Hesse, warned the Germans that "we must not become Chinese [...], otherwise we'd adhere to a fetish."

Next is "democracy," a concept of Greek origin. The Hellenic "civilization" failed a long time ago, of course. It's gone, while China's wenming is still here, uninterruptedly so, after 5,000

years. “Democracy” originally had little to do with letting the mob vote, lesser even so for the mob to rule the country; on the contrary, it meant that various, powerful interest groups should fight over the resources, each by mobilizing their supporters of influential city dwellers.

While in China we still see a family-value based social order, in the West we find an interest group-based social order. In your family, you do not apply strict laws or make contracts; instead you induce a moral code. When among strangers who fight against other interest groups, you simply cannot trust them like your own family, so you need laws.

Up to the 20th century, the Europeans believed China was not a proper “civilization,” because it had no police force, while China accused Europe of being without “wenming” because it lacked filial piety, tolerance, human gentleness and so on.

Finally, the shengren is the ideal personality and highest member in that family-based Chinese value tradition, a sage that has the highest moral standards, called de, who applies the principles of ren, li, yi, zhi and xin (and 10 more), and connects between all the people as if they were, metaphorically speaking, his family.

The modern Chinese word for philosopher, zhexuejia, is nowhere to be found in any of the Chinese classics. In fact, zhexuejia came to China via Japan, where it is pronounced tetsugakusha, after Nishi Amane first coined the word in 1874. Yet, the Western public is constantly told, through our highly subsidized China scholarship, that Confucius is a “philosopher” and that Confucian thought is “philosophy.”

As Slovenian philosopher and critical theorist Slavoj Žižek once said: “The true victory (the true ‘negation of the negation’) occurs when the enemy talks your language.” The West would be irrational to adopt Asian concepts. That would be like holding the candle to China. Moreover, the Middle Kingdom is notorious for assimilating all invading cultures in the past. Why queuing?

The “barbarians” always had superior weapons and technology, but, as Gu Hongming in 1920 noted, lacked true human intelligence. How’s that? Well, it’s a bit like Star Trek wisdom: If prehistoric humanity evolved from the beasts, then the most advanced human societies would be the least physically aggressive ones, no?

In 1697, the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz famously argued that the Chinese were far more advanced in the humanities than “we are.” He never specified, but I think it is all revealed when he urged all Germans that they must not use foreign words, but use their own language instead (German is a compound language, so it’s an infinite source), in order to build and enlarge the German-speaking world.

And so they did. And so the Germans rose to the top. As expected, the Germans, the descendants of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation, called Confucius a “Heiliger” (a saint or holy man). Now, that’s convenient. But is it correct scholarship?

Since the European languages have their own histories and traditions, they cannot sufficiently render Chinese concepts. The solution, I think, would be to not translate the most important foreign concepts at all, but adopt them.

So that next time in international relations we could discuss how we’re going to improve minzhu in Europe, and how to help America’s transition into a descent wenming.

Maybe the West just lacks shengren after all.

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