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My Dear Ak'i, Please Don't Be Upset

My dear Ak'i (grandpa), you have been here for more than 50 years; to be exact, 51 years. *(Translator's note: This article was written in the year 2000.)* One of your descendants, your eldest son who was also my a*mo* (father), followed you twenty-some years ago, and so did several of my a*moconi* (uncles). Right now, only the fourth a*moconi* is still alive, but he is 78 years of age. Throughout this long period of time, I, Paiz, *(Translator's note: In the Tsou's language, a person's name appears before a pronoun; e.g., "Paiz, I." However, in this English edition, the reverse format is used in order to follow the English style.)* your granddaughter, remember that only during the first few years after you passed away did we often think about you and come here to visit. After that, we nearly forgot all about you. We let you stay here all alone in this bamboo forest, which is damp and deprived of sunlight. My dear Ak'i, please don't get upset.

Before the arrival of the Tomb Sweeping Day this year (*Translator's note: The Tomb Sweeping Day is on April 5th each year.)*, my younger sister and I returned to our old family house, where we grew up, to sweep the nearby tombs of our *amo* and *ino (*mother*)*. My dear Ak'i, as you know, the customs of Tomb Sweeping Day and associated tomb sweeping ceremonials were not in our tradition. We Tsou people used to treat the matters of life and death as an inherent part of Great Mother Nature, and our way of living followed Her seasons in the manner of farmers planting specific crops at certain times of year. The Christian Bible describes death as "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The Tsou people seem to hold a very similar attitude. Therefore, our longings for the ancestors are all but formality, and we tend to forget about our deceased elders unless we really try hard to remember them.

During the time the Tsou still lived in thatch or bamboo houses, *(Translator's note: The Tsou's housing style began to change to modern day structures under Japan's influence in the early 20th century—a trend that continued into the Republic of China's rule beginning in 1945.)* when a family member passed away (we called it "the person is going bad") and while the body was still warm, it would be posed in such a way that it would appear to be sitting with the knees bent and the arms crossed over the chest. A wood stick was used to ensure the desired posture. We all knew that the body, while resembling a fetus inside a mother's womb, instead was really a person in Mother Nature's embrace. When it was time for the burial, a hole at the central area of the family house was dug, the deceased family member was lowered into it, and the hole was then covered with dirt. Above it, a wood pile was made and then lit.

I have no idea how far back this memorial tradition started, and you, the elderly a*k'i,* may not know either. Of course, there were other ceremonial activities performed at the same time. Within five days of the burial, for example, all family members were forbidden to work or travel very far, to show respect to the dead; at night, family members slept on a mat next to the fire in order to comfort the dead. Once the ground by the house was full with corpses, the living family moved on to a new site, leaving the house and bodies behind, allowing the trees and grass to grow back.

Historically, the Tsou people had no use for tombstones, since human remains were gradually returned to nature and the precious spirit to the eternal resting place, the Pagoda Mountains, located southwest of the present day Alishan Tourist Area. For that reason, the deceased would be buried facing the Pagoda Mountains. The departed who had performed good deeds in life would go to Big Pagoda Mountain, while the ones who hadn't behaved very well went straight to Small Pagoda Mountain.

My dear Ak'i, you also know that we Tsou don't have a writing system to record various events that have happened, therefore, I, Paiz, often regret and sigh that we cannot pass on our beautiful culture and historical events, clearly and truthfully, to our future generations. It is like a chef who has plenty of great ingredients but no available fire or fuel, and must therefore borrow from the neighbors in order to cook. Alas, food would taste different even prepared with the same ingredients and cooking procedures if other kinds of fuel were used. Similarly, borrowing a writing system from another culture to record the Tsou's history and events somehow gives me that feeling as well. It makes me think that some special, subtle flavor is missing, one that only we Tsou could smell and tell the difference. With no proper writing system, ancestors would be forgotten in three to four generations, unless they were so distinguished that their legacies were worthy of being orally told and retold among family and friends throughout the ages.

