

What does it mean to “commemorate”? Linguistic and cultural evidence from Chinese

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Abstract

What does it mean to “commemorate”? Is *commemorate* or its derivations in English understood and accordingly practiced in other languages and cultures? This article demonstrates through the case of Chinese language and culture that people do *not* all share the same understanding about “commemoration” or practice it as it is in the Anglo context. Even though *commemorate* is translated into Chinese as *jì niàn* 紀念 and these words show certain linguistic similarities, *jì niàn* is not an exact translational equivalent of the English word. Furthermore, evidence is presented to show that *jì niàn* is likely a “recent” word in Chinese, based on contemporary Chinese notions of something like to “commemorate” that reflect possible influences from the West. In drawing evidence from conventional Chinese linguistic and cultural practices, this article illustrates how Chinese “commemorate” in ways that are indigenous to them. As part of this, semantic analyses using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) are performed on the Chinese words *jì niàn* and *zhuī yuǎn* 追遠, lit. ‘to recollect the distant past’. These are then compared with the semantic analysis for *commemorate* in English, for an in-depth appreciation of what makes Chinese understanding of something like “commemorate” unique.

Keywords: Commemorative practices; Chinese language and culture; linguistic and cultural practices; Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)

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1. Preliminary issues: why *commemoration* is not a universal concept

Commemorate or its derivations in English is a complex word, either lexically or semantically speaking. Its meaning refers to an event which does not happen everyday and, in fact, the practice of *commemoration* as we understand it in English tends to occur occasionally and usually requires planning beforehand. A *commemorative* event or act usually serves to mark a memorable event or person in the past. While the concept *commemoration* may strike a chord with many people around the world from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it is by no means universally shared. In a way, this is quite understandable, given the formal and semantic complexity of the word *commemoration*.

Through the case of Chinese language and culture, this article demonstrates that “commemoration” as it is understood or practised in English is not universal. It illustrates that, even though a word does exist in Chinese whose meaning seems to correspond with something like *commemorate* in English, it is not an exact equivalent. Furthermore, another word in Chinese exists which better reflects the Sino-centric way of something like a commemoration in its cultural practices. Let us first consider some linguistic facts about *commemorate* and its usual lexical candidate in Chinese translations.

1.1. *Jì niàn* in Chinese is a recent word

To begin with and, according to *Oxford Dictionaries* online, its etymology can be traced back to the Latin word *commemorat* in the 16th century meaning ‘brought to remembrance’.¹ This lexical root itself came from the verb *commemorare* in Latin, formed by the prefix *com-* ‘altogether’ and the root *memorare* ‘to relate’.

In Chinese, any good English-Chinese dictionary will posit the compound word *jì niàn* 紀念 which reads “to commemorate; commemorative; commemoration”. Indeed, like *commemorate* in English, the word *jì niàn* was originally conceived of in two parts: *jì* 紀 and *niàn* 念. *Jì* used to be an independent word in Chinese whose polysemous though related senses relate to either ‘getting things together and sorting them out’ (*jì*₁, e.g. as a verb referring to sorting out historical or factual accounts), before ‘binding them and recording them’ (*jì*₂, e.g. as a verb referring to the compilation of historical or factual records).² Etymologically, *jì* used to refer not to abstract matters such as historical or factual accounts but, rather, tangible entities such as the loose ends of (silk) threads (as indicated by the radical, *mì* 糸 ‘(silk) thread’ that makes up the character 紀), since ancient Chinese used to record or detail events by a system of knotting the threads. *Jì* resembles the prefix *com-* in the word *commemorate* in the sense of togetherness i.e. something like bringing recollections of something or someone together.

Niàn in the compound word *jì niàn* was typically used as a verb meaning ‘to keep something or someone close to the heart’. In the character for *niàn*, the logographical representation shows something which is adhered to the body part, the heart (*xīn* 心). Indeed, it makes sense that something or someone should be held close to the heart only if s/he or it is worth considering or remembering. In this respect, *niàn* resembles the Latin root *memorare* ‘to relate’ of the word *commemorate* in that the meaning of both these has

¹ Available at: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com> [accessed on 28.10.2016].

