

TEACHING ENGLISH IN TRADITIONAL CULTURES

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Hundreds of thousands of students are learning English in government schools and in private language schools across Asia today. They believe that English is the language of jobs and the language of the future. When people study English, they learn about a completely different culture and way of thinking, and many times they start to believe that outsiders' ways are better than the traditional styles of their own people. Because they are taught to think like Western people, students quickly lose interest in their own language, history, values, and culture. They adopt the styles and attitudes they see on television, and soon they leave their homes to find jobs in big cities. In this way, the study of the English language can lead to the destruction of families, cultures and communities.

But there is a better way to teach English. Teachers can help students understand why their traditional beliefs and life styles are still valuable today, why traditional clothes and materials should be used, and why they should respect their families, their elders, and their traditions. This small book will help teachers and students of the English language understand the outside world more clearly, so that they can teach others how they can and why they should keep alive the ways of their ancestors.

Japanese university professor Yukio Tsuda writes, "A language is the basis of regional culture and tradition. No [money-making] activity should ever result in its destruction."

Tsuda continues in words that are true everywhere in Asia today: "This country needs to treat its own people and language with more respect."

INTRODUCTION

In 1492, a man named Christopher Columbus led three boats full of European merchants and Spanish soldiers into the Caribbean Ocean, and landed in the Bahamas Islands in North America. Columbus and his men were the first Europeans that the people of the islands, called the Taíno or Arawak, had ever seen. The Taíno gave Columbus and his men food and drinks and gifts, and welcomed them into their homes, and held celebrations to honor the strangers.

In Europe, guests were never treated so well. Columbus decided that the Taíno must think he was a powerful god. He wrote back to his employers, the King and Queen of Spain, explaining that he could easily defeat the Taíno's small armies and destroy their government. He also wrote that the Taíno would make good servants for European people, and that it would be easy to make the people forget their customs and religion and become Christians like the Europeans.

In the next 15 years, Columbus and the other Europeans who followed him killed over 3 million people in the small islands through war and slavery; they fought the local people to take their land, then forced the natives to work themselves to death digging into the earth to plant European crops and to mine gold.

Over the next 400 years, Europeans would take millions of kilograms of gold and silver from the Americas. They would destroy local governments, steal most of the land, and force the natives to work for them in mines and large plantations built to feed and clothe millions of Europeans who lived thousands of kilometers away. The Europeans grew rich from the wealth and the labor of the Americans; thousands of them came across the Atlantic Ocean on huge boats to help each other – for hundreds of years, the Europeans would provide the management and ideas and grow rich, while the poor natives did the actual work and became even more poor.

When new diseases brought by the Europeans killed more than 90 percent of the native Americans, the Europeans brought in black slaves from Africa to work all day every day in the hot sun, planting and harvesting cotton, sugarcane, and other cash crops. Later, when slavery was made illegal, the Europeans brought poor

Chinese in boats from Asia to blast holes in the mountains of North America and build railroads. They then turned to the poor from all the world, offering tiny wages to landless and hopeless men and women from Mexico, the Philippines, and dozens of other countries. These new workers had lost their ancestral lands to governments, leaders, and businessmen who were educated and supported by the Europeans.

Five hundred and twenty years after Christopher Columbus first met the Taíno, the story remains the same. Europeans (and those they have taught) still take the land, labor, and natural wealth of non-white peoples. They still destroy local governments and replace local cultures with Christianity and European ideas. The Europeans and their students still bring with them war, disease, alcoholism, prostitution, gambling, violent crime, and all forms of immoral behavior.

If we teach students to speak English, we must also teach them to value and protect their culture, their families, their land, their language, and their way of life. We must teach them to ask what is important and what is valuable in life, and why. And we must teach them to seek answers to those questions from their community, ancestors, and traditions – not from outsiders.

A wise man in Bangladesh once wrote this poem about a changing world:

***All Rashid asks of Allah
Is just one small gift –
If I write my will in Urdu,
May my son be able to read it.****

Here, too, fathers pray that their sons will be able to speak their ancestors' language and respect their traditions.

[* "Allah" is the name used by Muslim people for their god. A "will" is a signed piece of paper in which a man writes what he wants to happen with his property after he dies. "Urdu" is a traditional language used by Muslim people in Pakistan and India.]

THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

"Our land is more valuable than your money. It will last forever. It will not even perish by the flames of fire. As long as the sun shines and the waters flow, this land will be here to give life to men and animals. We cannot sell the lives of men and animals. . . . As a present to you, we will give you anything we have that you can take with you; but the land, never." – Blackfoot Tribe of the Northern United States

Land makes us who we are. Mountain people do not live nor pray nor dance nor die like the people who live in low valleys. Some people drink goats' milk; others eat the meat of sheep; others eat wild pigs and chickens; others eat fish and shrimp and crabs and snails; still others will not eat the meat of any animal, but instead make their food from fruits, vegetables, roots, and every part of plants. The food for all of these people comes from the land, and so the land gives them life.

Our land is also important for our religion. Across the world and in all times, people believe that some mountains, waters, caves, and other places are holy. They believe that the spirits of their ancestors and other spirits – both good and bad – live in their forests and fields and their holy places. The beliefs of the people come from their land, and their rituals, medicines, and festivals all come from the land around them. To take a community away from its land is to kill a people.

Land is the most important gift that a parent can give to a child. A son with an education and a job can buy a guava – unless he loses his job, or doesn't make enough money in one week, or he has to pay taxes, or if the price of guavas goes up because of international trade – if any of those things happens, then that man may not have enough money to buy a guava. But a son with land can plant one seed and grow a tree which will give him guavas for free for the rest of his life.

A person who owns one rai or hectare of land can feed a family, while a person who sold his land to pay for university can sometimes barely feed himself. Land is the most valuable and most important thing in the world; our community land can never be replaced.

NATURE AND OUR LIVES

“How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. . . . You must teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of our grandfathers. So that they will respect the land, tell your children that the earth is rich with the lives of our kin. Teach your children that we have taught our children that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves.” – Chief Seattle

Our lives and lifestyles, rituals and festivals, customs and culture all are determined by the natural cycles of life around us. We do not make nature – nature makes us. Nature gives us all of our food, as well as the clean water we all need to live, the medicines that keep us alive, the trees and plants that shelter us and make our homes, and even our clothes. Nature gives us our energy and our joy. Our festivals and holy days are decided by nature – we celebrate the time when the rains come, when the moon is bright, when the crops are ready to be harvested. By studying nature, we can understand our lives and our place in the world. We can learn patience and wisdom from the trees and the stars. Nature is the first and the best teacher.

Everything in nature is alive, and always changing. The crops, the weeds, the trees, the animals of the fields and forests and mountains and in the wet places and the dry places, all are alive like us and help to keep us alive. What goes into nature eventually goes into our bodies. If we put poisons on our land to kill insects and animals and unwanted plants, then one day the rains will come and wash the poisons into our rivers. If we cut down our trees, which hold the land together, then the rains will come and wash away our land. If we make a factory on land, then the water will receive whatever the factory gives out – chemicals, poison, and pollution do not disappear; they all go into our lands and into our waters and, eventually, into our bodies. Those who hurt nature, in the end, always hurt themselves.

THE STORIES OF OUR PEOPLE

“A child educated only at school is an uneducated child.”

Stories are an important part of culture. For many generations, our people have been preserving and passing on stories about life, about the animal world, about the spirit world, and about the moon and stars and sun. These stories teach us about the correct way to live. Through the stories of our elders, we learn about who we are, and who we should be.

Our traditions are passed down in the night, by stories around a fire or inside a home, or during the day as young children gather at a wise grandmother’s feet, or at festival time. Our stories are the best way of educating our children (and adults) to live their culture, to remember and be proud of who they are.

The stories of our elders are part of the wealth of our community. When a good storyteller dies, we all lose something valuable, so we must work to keep the stories alive for the children of our children to learn about their people.

In the small country of Bhutan, high in the Himalaya mountains, people study something they call “Gross National Happiness.” Gross National Happiness means happiness for everyone – the King of Bhutan wants his people to be as happy as possible. People studying this idea have found that being part of a community and understanding your place in the community are two of the most important things that make people happy. We learn about our community and our place in the world through our traditional stories.



WHAT IS DEVELOPMENT?

*"Only after the last tree has been cut down,
only after the last river has been poisoned,
only after the last fish has been caught,
only then will you find that you cannot eat money."
– Cree Tribe of Canada*

As teachers and students of English, you already know that the world is changing quickly. And you know that outsiders want you to change and become like them. But what are their lives like? What is important to them? And what place is there for your people in their world?