The previous so-called "country" you knew about, my dear Ak'i *(Translator's note: Here the author refers to Japan. This is a defiant expression she uses to suggest that Japan was a country from "outside" and therefore not the Tsou's true country.),* prohibited our burial tradition. They wanted us to follow their procedure of putting the dead body in a wooden box, called a casket, and burying it. Dear Ak'i, I remember this was also the way you were buried here. The grave was surrounded by stones, and plants of red stems and leaves were grown on the grave. From the time I was a small child, I have called the plant "dead people plant," because I have seen it on almost every grave. So whenever I see the plant growing somewhere, I just assume the ground must have been a burial site.

A wooden grave sign was erected after your burial was completed, Ak'i. But *w*ithin a very few years the wooden sign had decayed. The result of that natural occurrence, along with our, your descendants', negligence left us feeling embarrassed that we couldn't find your grave; we even swept the wrong one the last time we came out here. To make matters worse, our fourth *amoconi* (uncle) forgot the exact location of your grave, and not seeing anywhere a tombstone with your name upon it, complained to my father, a stone cutter, and asked him why he had never cut one for you. But Amoconi should have known that, since we Tsou never had such a thing called a tombstone, it was pointless to go looking for one, let alone criticize my father for not making one! My a*mo* probably had never thought that things would have changed so much over the next generations and that your descendants would learn the good tradition of the *putu* (the Han people) to remember their ancestors. Anyway, that's why no tombstone was ever erected for you, Ak'i.

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Dear Ak'i, do you remember that before you passed away, the previous so-called "country" was replaced by the present "country?" *(Translator's note: The author refers to the Republic of China, which took over the control of Taiwan from Japan in 1945. This is a defiant expression the author uses to say that the Republic of China is a country from the "outside," not the "inside," or the Tsou's true country.)* While these outside countries have nothing to do with our Tsou traditions and history, they like to count us among their territories. Japan called us "Royal Citizens." They wanted us to speak their language, and dress the way they dressed. As a result, it's hard to find any Tsou women of our generation who can weave Tsou's fabric. I haven't even seen a traditional Tsou weaving machine!

Years ago, the Republic of China, the present day "country," wanted us Tsou to learn how to live a "civilized material life," and towards that end created a slogan, "The Movement of Improving Indigenous People's Lives." This movement, enforced for a few years, promoted various competitions among the Tsou. They began at the lowest competition level, or unit, called *lin* (鄰), which means

neighborhood; next was the village or *tsun* (村) level, followed by the district level (鄉), and, finally, the province level (省). It would have taken a tremendous amount of time, hard work, and financial resources for a busy farming family to be able to hang certificates of merit on the walls of their house for winning all these competitions!

Thanks to this "movement," in order to keep up with the Joneses even families short on financial resources felt they had to overhaul their homes. Ak'i, after you passed away, my *amo* followed suit. He replaced the bamboo house you knew so well, the one made of limestone cement. He also spent money during the period of financial hardship to purchase household appliances that would comply with the competition rules. Dear Ak'i, before that, didn't we only use utensils that were made of wood, bamboo, or rattan? To impress the competition judges, my a*mo* purchased two shiny face-washing basins and kitchen utensils made of aluminum. Sure, they did look more beautiful than the old kind. Regrettably, the utensils Amo made were no longer in use by that time, so we never learned how to make them. A lot of skills were lost, Ak'i, and I am saddened. For us it is too late to begin cherishing our ancestors' knowledge and skills and heritage—we can yearn for them, but they are gone and we cannot bring them back.

During this period we were told by the abrupt and uncompromising authorities that we should learn to speak the "national language" *(Translator's note: The author refers to Mandarin Chinese, the official and national language of the Republic of China.)* used by the so-called "country." Because of that, I, your granddaughter, while not a particularly good student of the primary school, was humiliated several times when I inadvertently spoke the Tsou language that I had learned since I was in Ino's womb. Anyone caught speaking in their native tongue would have to wear for a full day a wooden plate on their chest with the words "rule violation." Some senior, naughty fellow students would say right to my face: "How stupid you are, still speaking the aboriginal language!" As innocent as I was, I only felt humiliated and puzzled. Why was it wrong to speak Ino's language? I dared not play in the school yard even though I was fond of playing outdoors. Besides, how could I, slender and small, play when wearing a big wooden plate on my chest? My dear Ak'i, I don't think you ever experienced these kinds of things! Did you?