² *Jì* is highly polysemous and has many other senses. The two senses mentioned here are mutually related and closely connected with the current meaning of the compound word *jì niàn*.

something to do with something or someone that we continue to relate to, be it mentally or emotionally (or both).

Despite obvious similarities between *jì niàn* in Chinese and *commemorate* in English, it would be premature to say that Chinese have traditionally or conventionally understood *commemoration* or practised something like *commemorative* acts in the same way as in the Anglo culture. For one thing, it is only very recently in the history of Chinese language and literature that the concept of *jì niàn* has appeared, as a whole compound word. In fact, the observation that the word *jì niàn* bears a structural and semantic resemblance with *commemorate* may be a telling sign that it has only recently crept into Chinese lexicon, possibly along with a host of words that have entered into Chinese due to Western influence, introduced into Chinese via Japanese at the turn of the 20th century.³⁴ It is noteworthy in connection with this point that, in Japanese, the word for *commemoration* is *ki nen* 記念, which is a very close counterpart of *jì niàn*, both formally or semantically speaking.⁵ If it is correct to say that *jì niàn* in Chinese represents only a recent approximation, rather than a true equivalent, of the Anglo concept *commemoration*, then this is one piece of confirmation that *commemoration* is not a universal word in so far as at least one language other than English is concerned.

1.2. *Jì niàn* is not an exact equivalent of *commemoration*

The non-universality of *commemorate* is further attested by the fact that this word and *jì niàn* in Chinese have similar, yet nevertheless different, different formal and semantic distribution. First, the similarities are that both *commemorate* and *jì niàn* are used in reference to important or significant events, usually by default, ones of a serious (or grievous?) nature. Because of this fact, neither *commemorate* nor *jì niàn* is a word which appears in everyday conversation. For instance, *bǎi nián jì niàn* 百年紀念 ‘centennial **commemorations**’ referring to the 100th anniversary of the Easter uprising is a typical example of *jì niàn* or *commemoration* used in relation to a significant and solemn chapter in Irish history. In this example, *jì niàn* or *commemoration* readily appears as a noun.

What are the distributional differences between *jì niàn* or *commemoration*? In English, derivations based on the verb *commemorate* may readily appear in various parts of speech, including not only the noun *commemoration* but also the adjective *commemorative*. From a formal point of view, *commemorate* and its derivations may be used in connection with not only “eventive” nouns denoting important occasions, whether they be joyous or sombre (e.g. “**commemorating** the Queen's 90th birthday” at shop.peterborough-cathedral.org.uk; “**commemorating** Waterloo”),⁶ but also “concrete” nouns, including proper nouns to do with “things” e.g. “**commemorating** the Polio Vaccine”.⁷

³ See Li Wang. (In Chinese) *Hàn Yǔ Shǐ Gǎo* (漢語史稿) [Monographs on the History of the Chinese Language Volume III: The Lexicon]. Beijing: Zhong Hua Books [北京：中華書局], 1980.

⁴ Without going into much detail, the Japanese language played a pivotal role in the introduction of many new words and concepts into Chinese because, in the beginning of the 20th century, many Western technologies and novel philosophical thoughts in the West were brought into China via Japan, one way or the other.

⁵ Despite this, I hasten to add that *jì niàn* in Chinese and *ki nen* in Japanese are not necessarily identical concepts, since the argument here is that people in different languages and cultures do not all understand or practice something like *commemoration* in the same way.

⁶ Available at: www.waterloo200.org/themes/society/commemorating-waterloo/ [accessed on 28.10.2016].

⁷ Available at: www.marchofdimes.org/advocacy/commemorating-the-polio-vaccine.aspx. [accessed on 28.10.2016].