The outsiders' world revolves around money. They have thousands of people working to convince your leaders to follow their advice and do what they want, so that they can make money from you. These outsiders – who come from other governments, from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, from the Asian Development Bank and other banks, and from the U.N. and other international NGOs – tell your leaders to increase “GDP,” Gross Domestic Product (instead of Gross National Happiness). GDP is the total money value of all business in one country in one year. These outsiders want more business; they want businessmen to make more money in your country. With increased GDP, they say, everyone in the country will have more money and then everyone can be more happy. To get money into the country, they want foreigners to bring their money into the country, as what is called “foreign investment.” And to get money from foreigners and from rich businessmen to the regular people, they want jobs and they want tourism. This process of trying to increase GDP is called “development.” We will talk about each of these ideas.

First, it is important to understand development. Development means changing a country's natural and human resources into commodities or assets, and making existing commodities and assets more valuable.

“Commodities” are things that can be bought and sold. Rice is a commodity, and so are clothes and land. A similar idea is an “asset” – an asset is something that

can make money for someone. So to your employer, you are an asset. If someone sells noodle soup from her home, then the house is an asset because she uses it to make money.

“Natural resources” includes everything natural: rivers, lakes, oceans, mountains, hills, fields, forests, animals, fish, the earth and sky and everything in and on them – gold, silver, petroleum, copper, rice, soy, hardwood trees, sand and rocks, and even the wind moving through the air. These things are all “natural resources” to the outsiders.

And “human resources” are you and your family and friends and all humans, and everything that makes you who you are. A country’s human resources, to the outsiders, includes all of your time, all 24 hours every day and seven days every week. It includes your mental and physical health. It includes your knowledge and your education and your muscles and your strong back and your eyes and the hair on your head. Development is thus the process of changing humans and nature into things to buy and sell. Do you agree that this is a good idea?

The second half of the definition of “development” is to add value to existing commodities and assets. That means that if something makes money for outsiders, they want it to make *more* money for them. So think about a mountain used for tourism. The fees from tourists make some money for the government. But maybe the government can make more money by breaking the mountain into little rocks, called “gravel,” and selling gravel to people who make roads. According to development ideas, the government should destroy the mountain and take the money. There is no value, in development, to keeping things the same for our children and grandchildren.

Let’s look at another example. A country may have a beautiful beach. On the beach are hundreds of small straw homes where fishermen sleep each night with their families before going out early each morning to catch fish. The beach is an asset – it makes money for the fishermen by allowing them to live close to the ocean. But the country could make *more* money if all the fishermen were gone and their homes were replaced with a modern hotel resort where foreigners and government officials can

stay for \$500 a night. If the beach is “developed” in this way, GDP goes up because *someone* makes more money from the beach – GDP and development do not care *who* makes the money and *who* has to be moved to let the money be made. And so we come to another fact of development: displacement.

“Displacement” means moving people away from their homes. In development, people are “displaced” so that others can make money from their land. And so, everywhere in the world today, poor people are losing their lands and their homes – and thus losing their cultures and traditions, and sometimes even their lives – so that others can make money. Development projects displace entire communities. Villages are moved so that factories can be built; so that mines can be drilled into the earth; so that monoculture plantations with only one crop (like rubber or palm or cashews) can be created; and so that giant dams can be build, flooding huge areas of land and destroying the natural movement of a river.

Now, with development, the son who had a guava tree and could eat guavas for free – because he had land – has to find some way to make money to buy his guavas. (Maybe he can ask the new owner of his land to give him a job!).

And so we come to the next idea of development: “foreign investment.” Governments and the outsiders who advise them say that foreign investment is needed for development. This is true. When a government takes land away from people or takes people away from their villages into the big cities – in other words, when development happens – *someone needs to pay money, either to the people to make them leave their land or to soldiers to force the people to leave.*

But foreign investment is not simply an idea for foreigners to kindly give their money to a country. “Investment” means that money is given with the idea of *making a profit*. A profit is extra money someone receives after spending some money. For example, you might pay 100 for a dress, and change the style a little to make it more attractive, then sell the dress to a neighbor for 150. The difference between what you spent – 100 – and what you received – 150 – is your profit. Profit is the main idea in the way that outsiders think. They want profit from everything.

And so we see that a foreigner or foreign company will only put money into a country – make a “foreign investment” – if he is sure that he will take out more from the country than he put into it.