Since the time our lives were turned upside down by these two major powers—first Japan and then the Republic of China—we indigenous Tsou have lost much in terms of our culture and traditions. Well, decades have passed. In order to live in today's world, your descendants have gradually left behind most Tsou traditions and adopted "modern" ways of work and life; many have even left our homeland to make their living elsewhere. I have married a *putunoapihana* (a Han person from the other side of the Taiwan Strait). Marrying a *putunoapihana* has been a very common occurrence among your grandchildren and great-grandchildren. So I hope you, my dear Ak'i, do not get upset by the fact that I married one. These days, your descendants have learned about sweeping graves on the Tomb Sweeping Day, in memory of the ancestors and to receive their blessings. This is something good that we have learned from the *putu*.

While we have remembered to sweep our parents' graves, alas, we have forgotten to sweep yours! It is not that we haven't thought of you during the many decades we haven't seen you. But, rather, we have thought of you and grandma and your sons—our father and uncles—who during the period of time when there were few tools to cultivate rice fields in the stony, steep mountains, did so with callused feet and hands all while opening up lands in the forests on both sides of the Yayoveya mountain valley. This initiative showed your far-sighted vision, as these areas proved rich in water resources.

Your approach to farming was clearly driven by something I had first noticed when I was a small child, namely that both sides of the mountain valley contained a greater variety of vegetation than that on our neighbors' lands. You had also cultivated a lot of rice fields on the flat land, as well as on the mountain slopes. Though your land was divided by your five sons, each of them with a modest share, every bit of it was the result of your blood and sweat. These things always make me think of you, Ak'i, and always make me grateful for you in my heart. When your descendants considered selling their shares of the land, I even stopped them, and told them this land was the result of your hard work clearing thorny shrubs and weeds, and that therefore we must cherish it. Although most of the land is steep hills, still, it is the land that Tsou people can count on and come home to after they are exhausted from living in a foreign land.

I, Paiz, remember this: Before I attended the primary school, one day my parents were working far away and couldn't come home for lunch. You, Ak'i, cooked the lunch for my elder brother, me, and other grandchildren. I remember very well that your hair was gray, and your back could not be held upright due to decades of overwork and over-exhaustion. (This was *my* image of you, not the tall, handsome, young man remembered by the village elders.) At the lunch, you let my brother and me share the piece of chicken that was specially put aside for you by my father, your eldest son. If this had been witnessed by my a*mo*, he would have scorned us for our lack of respect. During the years when it was a rare occasion to slaughter a chicken, everyone in the family was given the same amount. But Amo would offer you two chicken drums.

You of course will recall, my dear Ak'i, that according to traditional Tsou etiquette, when fish or meat was served, each family member received an equal portion of it. Children were given portions equal to those of the adults because kids needed nutrition in order to grow; the elderly received more out of respect. However, since old age had taken away most of your teeth, you couldn't eat as fast as we youngsters could, gobbling food like hungry ghosts while you had to consume each delicacy very slowly. We would stare at your chicken drums at meal time, and use our memory of what chicken meat smelled like—imaginary flavor to go along with rice! You understood what your grandchildren had in mind, but you would never offer us your chicken drums in the presence of Amo, for fear of him being angry with us; he respected you very much. Instead, you waited until Amo wasn't around to show your love and care for us.

I remember this also. When I was a small child, I liked to watch you sleeping on your bamboo bed, seeing your eyes closed, mouth closed, sleeping with very regular, smooth breathing. When you breathed out, the air would push out your lips with sounds of "brrr." How fascinating this was!

I forget exactly to what special occasion our entire family were invited in order to celebrate at my eldest aunt's, but it was rather hilarious. Before we left the house, I saw in your front chest pocket what you had prepared for yourself: some dried tobacco leaves you had grown and dried, a pipe you made out of a bamboo root, and a lighter. In addition, you had something wrapped in dried banana leaf. It smelled very fragrant, a mixed sauce of salt, pepper powder, and peanut powder. This was a special sauce you used when you were having a meal, but we were always afraid to try it. We realized later that the sauce made by other tribal people was not strong enough for you, Ak'i, and that you needed to bring your own!

