

# Language and Empire: My Language, Your Prison

By [Dr. Thorsten Pattberg](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, May 28, 2012

28 May 2012

*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world* – Ludwig Wittgenstein

Capitalism forces people to ruthlessly compete for market shares, natural resources, and human capital. Less obvious so, they also battle for terminologies. This is called lingualism.

Philosophy, religion, and science are ideological concepts that serve the needs of the dominant West, and in the past were hardly ever challenged. In this century, however, this could change.

Due to the former European conquest of the world most subject people adopted European vocabularies. The result is a large body of “international students” that no longer have any other concepts available to them other than philosophy, religion, and science, to explain the whole range of human thought. It’s a bit dull.

The reduction of all the world’s vocabularies to a few inherently European words makes it effortless for our elites to compose for example a ‘Philosophy of China’ without using a single original Chinese term.

The word “philosophy” includes all foreign, while being firmly rooted in the Western tradition. At the same time the word lacks all foreignness when we solely refer to ourselves. Thus, a book entitled ‘History of Philosophy’ may include a chapter on Confucius or it may not – either way it wouldn’t fail to fulfill its title’s promise.

If we asked an American, What’s the world’s greatest syndicate?, she would probably answer it’s the trade unions, the Cosa Nostra, the Freemasons, or maybe the anarchists. Actually, it’s none of those – it’s the philosophers.

What started in Greece as Plato’s school of philosophy eliminated all its competitors, conspired with religion, and is now some sort of compulsory membership-scheme for all human societies on earth. No great thinker of any culture can escape our label “philosopher” even if he’s not; and no scholar shall leave our universities without a PhD – a doctor of philosophy – even if it’s got nothing to do with it.

If we consult actual history, “philosopher” wasn’t even a concept in East-Asia before Nishi Armani translated it into Japanese *tetsukagusha* around 1871. There is no instance of the word “philosophy” (in modern Chinese: *zhexue*) in any of the East-Asian classics. Our books on “Chinese Philosophy” are blatant forgery, and our “Departments of Eastern Philosophy” are cruel fictions.

It’s a beautiful thing, the destruction of foreign words. We’ve laid our hands on the *shengren*, which is *seijin* in Japanese, and *seng-yin* in Korean, and altered or, as the official

term goes, translated them as “Chinese philosophers”, “Japanese philosophers”, “Korean philosophers”. And we have, metaphorically speaking, annihilated China’s spiritual wenming and Japan’s bunmei, which we now re-imagine in our fashion as materialistic “civilizations”.

We employ thousands of scholars, all “doctors of philosophy”, who make sure that our “corrections” to human knowledge will look like the original. The public couldn’t tell the difference between a shengren and a philosopher anyway. In fact, the public cannot know what has been omitted from their textbooks.

Perhaps our greatest invention yet was “science”. Maybe equally admirable ideas exist in India’s vast realms of sastras and sutras, or still exist in China’s countless teachings, jiao. Yet, people are taught it is science, a Western word and concept, that we all should worship and aspire to.

Maybe “globalization” is just another brilliant euphemism for this ongoing destruction of non-Western ideas. We want ‘economy’, not jingji. We want ‘globalization’, not tianren heyi. They are not the same. We demand ‘democracy’ in China, yet technically this word cannot exist there.

Next is “religion”. Religion is Christianity. We all live in the year 2012 of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The reason why we call teachings like Buddhism or Confucianism “religion” is simply because we want to pull our Religion over whatever they have, to digest them, to administer foreign knowledge in our books on “World Religions”.

It’s hard to imagine the President of the United State saying: “Allah Bless America!”? Or the Pope calling Jesus Christ and St Nikolas “a Buddha” and “a Shengren”. Yet we demand at all times that Muslims have a God and that Confucius is a saint.

Our students are conveniently told that there are “saints” and “philosophers” all over Asia, yet evidently there isn’t a single buddha, bodhisattva, or shengren in Europe or America. Think. What is that probability?

Any linguist who counts, knows that the vocabularies of the world’s languages add up, they don’t overlap. Translation is always reduction: one word acknowledged, the other... eliminated.

Here, like so often, we rely on the power drive of our best and brightest. In the past the conquerors were granted rights to occupied territory. Today they are granted contracts with some Oxford or Cambridge publishers about the history of “something” – something that is now penned in English. What greater gift to bestow upon a man of intellect than handing him the sovereignty over the definition of foreign thought.

Translation is a form of mental cheating, and its end is always power. The power lies in the taking away from others. Sure, true names always beat the fake names; that’s precisely why the Chinese want to keep their true names, and the Europeans do everything in our powers to take those names away from them. Think about the Western habit to switch Chinese surnames and names around, which borders on coercion.

What better use of an army of needy scholars who often live off state charity than to help Europe to fill its libraries with useful forgery. Here a book “Religion of China”; there a book “Scientific Revolution in China”; there another one “Chinese Classical Philosophy”! The

scholars convert history, they distort reality, they withhold the correct names.

Foreign key concepts like daxue (what we call “university”), shengren (what we call “saints”) or junzi (what we call “gentlemen”) have in their native usage unorthodox meaning. Foreign thought like rujiao or fojiao is unwanted thought. The “non-European” obviously exist, but because of their non-European origins foreign concepts make Europe feel incomplete and uneducated.

A prominent example is Germany which always worshipped might and started the whole thing of Kulturwissenschaften (meaning the science of cultures). Despite relentlessly studying foreign cultures and languages, the Germans only treated them as dead objects. As a sinister side-effect, Germany, with the exception of late American influence which was forced upon it, always remained absolutely and totalitarian foreign-free.

Indeed, the most complete European sinologist is always the one least Chinese himself. Or, have you ever met an entomologist who is a butterfly?

Nothing must interfere with our meanings of science, religion, and philosophy. We must never allow foreign key terminology – all those useless shades of Eastern meanings – to influence our public sphere and weaken our lingualism. We call this freedom. Another one.

***Dr Thorsten Pattberg** is a linguist and the author of *The East-West Dichotomy* (2009), *Shengren* (2011), and *Inside Peking University* (2012). He is currently on the board of the German East Asiatic Society in Tokyo, Japan. This article was first published by Asia Times on May 24, 2012. (Copyright 2012 Thorsten Pattberg.)*

The original source of this article is Global Research  
Copyright © [Dr. Thorsten Pattberg](#), Global Research, 2012

---

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Dr. Thorsten Pattberg](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)

[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)