

Going on the Journey of Learning to Respect Our Elders

by Biaohua Lei



Growing up in the United States, in a predominantly white neighborhood and attending predominantly white schools, I experienced an identity crisis in my youth: I wanted to be Caucasian. I wanted to disconnect myself from my Chinese roots. I perceived all Chinese cultural practices as backward and irrelevant. But since I became a mother, my perception changed drastically. I yearn to learn and introduce more Chinese cultural teachings to my children. I want them to grow up with some of the rituals that have filled my heart and mind with more love for my family and given me a deeper appreciation for life and for myself. I want to practice rituals to strengthen my children's sense of identity and their connections to people. I want my children to develop appreciation for cultural practices that stimulate sentiments and aspirations and balance their daily electronics-infused routines. This is imperative since my children are living in a society that often promotes "independence" or disconnection from others. These realizations as a mother help guide me as a teacher to what my students also need to learn, for they live in the same world as my children. Here I explain one of my family's important remembrance traditions and show how I drew from these experiences to develop a folk arts education unit for K-8 students to help them explore how they honor their elders and remember their ancestors.

Figure 1. Preparing for the Tomb Sweeping Festival at my mother's grave in Pennsylvania, 2020. Photograph by Ray Huang.

Tomb Sweeping Festival

It took me a long time to embrace the Han Chinese cultural emphasis on coexisting. In this core worldview, self-worth and self-definition are linked closely to relationships with people, especially through acts of love and respect exchanged and shared within your communities—home, family, and broader communities. This is Confucius’ teaching of 孝 xiao, which has been rooted in cultural practices within China for thousands of years. 孝 xiao is believed to be the most important pillar of traditional Chinese family structures and the foundation for a harmonious family and society. A Han Chinese child is taught the duty of caring for families when they’re alive and continuing to respect them after death by keeping their tombs clean, remembering them, and carrying on their honorable good name. In his famous *Book of Rites*, Confucius gave specific examples of how to practice 孝 xiao including actions of physical care, love, respect, and obedience to parents and elders; these imply practices for the living and the dead. No matter if you’re poor or wealthy, your communities expect you to practice 孝 xiao within your financial ability; you share your wealth and glory, you don’t leave behind your parents and elders in unacceptable conditions even after death.

清明节 Qing Ming Jie (Clear and Brightness Festival, a.k.a. Tomb Sweeping Festival) is the collective public practice of 孝 xiao for ancestors and deceased loved ones. This is one of the four most important Chinese folk festivals. 清明节 Qing Ming Jie is not a day for sadness, but a day to remember and honor your heritage, to remember your roots and the struggles, successes, and hopes of your ancestors. Elders in most Chinese families carry out Tomb Sweeping religiously whether they are in China or have immigrated. Over the decades, the Chinese government made it a public three-day holiday to encourage people to practice this ritual because of a decline in younger generations caring for their elders. Unfortunately, many overseas Chinese descendants have become disconnected from the roots of this tradition and see this ritual as an amusing, backward folk practice.



Figure 2. Offering food and wine at my husband’s family member’s grave at the Tomb Sweeping Festival in China, 2018. Photograph by Ray Huang.

清明节 Qing Ming Jie falls on the 15th day after the spring equinox, around April 4 or 5. People usually pick a day close to the festival date that is convenient for family members to gather. This is the one event that all my aunts and uncles and cousins living in different parts of Pennsylvania and New York City would not hesitate to make time for and drive to be there. Across China, this is one of the busiest holidays, when millions return to hometowns. Those who can't return home participate virtually. The event usually requires advance preparation of food and related goods and can take up to a few hours. Some rituals are repeated in the fall before the winter season makes traveling to cemeteries more difficult.

Upon arrival at the grave, everyone helps to clean the tomb to rid it of weeds and trash, dust and wipe the tomb, decorate the tomb area with flowers, plant new flowers, and/or replace old artificial flowers with new ones. After the cleaning, candles are lit and placed near the tomb. Then three small cups of cooking wine along with three sets of chopsticks are set out. Other drinks that the deceased enjoyed, such as tea, a can of beer, or a sweet juice box, are opened and placed with other offerings.

A display of foods follows including fresh fruits, pastries, hardboiled eggs, roasted meat, and the deceased's favorite foods. When the market price wasn't too high, our family would order a whole roast pig, which cost \$200 to \$300. My brother would bring a Cuban cigar and coffee for our grandfather who favored those tastes after toiling many years in Cuba and Spain and place them on Grandfather's tomb. As she did for our grandmother when visiting her in the nursing home, my cousin would bring homemade pancakes and place them on Grandmother's tomb. We would also bring sweet black sesame rolls for my mother who liked to order this dish every time we went out for dim sum and place these on Mom's tomb.