Even though *jì niàn* in Chinese are also found in various part of speech, its uses particularly as a verb seem somehow restricted possibly due to semantic conditions created by the overall context of the sentence. Two examples given in the Oxford Dictionary online illustrate this point well: for instance, *I was born In The Summer Of '69, and a song was written to commemorate the occasion*, *jì niàn* might be acceptable in a translation (*jì niàn zhè ge chǎng hé* 紀念這個場合) though *qìng zhù* 慶祝 ‘celebrate’ would appear a lot more appropriate (*qìng zhù zhè ge chǎng hé* 慶祝這個場合). For the other example *a stone commemorating a boy who died at sea*, it would be the verb *dào niàn* 悼念 lit. ‘mourn’ (*dào niàn zài hǎi shàng lí nán de nán hái* 悼念在海上罹難的男孩) rather than *jì niàn* which would work better translated into Chinese (*jì niàn zài hǎi shàng lí nán de nán hái* 紀念在海上罹難的男孩). Somehow, it appears that the verbal meaning of *jì niàn* is more focused than *commemorate* in English on pointing to the fact that something significant and serious has happened, with lesser concern for the positive (favourable) or negative (adversative) nature of the event. Therefore, Chinese offers one case in point that there is probably no true lexical or translational equivalent of *commemoration* in other languages, despite certain formal or semantic similarities.

2. Chinese ways of “commemorating” someone

So what is the Chinese word for something like *commemorate*, and how do Chinese practice something like a *commemoration*? In the ensuing paragraphs, I will present an overview of the kind of non-verbal or extralinguistic practices associated with something like *commemorative* acts or events (i.e. what Chinese do), before examining the verbal (linguistic) evidence attesting to something like *commemoration* in Chinese (what Chinese say). To be sure, the focus for the sake of the following discussions is on how Chinese “commemorate” a (deceased) person.

3. How Chinese “commemorate” someone

3.1. What Chinese do to “commemorate”

The Chinese practice of something like *commemoration* is deeply rooted in Chinese folk belief, and this belief has it that people live on, one way or the other, despite being physically deceased.⁸ This belief stemmed from the major philosophical traditions of China. Confucian thought reinforced the idea that that people may live on because others will always remember them for their outstanding attributes or the good deeds they performed during their lifetime. The Taoists propose that some people will achieve immortality when they pass on and they will continue to enjoy a presence, even if not in the way of a physical form in this world. Buddhists, on the other hand, advocate that people can achieve nirvana and some incarnations of the Buddha are revered and worshipped as are any god or deity.⁹

⁸ See Adrian Tien, “To be headed for the West, riding a crane: Chinese pragmemes in the wake of someone’s passing”, in *The Pragmeme of Accommodation: The Case of Interaction Around the Event of Death*, eds. Alessandro Capone and Vahid Parvaresh (Springer Verlag, forthcoming); X. X. Tang, D. L. Sun, Y. F. Xu X. Y. and Huang, *Living Etiquette in Taiwan* (Taipei: Qiu Yu Culture Publishing, 2005); and F. R. Xie, “A Passport to Eternity – Chinese Ancestral Spirit Tablets”, in *Trademarks of the Chinese*, ed. J. F. Wang (Taipei: Sinorama Magazine Publishing 1992), 168-177.

⁹ See also Yijie Tang, *Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, and Chinese Culture* (Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer, 2015).

To Chinese, this belief is psychologically real, and evidence of it can be seen in many aspects of “commemorating” a person. In order to communicate with the deceased in a “commemorative” act, an object of remembrance is erected which is then treated as a tangible and real representation of the deceased. This object could be as small as a rock with a simple (and minimal) inscription, as big as a stone or stone slate with calligraphy or as elaborate as a traditional tablet (*pái wèi* 牌位) with engraving. In a “commemorative” prayer, incense is often lit as a medium in facilitating communication with the deceased; however, a respectful bow, a simple nod of the head or open hands put together and held in front of the chest are also common ways of communicating.¹⁰

