

“The Great Learning”: Daxue and University: China versus The West

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Global Research, May 04, 2012

4 May 2012

Region: [Asia](#)

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A lot of people search endlessly for the secret key or a magic formula that would enable them to understand China. Naturally, at some point they will want to know how the Chinese are educated. The Middle kingdom has many prestigious schools, but let us take a closer look at Peking University, the mother lode of the Chinese wenming.

Wenming is often translated as “civilization,” but that is misleading. 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. Think about rockets and architecture.

“Peking University” is of course its Westernized name, so that foreigners can find its address. The Chinese themselves, however, call their institutions of higher learning the daxue. Peking University is Beijing daxue or Beida, Tsinghua University is Qinghua Daxue and so on.

“Daxue is not a translation of Greek universitas,” explains Professor Gu, but “a reference to one of the great Confucian classics, ‘the Daxue’”.

The Daxue is often loosely translated as “The Great Learning,” but it is really this: an instruction manual on how to become a junzi and then, perhaps, a shengren.

The junzi is the ideal personality in China’s family value-based tradition, while a shengren is its highest member, a sage who has perfected the highest moral standards, called de, who mastered the principles of ren, yi, li, zhi and xin, and who now connects between all the people as if they were, metaphorically speaking, his family. The historian Tu Weiming even calls the shengren “the highest form of an authentic human being.”

The junzi and shengren of Confucianism are as clearly defined, unique, and non-European as for example the bodhisattvas and buddhas of Buddhism are.

Yet the former are completely unknown to the educated Western public due to erroneous, biblical and philosophical European translations dating back to the 17th to 19th centuries.

As the historian Howard Zinn once remarked: “If something is omitted from history, you have no way of knowing it is omitted.”

While a Western university’s principal aim is to produce a skilled expert, a Chinese daxue’s

principal aim is to cultivate an ideal character.

Anglo-Saxon students often seem surprised when they hear that the Chinese daxue do not award PhD degrees or “Doctors of Philosophy.” They award a boshi, which literally means an erudite master.

The word for “philosopher” doesn’t appear in the Chinese classics. Our so-called “Chinese Philosophy” departments in the West are reminiscences of the imperial age. In fact, the Chinese word for philosopher, zhexuejia, came to China via Japan not before 1874, where it is pronounced tetsugakusha.

As the great educator and linguistic sage Ji Xianlin once remarked: We practically know the West like the palm of our hand, but the West’s vision of the East is still a murky confusion.”

Maybe, since the West obviously lacks the concepts of shengren and junzi, letting alone the daxue, we should adopt those Chinese concepts, out of necessity and by common sense, just as Japan and China back in the 19th century adopted the Western concepts like “artist”, “scientist”, and “philosopher”. It’s simple reciprocity.

Of course, some Western philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel have traditionally played down Chinese socio-cultural originality.

Western scholarship is strategically withholding valuable information about China – it will always prefer European terminology to describe China because it wants to keep what the Germans call *deutungshoheit* – the prerogative of final explanation. Or, 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.”

Tourists and imperialists rarely come to be taught; they call things in China just the way they call things at home. Only, that is, to later put their feet in their mouths, because all is clear mafa (trouble) and maodun (contradiction).

Using the correct terminology often makes a huge difference, indeed: Yes, a “Peking University” was founded in 1898, only recently by Western standard. Yet, the Chinese daxue can be traced back to its origins in the Spring and Autumn period, some 700 to 500 years before our Lord Jesus Christ!

As Confucius once said: “If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things.” It’s known as the rectification of names. Educated in error, the people of Europe to this day have no idea what they are missing: The East invented tens of thousands of non-European concepts they may have never heard about.

China is a wenming with a Confucian love for learning. And Peking University — that’s a living shengren culture.

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