Your granddaughter, I, Paiz, who wasn't very sharp, could only remember this much about you when you passed away, though I was already in the second grade. My dear Ak'i, please don't get mad at me.

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Why do I come here today to disturb your peace, after not having come to visit you for so many decades? My dear Ak'i, it is because someone named Iusungu wants to see you, a great-grandson of yours, the eldest grandson of my youngest uncle. He is 19 years old, and has lived since he was a small boy with his parents in a Han community on the flat plain. *(Translator's note: Most Taiwanese aborigines live in the mountains and are called "Mountain People," and most Han people live on the flatlands and are called "Plains People.")* A college student in Taipei when I saw him on February 15th of this year *(Translator's note: the year 2000.),* he was no longer the shy middle-schooler back when we first met at the *mayasvi* (Tsou War Festival) in our hometown of Tfuya (特富野). He had borrowed a red Tsou outfit from someone to give the impression that he was a Tsou warrior. In my mind, I was thinking, "What a child! He thinks putting on red clothes would make him a Tsou warrior?" At Tfuya, he told me he would find time to ask me about the M~~uku~~nana family heritage, the family that had resided in the valley of Yayoveya. (M~~uku~~nana is our family name in the Tsou language; it was later changed to Wu (武) by the current "country.")

Not long after that, this kid actually came to my house. He told me that he didn't speak the Tsou language because he had lived outside the Tsou community since he was a small child, and that his father didn't want him to learn Tsou, lest he be looked down upon by his classmates. A case in point: My aunt-in-law, who married your youngest son (that is, my youngest uncle) after you passed away, didn't receive a formal education; therefore, she couldn't speak the language of the present "country." However, in order to communicate with her grandchildren, who could not speak our Tsou mother tongue, she tried her best to learn to speak Mandarin. But she spoke the language so poorly that her grandchildren laughed at her. This situation is common among most of your children and grandchildren. If you were still alive today, you wouldn't be able to communicate with your own grandchildren! And that is why I ask, my dear Ak'i, please don't get upset.

After this boy, Iusunga, attended college, and maybe because he had finally grown up, he began to wonder about his heritage—his family origin and background, his upbringing. He was curious about the Tsou's history, culture, and traditions. He said he seemed to have lost a lot of knowledge that he should have possessed, and thus is vexed. He wants to go back and start over again. He asked me, "Is it too late?" My reply: "As long as there is a beginning, it would never be too late."

I was extremely embarrassed by your great-grandson when he asked me this: "Where is my great-grandfather, your *ak'i*? Why have I never seen his grave?" This question really made me speechless. I didn't have an answer for it, because no one had ever asked such a question. In response, I told him about our tradition of burial, and our views regarding life and death and so on. But he was dissatisfied by my answers, as though I were giving him the runaround. His world view and very way of thinking about and understanding things were vastly different from those of the Tsou. He insistently asked me: "How come the great-grandpa doesn't have a grave? How come no one thinks about him?" No wonder he is confused; our negligence has made it impossible for him to understand.

My dear Ak'i, you should be very happy today, because among your many descendants finally one of them thinks of you, and wants to find you! I promised him, this boy, Iusunga, that I would look for your grave, that memories provide me some notion of where it may be. Several years after you passed away, my *amo* and I had often presented you with a bowl of cooked rice, and burned incense for you. The custom of presenting rice and burning incense wasn't our Tsou's tradition; we learned it from the

previous “country.” Our Tsou saying is: Human spirit goes to where spirit belongs, where there is food for the spirits. They shouldn’t share food with the living.”

After having been moved out of the house for more than 30 years—from the time that I was married—I was actually concerned whether I could find your grave, knowing it didn’t have a tombstone. The last time we three sisters came home, we intended to ask our fourth uncle, who was still in very good health, about your grave’s whereabouts. We were unable to find him, however, mainly because we hadn’t tried to inform him of our intent ahead of time. So we decided to search for your grave ourselves.

We used the scythe I bought in northern Taiwan, picking the shortest path across a steep slope full of bamboo plants and overgrown grass. I was leading the way, and cleared a path. This reminded me of a Tsou youth who once stated without exaggeration: “We the Tsou people don’t need to bend when we clear grass.” The young man meant that since the land reserved for the Tsou tribe was mostly steep rocky hills (and difficult to cultivate), one could clear the grass ahead by standing up rather than bending down. For example, from where I was standing that time, the grass I cut moving forward was at about my eye level. Sometimes I even had to raise my head to cut it!