Because objects of remembrance are seen as real representations of the deceased, they are often carefully housed. Tablets of past ancestors are worshipped either on the family altar at home or, for big or wealthy families, a traditional shrine (*cí táng* 祠堂) may be separately built specially to house ancestral tablets. In the unfortunate event that someone in the family were to pass away, a tablet would be erected in his/her name which would then get worshipped along with his/her ancestors by the family’s descendants. At the “national” level, shrines (*cí* 祠) or their architectural equivalent, are places of worship on a large scale that house tablets of the country’s heroes or noteworthy historical figures. Notably, icons of gods and deities are often also seen on the altars or in the shrines, which demonstrate the fact that the deceased are often worshipped as though they have become immortal or deity-like. In fact, the living often ask through “commemorative” prayers that the deceased and their other ancestors would bless them and protect them in the same way as would gods and deities.

The deceased are thought of as requiring the same kind of necessities and even luxuries as the living, and this is clearly attested by the fact that offerings comprising of food and consumables and even commodities such as paper currency for use in the netherworld (to be sent to the deceased by burning the paper notes) are usually seen at “commemorative” ceremonies or rituals. Chinese “commemorations” are similar to Chinese memorial services at a funeral except that, unlike a memorial service during which it is expected that there be orchestrated, even vocal, expressions of mourning, a Chinese “commemoration” can be a much more peaceful and calm affair.¹¹

3.2. What Chinese say to “commemorate”

To express respect to the deceased in words, one of the main linguistic features of a Chinese “commemorative” act is that the hierarchical position of the deceased is upheld, even elevated, as inscribed or engraved on objects of remembrance.¹² This requires carefully following a set of strict conventions to do with the proper wording of inscriptions or engravings, much of which is unbeknown or unfamiliar to most ordinary native Chinese speaker, as it is the primary “identifier” of an object of remembrance to the deceased.¹³

¹⁰ A supreme show of respect is kowtowing. This gesture is used (when it is used) by the closest yet hierarchically junior relatives of the deceased, to acknowledge their profound remembrance of the deceased (and other ancestors).

¹¹ For example, Daniel Tong, *Chinese funeral practices: what's right for the Christian?* (Singapore: Armour, 2005) and Tien, “To be headed for the West, riding a crane: Chinese pragmeme in the wake of someone’s passing”.

¹² See Tien, “To be headed for the West, riding a crane: Chinese pragmeme in the wake of someone’s passing”.

¹³ Admittedly, these conventions have become increasingly simplified to suit modern usage. Nonetheless, the principle behind these conventions (that the hierarchical position of the deceased is upheld, even elevated, in the inscription or engraving) has remained in this aspect of the Chinese “commemorative” practice.

Getting the hierarchical position of the deceased properly stated involves using correct kinship terms, honorifics and titles etc. that establish the hierarchical relation between the living i.e. one who is doing the “commemorating” and the deceased. Each of the following (and more) makes a difference in this set of conventions: whether the deceased came from the close or extended family of the living; whether the deceased came from the maternal or paternal family of the living; which generation the deceased came from in relation to the living; which side of a marital relationship the deceased came from in relation to the living; whether there was an adopted relationship between the living and the deceased; and (less rarely in modern contexts) whether the deceased was professionally and hierarchically related to the living (e.g. the deceased was a teacher who taught the living when s/he was alive). In situations where it is impossible to identify a certain deceased individual – for instance, an unidentified boy who drowned at sea; an unknown soldier who died at war; a group of war dead – the honorific *gōng* 公 lit. ‘duke’ or *mǔ* 母 lit. ‘duchess’ is traditionally attached to the surname of the deceased. Note here that, based on cultural conventions, a person who dies young such as the boy who dies at sea gets acknowledged on the object of remembrance as a *gōng* or *mǔ*, even if s/he would have been hierarchically junior when s/he was alive. This is a telling sign that the hierarchical position of the deceased is normally elevated in Chinese “commemorative” practices.