Last, piles of joss paper are set out. Han Chinese traditionally believe in life after death. When your elders are alive, you're expected to take care of their needs and offer as much comfort as possible, and thus it is also expected that you continue such care for the deceased. Joss paper (spirit money) and paper goods resembling realistic necessities such as money, a house, servants, jewelry, car, computer, electronics, credit cards, clothing, etc., may be purchased and burned for the deceased. Of course, first timers and children are always fascinated with the idea of offering/burning 冥钞 ming chao money for the deceased. These 冥钞 ming chao resemble U.S. dollars and Chinese yuan and have a seal "Bank of Heaven and Earth" or "Hell Bank Notes." They come in denominations from hundreds to thousands to billions. It is believed the deceased can use this money to pay for goods, traveling, services, and bribes for favors or to escape punishment. Offering joss paper has been a part of Chinese ancestral and deity worshiping for the longest time and is commonly seen at a funeral and during any big event that needs inclusion of the ancestors.

Once the traditional materials are set out, everyone starts praying with burning incense sticks. The smoke is believed to bridge the mortal and spiritual worlds and bring the spirits of the deceased to the event. Each person lights one or three incense sticks and with both hands holding them, kowtows to the deceased three times. During that prayer, we may speak to the deceased to express gratitude, ask for blessings, and share news and updates with the deceased. Afterward, we place these incense sticks in the incense holder near the tomb.



Figure 3. Burning of joss paper at my husband's family member's grave at the Tomb Sweeping Festival in China, 2018. Photograph by Ray Huang.

Then each of us gathers a stash of joss paper, holds it with both hands, and kowtows three times to the deceased. We may say words of blessing with the joss paper like wishes for the deceased to receive the money and have a prosperous, happy life in the spiritual world. We burn the joss paper in a fire-safe metal canister so its smoke transports the money to the deceased.

Next, the elders take turns to pray and offer cups of wine to the deceased by toasting and emptying the cups onto the ground. A big picnic follows. Cutting board, butcher knife, and utensils are taken out. My uncle, a professional cook, usually chops the roast pig and a chicken for sharing. Everyone happily digs into all the food and chitchats, loudly exchanging updates. Meanwhile, passersby, unfamiliar with our tradition, usually stare in shock at the sight of the jubilant picnic around the grave, breaking local Philadelphia norms of solemn observance.

Practice helps young people get comfortable and embrace such a publicly visible distinctive cultural ritual. When I was new to motherhood, I hesitated to allow my young children to visit the cemetery, but after my mother passed, I knew it was time to introduce my children to this ritual of visiting the tombs of deceased family members. Since we lived right next to my parents, my children were dearly close with their popo. They watched her health gradually deteriorate at the end of her life. This made me realize that it was time to have those inevitable conversations about the cycles of life and death with my children, ages 2, 7, and 9. It was important to let them witness how my Chinese family traditionally mourns the passing of loved ones and how to continue honoring their spiritual existence.

Allowing my children to participate in the tomb sweeping and worship rituals remembering ancestors will help them now and throughout their lives to normalize their emotional needs to stay feeling connected with loved ones who pass. These family gatherings also provide opportunities for my children to spend time with elders and cousins and share this special family bonding ritual. And, hopefully, upon learning more stories from their elders about how their ancestors faced challenges and overcame difficulties, my children will gain more courage and strength to live their own lives. Additionally, they learn that they always have loved ones—living and spiritual—watching over them, so they should feel blessed and obligated to live well, to be happy and aspire to achieve for themselves and their ancestors.

Now my children go with me when I visit my mother’s grave for casual occasions too, like birthdays, holidays, and Mother’s Day. On these trips, we bring flowers or incense and say prayers to my mother. I tell my children that one day when I’m gone, they can talk to me and visit my burial site; I’ll always be with them spiritually too. I want to model that even strong emotions are natural; it is healthy to miss someone and yearn to connect with the deceased. More importantly, I want my children to learn that we are social beings and naturally thrive in a caring community. Hence, folk practices and rituals that help us achieve emotional wellness are vital for building our resilience for survival and advancement.