The idea of foreign investment is a little strange. Why should we want foreigners to come in and take things away from our people? The money that the foreigners take away must come from somewhere – our country only has so many things that can make money. So why should we give those things to outsiders?

There are two main reasons why governments want to sell things to foreigners. The first reason is simply that foreigners and people who study at foreign universities or take jobs with foreign companies say that foreign investment is a good idea. Governments listen to these people – they believe that foreigners and foreign-trained people know more than their own people do. The second reason, also important, is that governments need foreign money – especially US dollars – to pay debts. Almost every government in the world has big debts. Governments borrow money from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), foreign governments, and from foreign banks, and they need US dollars to pay back the loans because these foreigners do not want our country’s kind of money.

Why does a government borrow from foreigners? First, governments borrow money so that they can have more development (and so, in a strange way, the government needs development to pay for the development it already has). Governments also borrow money so that they can have more modern equipment for their armies: new guns and bigger bombs and new vehicles. Because of these things, your government wants foreign investment.

Is foreign investment a good idea in your country – or in your village? Is development good for your people?

FOREIGN PRODUCTS AND FOREIGN POISONS

There is another cause for some displacement – young people leave their families and lose their culture because they see that foreigners have many beautiful new things and they want to have the same things. They also see that foreigners have different ways of doing things – for example, using chemical fertilizers to make crops grow quickly – and they want to use the foreigners’ styles.

But we must ask: What are these products which the foreigners use and want to sell to us? And what are the new foreign styles?

Most foreign products are made from plastic: mobile phones, computers, toys, furniture, clothes, pens and pencils, toothbrushes, bags, the packaging for food, and even many parts of cars and motorcycles. If something is not made from natural materials, like wood or cotton or other plant products, and it not made from metal or glass or porcelain, then it is probably plastic.

Plastics are made using chemicals in laboratories. The main ingredient in plastic is petroleum. Poisons are used to make plastic, then more poisons are added to plastics to make them more useful – to make them into soft bottles or hard plates – or to give the plastics nice colors. When plastic is used to hold food or water, the poisons in the plastic can go into our food and drink.

But the biggest problems of plastics come *after* they are used. Traditional materials are part of nature, and they can be thrown into the natural world again, where they will quickly disappear or be eaten by animals or insects and become part of the earth. Plastic is different. Some kinds of plastic do not disappear for hundreds of years, while others stay in the same shape for thousands of years! After we and our children and our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren are all dead and forgotten, a piece of plastic we throw away will still be in the same place. In every country in Asia, the land beside highways is covered in pieces of plastic – this is not because people are bad or dirty, but because plastics are different from anything that people have ever used before.

Plastics are different from traditional materials in one other important way: they are very dangerous to burn. If plastics are burned, they fill the air with a chemical called *dioxin*. Dioxin causes many diseases and kinds of cancer; it can stop men and women from having babies, and it can cause babies to be born without arms or without legs or with heart diseases or with a million other different problems. Dioxin is one of the most terrible poisons in the world, and so plastics should never be burned, especially not close to people.

Dioxin is not the only poison in foreigners' style of life. Their farming styles rely on poisons called pesticides and herbicides to kill insects and weeds which are near their crops. These poisons cause cancer and other diseases, and they hurt everyone because rains wash them into the water which we drink and in which we bathe. Even foreigners' chemical and natural fertilizers are poisonous when they go into our water, and, more than that, they kill our land by taking out too many healthy things from the soil, leaving good farm land dry and dead in three or four years.

We people are part of the natural world. Natural things are good for us, and unnatural things kill us and give us diseases. Unnatural things hurt us in secret ways. For example, mobile phones are very popular today. But these phones work by using a kind of radiation to send and receive information. This radiation causes cancer, as do the kinds of radiation used in microwaves and other modern cooking products. Some foreigners say that the radiation and poisons in all of these products are not enough to hurt you, but foreigners living in a "modern" style have hundreds of times more diseases, cancers, and health problems than people who live traditional lifestyles.