Another linguistic characteristic of a Chinese “commemorative” act is that there will often be a couplet somewhere with words of praise for the deceased, somewhere near the place of remembrance (the shrine or the altar etc.) Those couplets that are Confucian-influenced will highlight the virtue or righteousness (*dé xìng* 德性) of the deceased. It is owing to such virtue or righteousness which the deceased will be remembered by and which will live on in the heart of the descendants. Taoist-inspired couplets, on the other hand, will make the claim that the deceased has achieved immortality. Themes of longevity, such as the ancient pines and cypresses (plants which are known to be centuries old), are adopted in couplets of this kind to metaphorise immortality. Buddhist couplets are rare but, when they do, the words give reference to gods and deities, implying that the deceased has hopefully achieved nirvana.¹⁴

Now for a general overview of the kind of specific verbs that Chinese use to refer to something like “commemorating” someone: if a person was deceased in the recent past, people would *dào niàn* 悼念 lit. ‘remember him/her in mourning’ or *zhuī sī* 追思 lit. ‘pursue him/her in memory’. The word *zhuī sī* is used in Chinese Christian memorial services. If a person was deceased in the distant past - e.g. an ancestor – people would *zhuī yuǎn* 追遠 lit. ‘recall (him/her) from the distant past’. In addition to these verbs, there is *jì sì* 祭祀, which is a formal and specialised verb referring to a “commemorative” act of prayer (once upon a time, the act of *jì sì* involved some sort of an animal sacrifice). The word *jì* 祭 is sometimes used in isolation, as a formal but non-specialised verb also referring to a “commemorative” act of prayer. *Jì* is sometimes collocated with the verb ‘to pray’, forming a compound word such as *jì bài* 祭拜 ‘to worship’, which is similar in meaning with *jì sì* but which is probably again less specialised. Last but not least, perhaps the least specialised and the most generic verb of all is *bài bài* 拜拜, or its curtailed version *bài* 拜, which reads either as ‘to pray’ or ‘to worship’. *Bài* may refer to an act of prayer in most situations, including prayers to the

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the use of couplets in Chinese memorial services, including “commemorations”, see Tien, “To be headed for the West, riding a crane: Chinese pragmemes in the wake of someone’s passing”.

deceased or prayers to god and deities etc. *Bài* is typically the first word that Chinese children pick up to do with any kind of a “commemorative” act.

In the next section, I present a focused semantic analysis of the verb *zhuī yuǎn* as a compelling example of an aspect of Chinese “commemoration”. For the semantic analysis, I have adopted the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)f method as advanced by Anna Wierzbicka and Cliff Goddard.¹⁵ In a nutshell, the NSM is, in principle, a set of semantically basic and universally identified primitive concepts or “primes”, with corresponding lexical manifestations across languages which, when combined in specifiable configurations, carry the power to reduce culturally complex meanings of words into semantically simple elucidations (see Appendix I for the list of NSM primes).

3.2.1. Word in focus: *zhuī yuǎn*

Zhuī yuǎn ‘to recall someone from the distant past’ (where *zhuī* = ‘to chase (after), to pursue’ and *yuǎn* = ‘distant, far’) is a poignant word. It is a highly Sino-centric concept whose cultural significance is exemplified by the fact that it is very much embraced by Chinese not only in China but around the world by Chinese diaspora. In a famous tear-jerking episode from the hugely popular Singaporean television drama series, *The Little Nonya*, the humble heroine (who was half Chinese) won the audience’s resounding praise when she declared that *zhuī yuǎn* should be upheld as one of every person’s dearest virtues because recollecting our ancestors from the past, acknowledging all their trials and tribulations and showing an appreciation for all the things that they did (the many struggles and hardship that they overcame in order to get us to where we are etc.) is essential to our understanding of who we are and where we have come from i.e. our ancestral roots, which is something that we can be proud of. It is true that the word *zhuī yuǎn* is commonly seen displayed even in peranakan shrines in Southeast Asia, reminding people of the importance of being able to remember one’s ancestors from the past.¹⁶

Zhuī yuǎn is also prominently featured in Chinese literature, and an outstanding example of its occurrence is in Chapter 53 of the Chinese classic, *Dream of the Red Chambers* (*Hóng Lóu Mèng* 紅樓夢). In this epic, this word made its way into the story when characters representing this word were clearly displayed on a plaque (*biǎn* 匾) in the magnificent family shrine, as a way of reminding the descendants of the fated household that they would not have prospered or attained all the fortune and glory had it not been for their distinguished forerunners.