Finally, we reached an area that was somewhat flat and saw “dead people plants” and piles of stones. I convinced myself that this place ought to be your grave. My sisters and I laboriously removed the weeds and swept the area clean, a very important task. But that evening, when a cousin of our second uncle returned from a training workshop, he told us that we had gone to a totally wrong location. When asked where it should be, he said he didn’t know, because he had been away from home for many years. He advised us to ask Mr. Wu, who lived in Pcopcokn~~u.~~ (*Translator’s note: present day Zu-Giaw* (竹腳)).

I have known Mr. Wu since childhood. We lived in the same neighborhood district, and he had been the captain of our young student procession in the walk to and back from school. *(Translator note: There were no school buses then in Taiwan, and they are rare throughout the country even today.)* We school kids lined up in one column early in the morning at a specific time, and it was up to Mr. Wu to lead our column and maintain order throughout the round trip, which took many hours in total.

In order to find you, the next day we left the house not much later than five o’clock, and headed to Mr. Wu’s place. When we arrived, to our embarrassment, the whole family was still asleep. As I recall, Mr. Wu and his parents were hard-working people. They often had the house in order before dawn, and kept it neat and orderly all day long. Daily tasks included feeding the livestock, and cleaning the inside and outside of the house. After their breakfast, at daybreak, adults went to the mountains to work and kids went to school to study.

But today, at almost six o’clock, all was quiet. After calling them a few times, finally someone answered the door. What happened? Well, Mr. Wu wasn’t young anymore. He had eye problems, and he couldn’t work as hard as he used to. Also, since every family owned some sort of transportation vehicle nowadays, there was no need to get up early in the morning to walk to some mountain top or valley, oftentimes a time-consuming distance away, which they had to do previously. I apologized repeatedly to Mr. Wu’s family for disturbing them at such an early hour. To my surprise, however, they seemed pleased. In this neighborhood district the number of people in my age group was gradually shrinking, not to mention that people also had spread out geographically; it was no longer easy for them to meet with one another. For these reasons—and maybe others—Mr. and Mrs. Wu appeared to be very, very delighted we were there.

I explained to Mr. Wu the reason for our visit. He said that even though he didn't remember exactly which grave was yours, Ak'i, he still enthusiastically led my younger sister and me in search of it. He said that when you were buried, he was already in the fifth grade. He vaguely remembered squatting on a large rock covered by moss, due to lack of sunshine, watching adults dig a hole in the ground and lower you into it. After so many years, though, it was clear that since there were several unmarked graves circled by rocks, there was no way Mr. Wu could be certain which one was yours.

Since we couldn't find your grave that day, I returned home disappointed but determined to find it in the future, so that I, Paiz, would have an answer for your persistent and devoted descendant, Iusunga.

After I returned to Northern Taiwan, a cousin I hadn't visited during the last search heard about my desire to find your grave, and called me. She remembered clearly where your grave was because it's next to her mother's. Thank God! But my cousin had just returned from visiting that burial area and had no plan to go back there again until after the Tomb Sweeping Festival.

Dear Ak'i, let me pause here to tell you about this past Tomb Sweeping Festival. I joined for the first time with your grandson-in-law, a *putunoapihana,* to help sweep his ancestors' graves in his hometown, thousands of kilometers away in Sichuan, China (中國四川). The organization, the Liu Kinship Association for Tomb Sweeping Festival (劉氏宗親清明會) *(Translator's note:* Liu is her husband's family name.*)*, was recently reactivated after decades of interruption due to government policies. (*Translator's note: For 40 years, China experienced a major upheaval resulting in the discounting and eradication of many old Chinese traditions. The movement from May 6, 1966 to October 6, 1976, called the Chinese Cultural Revolution, was orchestrated by Mao Zedong to attack and harass members of China's elderly and intellectual population. The impact would be felt for decades.*)

This trip was an eye-opening experience for your granddaughter, me, Paiz. On the one hand it made me admire how much the Liu descendants remembered and honored their ancestors, while on the other it made me ashamed that I couldn't even find my grandpa's grave.