Taking My Life Learnings into the Classroom

“Children are like wet cement; whatever falls on them makes an impression.” With this quote from the child psychologist Haim Ginott in mind, I am intentional when I decide what to teach (Hertel and Johnson 2015). My topics need to be relevant so that my class is meaningful. My school, the [Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School](#) (FACTS), is a public charter school with the mission to serve the immigrant community. The school is in the Philadelphia Chinatown neighborhood to be a resource for this community that lacked many public resources. Although we’re in Chinatown, students are from all over Philadelphia. Our student body has a large population of Asian descendants, the most numerous are ethnically Chinese. Our founders chose to offer Mandarin Chinese language and culture as a specials class to show our support for the Chinese community and because Chinese is not typically offered in most schools.

I have been teaching Mandarin Chinese at FACTS for eight years. Prior to that, I was a general classroom teacher of math and science at FACTS for seven years. I teach Mandarin Chinese for all students—kindergarten to 8th grade. They are a mix of heritage and non-heritage students with various levels of Chinese language ability and cultural understanding. Although there are many Chinese heritage students, the majority are raised here with minimal understanding of their parents’ home culture and language. One of my objectives is to be a channel for our heritage students to develop an interest in their parents’ cultural upbringing and provide an opportunity to practice Chinese outside home. Simultaneously, I encourage our non-heritage students to learn about their family culture and language too. My goals are to expose all our students to Chinese culture, history, and language and strengthen interest in and appreciation for Chinese folk arts. During these investigations, I seek to nurture students’ self-awareness and self-reflection—to motivate them to question and learn about the folk arts and rituals in their own lives and better understand how these traditions shape their cultural identity.

Even before the deaths from Covid-19 began affecting so many families, I believed it was relevant to provide children the space and opportunity to explore their understanding and feelings about death and to remember loved ones who passed away. The cycle of life and death is natural, and the connections with those who preceded and shaped them are important as students explore who they are. I chose to include the Tomb Sweeping Festival in my curriculum. It is a ritual that teaches traditions important in Chinese culture and naturally leads into related conversations.

The Tomb Sweeping Festival Unit

Because Chinese is a specials class, I get to teach all students in the school once a week. Rather than teach lengthy units in particular grades, I use a multiyear vertical curriculum model for annually occurring traditions (Mid-Autumn Festival, Lunar New Year, and Tomb Sweeping Festival). It is structured like the FACTS spiral curriculum we developed for our folk arts residency with NEA National Heritage Fellow [Losang Samten](#), a Tibetan sand mandala artist. Within each K-8 grade level, I teach Tomb Sweeping Festival lessons for a couple of weeks. These mini-units build upon what students learned about the festival in prior years and together over nine years form the entire unit. Thus, students deepen their learning about this tradition nonrepetitively each year. I present the three instructional topics below: traditions about death, remembrance traditions and the worldview values they reinforce, and the history and tangible traditions that make up the festival. The chart indicates the topics I focus on in each grade to show how my vertical unit is structured, but the unit could also be taught as a horizontal unit in intermediate or middle school grades.

Traditions About Death

This part of the unit focuses on exploring the diversity of traditions around death that societies (primarily in China and the U.S.) have created throughout time. Students first examine examples from stories and the media of how people generally handle death. Students usually share their general understanding of types of funerals and ceremonies. I avoid asking students to tap into personal experiences surrounding funerals. If I notice any students are finding this challenging, I ask our school counselor to support them and/or guide me in supporting them. Students then think of possible reasons people anywhere at any time have funerals and ceremonies. They investigate some environmental factors that shape types and costs of burial practices in various places. Students get a general understanding of how Chinese burial practices changed from burial to cremation due to changes in population and living space issues.

Remembrance Traditions and the Worldview Values They Reinforce

This part examines remembrance, both the emotional needs and the cultural lessons that can be taught and reinforced in remembrance traditions. Students reflect on rituals practiced in their homes and/or relatives' homes to honor living elders and to remember those who have passed away. Students generate possible reasons for practices and reflect on their viewpoints of those rituals. Students are asked to ponder the significance of Cicero's quote, "The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living." Students discuss whether they want remembrance rituals to continue in future generations and if they could change or create a new ritual for honoring the deceased, what specific activities or objects could be added or subtracted.

Students explore the worldview value that is important in Chinese remembrance traditions by learning about Confucius’ teachings of 孝 xiao – filial piety through readings and videos. Students practice writing the Chinese word 孝 xiao and phrase 孝子 xiao zi – honorable child. Then students discuss their perspectives on Confucius’ concept of 孝 xiao and name specific examples of actions they take that could be considered acts of 孝 xiao. To demonstrate their learning, students make poster presentations on their understanding of 孝 xiao.