Given the unique and culture-centric status of this word, it is perhaps not surprising that *zhuī yuǎn* is not a very productive word at all, lexically speaking. It is usually found in conventionally set compound words, either retaining its verb form e.g. *shèn zhōng zhuī yuǎn* 慎終追遠 ‘to conform with how things should be done according to Confucian doctrine by **recalling people of the distant past**, through proper practice of conventions’. On occasion, *zhuī yuǎn* might appear as a gerund (e.g. *dǒng de zhuī yuǎn* 懂得追遠 ‘to know what

¹⁵ See, for example, Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka, *Words and Meanings: Lexical Semantics Across Domains, Languages, and Cultures* (Oxford University Press, 2015); and Cliff Goddard, *Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)*, available at: www.griffith.edu.au/humanities-languages/school-humanities-languages-social-science/research/natural-semantic-metalanguage-homepage [accessed on 28.10.2016].

¹⁶ “Peranakan” refers to people born in Southeast Asia of mixed Chinese and (usually) Malay descent.

recalling someone from the distant past is’) or as an adjectival form in a compound noun e.g. *zhuī yuǎn tīng* 追遠廳 lit. ‘hall where people **recall people of the distant past**’.

An NSM explication of the meaning of *zhuī yuǎn* may be tentatively posited, as below:

[A]

‘Someone *zhuī yuǎn* someone else’ =

someone does some things at some times

this someone does these things, because this someone thinks like this:

“someone else died a long time ago before this time

people think like this about this someone else:

this someone else did many good things before

because of these things, people cannot not think about this someone else

for a long time after this time

it is very good if everyone can think about this someone else like

this”

this someone does these things because this someone wants to think about

this someone else for a long time after this time

This explication captures a couple of important elements characterising the meaning of *zhuī yuǎn*: first, *zhuī yuǎn* is not only about the mental state of remembering the deceased (‘someone else’) but also what a person *does* to put his/her thoughts into action (‘someone does these things’). Engaging in a “commemorative” act abiding by the proper cultural conventions is one way of showing remembrance; for instance, erecting an object of remembrance, building an altar or a shrine or making offerings, putting appropriate words on objects of remembrance and couplets, using the appropriate verbs for something like *commemorate* etc. Second, the mindset of a person who recalls the deceased will concur with what many others think (‘people think like this about this someone else’) i.e. that the deceased was virtuous or righteous in their conduct, performed good deeds or s/he worked hard during his/her lifetime in order to pave the way for his/her descendants etc. (‘this someone else did many good things before’) and that we owe it to the deceased to always remember them because of their exemplary virtues, good deeds or toil (‘because of these things, people cannot not think about this someone else for a long time after this time’). Above all, these semantic characteristics of the word *zhuī yuǎn* suggest that its origin is intensely rooted in Confucian philosophy which, as pointed out earlier, propagates the idea that people live on even after they are no longer physically living because others will always remember them for their exemplary virtues, good deeds or toil.

For the sake of comparison, here is a preliminary NSM analysis of the verb *commemorate* in English:

[B]

‘Someone *commemorates* someone else’ (e.g. *someone commemorates a boy who died at sea*) =

someone does some things at some times

this someone does these things, because this someone thinks like this:

“someone else died before this time

people think like this about this someone else:

something happened to this someone else before

it is something big, people cannot not think more about it

because of it, people cannot not think about this someone else
for a long time after this time
it is very good if everyone can think about this someone else like
this”

this someone does these things because this someone wants to think about
this some else for a long time after this time