At nine o'clock in the morning on the Day of Tomb Sweeping Festival, the various Lius gathered at one place. When descendants of the branches of the family trees had all arrived, they began the grandiose procession, striking cymbals and drums, toward the graves of their ancestors. These forbears, who arrived at Sichuan and settled there, went as far back as ten or more generations. Once they arrived at the grave sites, they bowed to the graves. Then descendants of each family tree branch proceeded to sweep the graves of their respective ancestors, who represented many generations. By noon, having finished, they had lunch together, using a total of 36 dinner tables. (I was told there were 60 tables several years ago. In general, there were usually ten to 12 persons per table.) The descendants of various family branches took this opportunity to get to know each other, and to network. Some of them even brought out their family genealogy books to show that they were authentic descendants of the Liu family and could trace their history back as far as 2,000 years ago. I was really amazed, and greatly admired them.

Looking at how the relatives on my husband's side so profoundly honored and remembered their ancestors, I was truly mortified and ashamed to admit to myself that I couldn't even find your grave. How could I face the collective spirits of the Tsou ancestors? How could I explain it to them? Would it be satisfactory to just say it was our, the Tsou's, tradition? Would it be enough to simply say "I am embarrassed?" No.

And that's why I came back here today. Leading the way was my cousin—whose mother's grave, it turned out, was next to yours, Ak'i. We had found it! A mixed feeling of excitement and sadness occupies my heart. Finally, after 51 years, we meet again.

The Tsou tribe is a patriarchal society, yet your great-grandson, Iusungu, who has been searching for you, couldn't be here. As you know, a woman becomes an outsider of the family where she was born and raised, and becomes a family member of her husband's. Well, since my cousin and I are married, we needed to have a male family member with us to witness what we have done today. Therefore, we have with us Avai, the eldest son of my eldest brother. My dear Ak'i, he should learn much more about you.

It hasn't been easy to find your grave; all we can do today is some weeding, and clear the surrounding area. Regarding grave repair: This is a major endeavor, and should involve your descendants of the M~~u~~k~~u~~nana family in the Yayoveya Valley. A descendant of yours even suggested that we should also create a family genealogy book of the M~~u~~k~~u~~nana family in the valley of Yayoveya. I think this is a rather good idea; we should.

Dear Ak'i, we know your name in Tsou language was Voyu M~~u~~k~~u~~nana. However, we don't know what names you were given by the previous "country" and the current "country." In order to repair your grave, and to create the family genealogy book of the M~~u~~k~~u~~nana family in the valley of Yayoveya, we need to know that information. Therefore, I applied for the original household documents issued by the previous and the current "countries," and learned that the previous "country" gave you a Japanese name of Mukino Kinsuke (向野金助); Mukino (向野) was the last name, Kinsuke (金助) the first. And the current "country" gave you the name of Wu Tsumin (武助明); Wu (武) was the last name, Tsumin (助明) the first.

Now comes the question: Which name should be used on your gravestone and in our family genealogy book? If we use the names given by the so-called "countries," then how would your Tsou spirit and physical characteristics be manifested? As you are aware, if a foreign name is assigned to a person, then that spirit and characteristics are lost in the name. Only a Tsou name will work! But if we use your name in the Tsou language—alas, it was not registered in the governmental documents—it could cause as much confusion for future descendants as it has already caused me, and it would require of them as much work to properly understand it as it already has of me!

In search of you, your granddaughter Paiz's heart was full of excitement, but now, suddenly, it is puzzled. Since we left you in the ground, you've spent 51 lonely years there. Then we came back here, unexpectedly, to not just disturb you but, even worse, to annoy you with all of the hustle, bustle, and fracas of this secular world. All I can do is to say to you: "Dear Ak'i, please do not get *too* upset." *

* (*Author's note: The article received the 2nd place award at the Second Aboriginal Essay Writing Competition sponsored by the Chung Hwa Motor Company, Year 2000.*)

（The English edition of Fais~~u~~ M~~u~~k~~u~~nana's book under the same title "My Dear Ak'i, Please Don't be Upset" is being planned to be published.）