Tomb Sweeping Festival History and Tangible Traditions

Building upon the shared understanding of funeral and remembrance traditions, and the worldview value of 孝 xiao - filial piety, the next part focuses on 清明节 Qing Ming Jie – Tomb Sweeping Festival. Students learn the Chinese characters for all activities for this festival such as 祭祖, 拜祖先 ancestral praying and 扫墓 tomb sweeping. I share some of my family experiences of the festival and encourage heritage students to share what they know about this festival and whether they have seen it practiced in their family.

Students read about the history of 清明节 Qing Ming Jie and examine how it was created from the combination of the 寒食节 Han Shi Jie and 上巳节 Shang Si Jie. Students study classic writings like the Tang dynasty poem 清明 Qing Ming by Du Mu to learn more about the historical settings and people’s emotions around this festival. Students recite the poem as an oral presentation. They also learn the story of the man who was instrumental in beginning this festival, 介子推 Jie Zi Tui, and act out his contributions in a skit.

The unit reinforces other units at FACTS that help students understand how celebrations have many components and activities, and lots of people are involved in making them happen. We look at some of the lighter, fun, family-bonding activities related to 清明节 Qing Ming Jie. Students learn about the celebration’s traditional foods, and I bring in 青果 qing guo 青团 qing tuan, a green glutinous rice pastry made with mugwort juice for them to taste. They learn about the history of Chinese traditional activities such as flying kites, going on swings, hiking, and playing a soccer-like game. Students enjoy designing a simple kite and writing a wish on their kite to fly away for a blessing.

Throughout the unit, students are asked to summarize and reflect on what they have gained from learning about 清明节 Qing Ming Jie. This emphasizes Mother Teresa’s teaching “love begins by taking care of the closest ones the ones at home” and in our heart.

Grade	Traditions about Death	Remembrance Traditions	Qing Ming Jie History and Traditions
K		What do you do to help remember a person special to you? Do you have a special elder in your heart who is living and/or has passed away? Name that relation.	Introduce 清明节 as a festival to honor deceased loved ones.

1		What do you do to help remember a person special to you? Do you have a special elder in your heart who is living and/or has passed away? What do you remember about the special elder or the deceased? Illustrate your favorite activity with or memory of this person.	Introduce 清明节 as a festival to honor deceased loved ones.
2	Do you know anyone who has passed away? Name the relationship of the deceased to you.	What do you remember about a special elder or a deceased relative? Do you have any special items or photos to help you remember that special person? Draw illustrations of this special object or item.	Introduce 清明节 as a festival to honor deceased loved ones.
3		Introduce 孝, 孝子 - honorable child as defined by Confucius as individual behaviors toward living elders and ancestors and remembering and doing things to honor living elders and deceased family members. List actions of filial piety described by Confucius.	Introduce 清明节 Pure and Brightness Festival to honor deceased loved ones, value those ones who came before you, and do a collective act of filial piety.
4		Discuss 孝, 孝子 - filial piety, honorable child defined by Confucius as individual behaviors toward living elders and ancestors and remembering and doing things to honor the deceased. List actions you personally take or seen done by your family that are examples of filial piety.	Introduce 清明节 Pure and Brightness Festival to honor deceased loved ones, value those ones who came before you, and do a collective act of filial piety. Discuss whether having such a festival is necessary and how you might do it differently. How would you rename such a festival? Create a poster promoting your remembrance festival.
5	How is death generally viewed in our society? In our communities? Validate that there can be many feelings around the topic of death.	Discuss 孝 filial piety, 孝子 honorable child, and the Chinese belief in a continued relationship between the living and the dead to establish and maintain order and harmony in their relationships. Describe 祠堂 family altars in homes for frequent practice of	Introduce 清明节 as a festival to honor deceased loved ones with prayers and goods. Identify food and ritual items. Examine joss paper goods purchased from Asian supermarkets. Identify