CHOOSING A WAY OF LIFE

The new style of life, full of poisons and rubbish, cannot last for a long time, and it cannot be the lifestyle for everyone in the world. Almost every month, foreign leaders come together to talk about ideas like "sustainability," because they know their lifestyle cannot continue. They talk about things like "green" products and

healthy lifestyles, but they forget that traditional peoples have been living in the same sustainable, green, natural, healthy style for hundreds and sometimes thousands of years. The style of life which our ancestors chose for us was a good one. The new style, full of poisons and plastics and cancer and unhappiness, will not last for very long. The pictures we see on television are not from real life in foreign countries – television only shows what companies think will make you buy their products. You can see with your own eyes in your community what is beautiful and what is healthy. It is our job to be sure that we do not lose everything which is important and to us during the short lifetime of the “modern” style.

When they came to America, Europeans would tell the native peoples that everyone in Europe was happy and rich, and that European cities were the most beautiful places in the world. They told the traditional peoples that Europeans were more advanced and civilized and intelligent, and that they had better societies and better governments. In 1844, the leaders of one tribe of Americans (whom the Europeans call “Indians”) traveled to Dublin, the capital city of Ireland and one of the most modern places of that time. Their chief, named Neumonya, was asked to speak to a group of European businessmen. He said:

“I am willing to talk with you if it can do any good to the hundreds and thousands of poor and hungry people that we see in your streets every day when we ride out. We see hundreds of little children with their naked feet in the snow, and we pity them, for we know they are hungry, and we give them money every time we pass them . . . we give our money only to children. We are told that the fathers of these children are in the houses where they sell fire-water, and are drunk. . . . You talk about sending [missionaries] among the Indians: now we have no such poor children among us; we have no such drunkards, or people who abuse the [spirits]. . . . Now we think it would be better for your teachers all to stay at home, and go to work right here in your own streets, where all your good work is wanted. This is my advice. I would rather not say any more.”

When we think about the foreign style of life, we also must ask: where is the place for us in this new world? We do not have a lot of money, so we cannot be at the top. We are not brothers or sisters or cousins or children of rich people, so there is no place for us close to the top. We do not have enough money to make modern businesses and anyway we do not understand the ways of foreigners' markets, so there is no place for us in the middle. And many people around the world, in places like China and the Philippines and Indonesia, have been working for foreigners for many years, so we also cannot make as much money as other workers who have more experience. So the only place for us, for people who have never been part of the foreigners' world and have only our hands and brains to sell, is at the bottom, in the worst and most dangerous jobs with the lowest pay.

Even worse is that the people who study hard and borrow money to go to university cannot get jobs – *every year in every country in Asia, thousands of young men and women graduate from university and cannot find any job at all.* In China, 1.76 million university graduates could not find *any* job in 2010. In Japan, one-third of university graduates and one-half of junior college graduates could not find *any* job in 2010. Japan and China are the two biggest and most “modern” economies in Asia – the problem in other Asian countries is even worse. And so to tell students that they should go study so they can make money is dishonest and wrong. Learning English helps students communicate with foreigners. But we must teach our students about their culture and about the real world so that they can communicate things that are worth hearing – not only beg for bad jobs in bad conditions far from their homes.

On March 25, 1911, a fire at a clothing factory in New York City killed 146 workers, most of them young women. The workers could not get away from the fire because their employers had locked most doors to keep them at work and to be sure no one could steal.

On May 10, 1993, a fire at a doll factory in Nakhon Pathon Province, Thailand, killed 188 workers, most of them young women. The workers could not get away from the fire because their employers had locked most doors to keep them at work and to be sure no one could steal.

Nothing changed in more than 80 years, except the dead workers this time were poor girls from the Thai countryside.

BUT WAIT – THERE’S HOPE!!

There are still good reasons to learn the English language. The most important reason to learn English is to help your own people. Foreigners know that their new system does not work, and so they have made many rules to try to protect traditional people from the money-makers. Of course, most traditional people never learn about these rules and never know that they can go to courts. People who can understand English can learn about how others are trying to help.

One of the good things for traditional cultures is a new document which every country in the United Nations has agreed to respect. The document is called the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. (A “right” is something that courts protect – for example, if someone tries to kill you, you can go to a court and complain because you have the *right* to life. “Indigenous peoples” are the natives of a place, the traditional peoples who have lived in one place for a long time and who are different from the people holding government power in a country.)