Initially, what both meanings of *zhuī yuǎn* and *commemorate* have in common is that remembrance is something which needs to be put into action (‘someone does some things’). In the former Chinese case, this involves certain cultural conventions and, in the latter Anglo case, this entails some sort of a ceremony (e.g. wreath laying etc.). One striking difference in the semantic compositions as reflected by NSM analyses at [A] and [B] is that one can only *zhuī yuǎn* if a deceased person died a long time ago (‘someone else died *a long time ago* before this time’), whereas it is entirely possible for the deceased person to be *commemorated* even if s/he has only passed away recently (hence ‘someone else died before this time’, without any specification of length of time). Another outstanding compositional difference is found in the details of what people think. Whereas the Chinese concept *zhuī yuǎn* indicates that the deceased should be remembered because of all their virtues, good deeds or toil (‘this someone else did *many good things* before; because of these things, people cannot not think about this someone else for a long time after this time’), it can be seen through the Anglo concept *commemorate* that people remember the deceased because something significant happened to them (‘something happened to this someone else before’ and ‘it is something big’).

It might be further argued that, by default, something not only significant but also adverse would have to have happened to the deceased to warrant the deceased being made worthy of *commemorating* e.g. the boy who died at sea is *commemorated* because he was caught up in a ship disaster, or a soldier who gets *commemorated* because he was killed in a war etc. Admittedly, examples do crop up from time to time in English that seem to suggest that nothing adverse has to have happened to the deceased in order to his/her being *commemorated*. For instance, a celebrated late comedian might be *commemorated* without any reference to an adversative event. Even in such examples, however, I would argue that probably the unfavourable element might lie with the mere fact that a celebrity is no longer with us i.e. a star has fallen, which is itself something negative (at least to those fans of the celebrity).

4. Concluding remarks

The practice of “commemoration” is culturally dependent, and words for something like “commemoration” or its derivations are language-specific. The ways in which a “commemorative” event is conducted in the Anglo context as reflected by the meaning and the uses of the English word *commemorate* are complex and Anglo-centric. Making sense of Anglo commemorative acts and English acts related to the acts presents enough of a challenge in its own right. It is an entirely different ball game to look in other languages and cultures for something like “commemorative” acts and events or something which seems to stand for the English word *commemorate*. The case of Chinese language and culture is one clear case in point, as contended in this article. It would thus be a huge mistake to take “commemoration” as universal.

In Chinese, there is a number of words which are potential candidates for something like *commemorate* in English, not only the word *jì niàn* which is popularly given as the Chinese translation of *commemorate* but also those words such as *zhū yuǎn*. In fact, it was introduced in this article that words other than *jì niàn* exist in Chinese whose meanings and uses capture something like “commemorative” practices in Chinese culture much more pertinently than *jì niàn*. To be precise, Chinese words such as *zhū yuǎn* reflect an aspect of the Chinese culture which appears to be profoundly engrained in Confucian and, to a lesser extent, Taoist or Buddhist teachings. A detailed semantic analysis focusing on *zhū yuǎn*, along with a brief semantic comparison with the English word *commemorate*, has gone some way towards substantiating this and the argument that something like “commemoration” in Chinese is highly Sino-centric.

Appendix 1: NSM primes¹⁷

Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE, PEOPLE, SOMETHING~THING, BODY
Relational substantives:	KIND, PART
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW
Evaluators:	GOOD, BAD
Descriptors:	BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates:	THINK, KNOW, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech:	SAY, WORDS, TRUE
Actions, events, movement:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Location, existence, specification:	BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)
Possession:	(IS) MINE
Life and death:	LIVE, DIE
Time:	WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
Space:	WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH
Logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Intensifier, augmentor:	VERY, MORE
Similarity:	LIKE~AS~WAY

¹⁷ Cliff Goddard. *Natural Semantic Metalanguage* (NSM). Available at: www.griffith.edu.au/humanities-languages/school-humanities-languages-social-science/research/natural-semantic-metalanguage-homepage [accessed on 28.10.2016].

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