		honoring the deceased. Reflect on rituals practiced to remember the deceased in your family/home.	feelings and opinions about the joss paper goods. Design your own joss paper goods.
6	How is death viewed in our society? Identify death rituals seen in our community or media.	Discuss 孝 filial piety, 孝子 honorable child, and the Chinese belief in a continued relationship between the living and the dead to establish and maintain order and harmony in their relationships. 祠堂 Chinese family has altar in home for frequent practice of honoring the deceased. Reflect on rituals practiced to remember the deceased in your family/home. Interview family or close friends about remembrance rituals of deceased loved ones they know about or have seen.	Story of Jie Zi Tui 介子推 started the ritual of tomb sweeping 扫墓 and cold food ritual 寒食节 to honor the deceased. Roleplay the story of Jie Zi Tui, the government official who sacrificed himself for his Duke and later was honored by the Duke, which historically started part one of this festival.
7	Research death or funeral rituals seen in our community or media. Discover types of funerals and ceremonies and influential factors. Make use of personal narratives or interviews, for example.	Research to gather information on ways people grieve and remember those who have died in different cultures. What rituals, celebrations, or traditions around remembrance do different cultures practice?	清明节 is the combination of Cold Food Festival 寒食节 and Shangsi Festival 上巳节 (naming specific foods and activities related to the festival). Students compare these two festivals.
8	Examine traditional Chinese death rituals (preparations, mourning, burial). Discuss death rituals of family and/or friends or community. Explore the relationship of personal comfort with death rituals.	What do you do to help remember a person special to you? Do you have a special elder in your heart who is living and/or has passed away? Name that relation.	Examine the classic poem 清明 from Tang dynasty by 杜牧, emotions related to 清明节, and the famous Song dynasty painting Along the River During the Qingming Festival to view rituals of everyday people at that time.

孝 is the idea that since your parents took care of you when you were younger, you have to take care of them now that you're older. The idea of filial piety came from Confucius. He was very empathetic towards those in poverty. He believed that a ruler should be inspirational, gaining popularity and loyalty through that instead of force. Failing to find a ruler that governed by his principles, he became a philosopher and teacher in his hometown. Believing that family is the base virtue where all others come from, his ideas became very popular and it helped shape Chinese culture to how it is today.

孝 is shown by taking care of one's parents/grandparents, since they took care of you when you were younger. A while ago, most people would live with or near their parents to care for them. They would take care of their parents' medical stuff, money, house, etc. Now, a lot of people (not all) seem to have forgotten this idea of caring for one's parents. Of course, not everybody doesn't care for their parents, but there are a large number of people who don't. In some countries, there are laws that require you to care for your parents' needs and wants once you're an adult and they're a certain age.

I believe that 孝 should be practiced because if you truly love someone, then you'll make sure that they're happy and well cared for. I love my parents and want them to be happy, so I try doing things to make sure they have less to worry about. My family does this too. We visit our grandpa frequently to eat with him or just to hang out around him to make sure he's not lonely all the time. Last week, my dad came back from China after going there to take care of his father who was sick with heart problems. I would continue this idea because it seems like common decency to me and a family should take care of each other. Love is a two way street. It is unfair to expect love if you don't give any.

Figure 4. Tomb Sweeping Festival unit reflection by FACTS 6th Grader, Kayli H.

Sharing Students' Glimpses into the Journey of Learning to Respect Elders

One of my favorite moments in teaching all year happens during the introduction of the Tomb Sweeping rituals. So often when a student tells of their family traditions, I hear excited gasps and see students' raised hands making a signal we use at our school to express commonality, shared experience, or a connection. Students act relieved and happy to know peers share the same ritual practice or similar emotions about the ritual. The topic offers the opportunity to talk about this family ritual, often not well explained by their own family members, and ask questions.

Xiào

孝

Filial Piety

A few examples that I seen practiced in my family or community are...

- Helping elders wash dishes.
- Offering seats to elders.
- Offering help or support to elders.
- Doing simple jobs that can be done.
- Offering or serving drinks to elders.
- Preparing the table for breakfast, lunch or dinner.
- Listening to elders, suggestions or words.

Thank you, good bye.

谢谢,再见。








Figure 5. Tomb Sweeping Festival unit assignment by FACTS 7th Grader, Akemi L.

On the last day of school a couple of years ago, an 8th grader left me a note. He explained that Chinese class opened his mind and heart about his Chinese family. He changed to embrace his family's Chinese rituals and customs and feels closer to his parents. Before my class, seeing his parents praying daily to their ancestor's altar made him feel weird because he thought his parents were overly superstitious. As he learned about the deeper meanings that underlie their actions, his feelings changed to feelings of comfort in knowing that his hardworking parents weren't doing something strange. He now appreciated how they were making emotional connections with their ancestors daily and acting mindfully about their daily work to uphold and respect their ancestors and elders. I am grateful that I was able to help guide him, his classmates, and all the students who pass through my room on this part of this journey. All of us are connected through time to our ancestors, our elders, and those who will call us elder and then call us ancestor. Learning to live a life of respect is truly a journey, and I look forward to learning even more.

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