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples says that traditional peoples have rights: *to govern themselves; to choose whether and how to accept development; to live in freedom and peace as different peoples and not be attacked with violence; to protect and keep their own culture; never to be removed from their lands by force; to practice and teach their own religion; to decide and control their own education; and to participate in the making of any government decisions which will affect them.*

We believe it is best to teach children first about their culture’s traditional beliefs and customs, and teach them that they should respect and try to follow the ways of their people. The customs of traditional people are respected and followed because they work well and because they are part of the wisdom of our ancestors. Because of this, we feel that the foreigners’ idea of “rights” is *not* the best way to protect people – instead of expecting people to accept rules because the rules are good and are part of their culture, the foreigners believe that everyone needs courts full of rich lawyers and judges to argue and decide about the “rights” of poor people. We say instead, “right is right, and wrong is wrong.” So we recommend that students learn about “rights” and other foreign ideas only after they learn and understand their own people’s ways.

WHAT IS MONEY?

There is a lot of talk in the world about money. What is money, and who decides how strong one kind of money is?

It is easy to say that money is what we use to buy and sell things, but we do not really need money for that. Instead of buying a chicken with money, we could buy it with rice, or with some clothes, or we could buy it by helping our neighbor build a new house. It is easy to exchange things. This is called “barter,” and it is the basic idea of all trade. But since it is not easy to carry around a lot of rice or chickens, people in the past wanted to find something easier to use. So people began to use beautiful sea shells as money. In other places, they used lines cut into a stick as money. In one island in the Pacific Ocean, people used huge stone wheels, which were so heavy that they were only used for buying and selling land.

In time, people began to use gold and silver as money, especially for international trade. Gold and silver became more common in Europe after the Spanish and others took valuable metals from the Americas. But gold and silver are heavy, and people were afraid to keep a lot of gold and silver in their homes. So they began to leave coins with rich people who lived in big houses and had servants to keep the gold safe. Then if someone wanted to buy a boat, for example, he would give the boat’s owner a paper saying, “Please give five pieces of gold to the person holding this paper,” then tell the man to go to the rich man’s house and get his gold.

But soon the rich men understood that very few people were coming to get the gold. Instead, they were just using the pieces of paper to buy other things. So the rich men, the world’s first bankers, had an idea. They could make new papers which said, “Please give five pieces of gold to the person holding this paper,” and use the new money to buy things for themselves. If anyone came with a new paper to collect gold, they could just give him five pieces of gold which someone had left at the bank – one piece of gold looks the same as another piece. And if the next person wanted his gold, the bankers could simply give him a third person’s gold. As long as not everyone came to the bank at the same time, the bankers could make a lot of new pieces of paper and make themselves very rich.

And so these banker-created pieces of paper were the first paper money. Later, the bankers stopped keeping *any* gold in the banks. The same story happened even with the new paper money. Because people did not want to take all of their paper money out of the bank (it might get stolen or it might burn or insects might eat it), the bankers understood that they could make a lot of new money without printing any papers. Now if someone gives paper money to a bank, the bank uses the safety of that extra paper to create money, which is only a mark on a computer screen!

Why are these things considered to be real money if banks just make them whenever they want? The pieces of paper, and the marks on computer screens, are money because the government says so (this kind of money is called “*fiat currency*”). There is a maximum amount of new money that banks can make. If you give a bank \$1.00, then bankers can use the strength of that \$1.00 to make \$8 or \$9 more for themselves to use. (This system is called “*fractional reserve banking*.”)

There is one more step to understanding money. Because your country’s money has no value by itself, bankers from around the world get to decide how much its value *should* be. That is why the value of money goes up and down – bankers get together and decide how to change different moneys to make profit, using something called “foreign exchange markets.”

In 1990, the Cambodian government made a new currency, a new Cambodian riel, which it valued at around 350 riel to 1 US dollar. By the end of 1992, banks had pushed the price of the riel down to more than 2000 for 1 US dollar. Recently, the rate has been around 4000-4200 riel to 1 US dollar. So now people say that Cambodians are poor. Why? They are poor because their money is not strong. Their money is not strong only because banks say so. If Cambodians could still buy US dollars at the old rate of 350 riel to 1 US dollar, then they would be the rich ones traveling around the world!

Understanding all this, we have to ask: Why should people spend their lives trying to make money? And why should people give up their cultures, their lifestyles, and their ancestral lands to make money?

ECONOMICS AND ECONOMIES

“Wealth is what Nature gives us and what a reasonable man can make out of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use.”

Because they explain most government decisions, we should also understand some things about economics and about economies.

