

November 15, 1993 (Vol. 9, no. 6)

Dear Colleague:

Cress Funeral Home keeps sending me solicitous letters suggesting that I consider a move to a better place, guaranteed quiet and temperature-controlled. Now, who says American society isn't caring? If I had stayed in China, my filial son would have put a coffin in my bedroom and given it a fresh layer of paint on every anniversary of my birth. Is this--my heritage--so much better?

Let me pursue this line of thought another way. As a child in China, I used to walk to the one-room elementary school about half a mile away. Unfortunately the path to school ran through a village, where all too often someone had died, his corpse wrapt in a bamboo sheet and a live rooster tied onto the bundle. Why the rooster? I asked. Well, it was an advance-warning system. Should the corpse suddenly turn into a ghoul and stir, the rooster would crow, which would be time enough for the carriers to abandon their charge and run. Well, that wasn't reassuring to a young child.

At school I entered another world. For all its material poverty, it was a place of intellectual wealth and enlightenment. We children were taught the three Rs, but also human excellences such as kindness, filial piety, courage, patience, and intelligence, by means of fables and legends taken from all over the world. What came through forcefully to us children were these human qualities, and not at all the cultural garb by which they were conveyed. I remember, in particular, one tale. It had to do with an absent-minded inventor (Thomas Edison?), who got hungry and decided to boil an egg and time it with his watch. By the end of two minutes, he looked at his watch and found an egg in his hand and the watch in the boiling water. You can imagine the glee with which we children greeted this tale! But, thinking back now, how clever of my Chinese mentors to put that tale in, for, of course, the subtext was the wonder of the human mind, something of which the children should be immensely proud.

To boast a bit, thanks to such tales in early childhood, I end up a tenured prof (yeah, yeah). If I, as a Chinese-American boy, had been taught by white American educators, I would have been told to forget Thomas Edison and his boiling watch, and embrace instead filial piety (ok, ok) and the cock-and-corpse funeral rite which is undeniably a part of my heritage. Unlike my enlightened Chinese educators, American educators emphasize precisely the wrapping--the cultural garb--at the expense of the human excellence it might (or might not) clothe. The garb itself, American children are told, must be the source of pride. I find this both perverse and unendurably sad.

Best wishes,