“Economics” is a way of thinking; it is something that people study at universities and use to talk about the future and about how to make good plans. The number one idea of economics is that everyone in the world wants everything that they can get, and that there are not enough things in the world to give them everything they want. And so economics and “economists” – people who study economics – work to find ways to make as many things as possible. The idea of economics is really the same as development – taking natural and human resources and making them into things which other people can buy.

The ideas of economics do not care about the real world; economists only think about one thing at a time. For example, an economist might say that selling rice to Russia will make a lot of money for our country. But he doesn’t worry that selling rice to Russia will make the price of rice go up, so that some people will not be able to buy rice and will die. That is not the economist’s job. He only thinks about how much money the country can make if it sells rice to Russia. Things that happen in the real world to real people are called “externalities,” and they are not part of economists’ ideas.

Some students in France call economics “an *autistic* science,” because it is like a person with a brain disease who cannot understand life. And yet most government decisions are made today from ideas of economics, and you can read every day in English-language newspapers about what economists think.

It is also important that we understand *economies*. An economy is one place where business happens. An entire country has an economy, and so does every village and even every family. All economies are essentially closed systems; everything comes from somewhere and everything goes somewhere. Nothing appears by magic. In your family’s economy, if you gain a pair of socks, you (or your parents) lose some money to pay for the socks. If you burn some wood for fire, then you will not have as much firewood left. A country is no different – if a company makes a lot of profit in a country, some people in the country must have lost a lot. Maybe they lost land, maybe they lost money, maybe they lost their time

because they were working for the company – one way or another, someone has to pay for every profit.

The good thing is that we can choose where things go in any economy. If I get a traditional pair of trousers from a tailor in my village, I *choose* to keep the money inside of my village. But if instead I buy a pair of jeans that were made in China, my money leaves the village. If I buy a new Honda motorcycle, my money goes to the Honda company in Japan and to the rich city businessman who brought thousands of Honda motorcycles here (buying second-hand things, on the other hand, usually keeps money inside of a country). And so we can see how economies work. What we decide every day can either help or hurt the people around us. The best style is to bring money into our villages and into our families, and keep the money moving *inside* of the village or family. In other words, it is best to buy things from our friends and neighbors, and not from foreigners or from the big city!

These rules are also true with how we spend our “human resources.” If my wife goes to work in a factory, then the family gets the money she makes but also loses all of the things she does in the house – her cooking, cleaning, sewing, caring for the children, and even her love. So we must be careful to *choose* how we spend ourselves, and we must always think not only about what we can get (like economists do), but also about what we can lose, and about what is most important to us.

CONCLUSION: HOW TO KEEP YOUR TRADITIONS ALIVE

It is not easy to keep your traditions in a modern world. But by educating yourself and your students about the outside world and about economics and money and foreign products, hopefully you can help them see that the ways of their ancestors are good and healthy and keep people happy.

Here are some more ideas for helping your people keep their traditional ways:

1. Bring elders to your school. As a teacher, you are a respected member of your community and you can decide the future of your people. Use your power to bring community elders into your school, or take your students outside of the classroom to learn from elders. Elders can teach students about nature, about arts and crafts, about the people’s history, and can share traditional stories. You can then talk in English in your classes about the elders’ lessons.

2. Make your own teaching materials. Most English-language textbooks teach students to think like Europeans. These books are written in places like Oxford or Cambridge, England, to be used by rich European students who live in condominiums and travel to many countries. Instead of using books like Headway or Interchange, look for books that were written in Asia. Some Indian companies, for example, make very good books for teaching English. Use only the parts from books that you think are good for your students – or you can take the ideas from different books to make your own teaching materials. Students should learn about their everyday life – instead of “Apple,” teach “Ant”; instead of “Telephone,” teach “Tree”; instead of “Vacuum,” teach “Valley.”

3. Reject tourism that makes people like animals in a zoo. People do not *need* money; they need self-respect. No person can maintain his self-respect when outsiders come in and treat him as if he were something strange and stupid. If we use our culture and traditions to make money, we will quickly lose our ways, and our children will follow the tourists’ money instead of their elders’ teachings. It is better to keep to our own lives, and let money cultures worry about money. It is ok to sell things to outsiders, but don’t sell our lives for their entertainment!

There are many more things you can do to protect your culture (including making a new money that people can use in your village!). For more information about teaching English to traditional cultures, or to discuss the ideas in this book, send e-mail to profitcomeslast@gmail.com. This book may be photocopied and distributed freely for educational purposes.



An Akha villager swinging into the future