

Ukraine's Take on Why East Is East

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A Ukrainian man sporting the traditional чуб (chub) haircut.

Азиатчина: Eastern backwardness (derogatory)

I came across an interesting exchange online in comments about a series of dramatic photos of demonstrations in Kiev. Someone, presumably Russian, asked with admiration and a dose of condescension: А чего хотят-то brave украинцы? (And what do those valiant Ukrainians want?) The answer, presumably from one of those valiant Ukrainians, was dry but to the point: Хотим попрощаться с азиатчиной и совком (We want to break with Eastern culture and the Soviet mentality).

Well, that was the gist of it, but азиатчина required a bit of research.

Like all words ending in the suffix –щина/-чина that denote the characteristics of a place, philosophy or people, азиатчина is derogatory. So you know right away that it means "all the bad stuff connected with Asia." But what bad stuff and where in Asia?

One dictionary defines азиатчина neutrally: порядок вещей, образ жизни и способ действий, свойственный азиатам (the way of things, the way of life and behavior characteristic of Asians). But the other dictionaries I consulted are far from neutral and define it as некультурность, культурная отсталость, грубость (lack of culture, cultural backwardness, crudeness). And one dictionary from the turn of the 20th century was extremely clear: противоположные европейским обычаям, т.е. грубые; отсутствие цивилизации (the opposite of European customs — that is, crude; the absence of civilization). Yikes. Makes you appreciate политкорректность (political correctness).

But I still did not know what part of Asia was meant or, more important, what азиатчина connotes to average folks today. So I started asking around. For most people, азиатчина refers to the Eastern parts of the former Russian Empire and Soviet Union — the Caucasus and Central Asia — plus the Eastern cultures surrounding it to the south and west: Turkey and the Middle East. Everyone excludes the Far East (China, Korea, Japan) and Southeast Asia (India, Nepal). Some people exclude Georgia or Armenia, presumably because they are Christian.

And how do they define азиатчина? Replies included: отсутствие прав человека (no human rights); некультурность (uncultured); яркая одежда, эмоциональность, грубость (bright clothing, emotionalism, crude behavior); коррупция, отсутствие свободы (corruption, lack of freedom).

Actually, азиатчина is close to the concept of Orientalism as defined by Edward Said — only largely without the elements of exoticism and sexual fantasy that are part of the Western notion.

As far as I can tell, in the Ukrainian press and blogosphere азиатчина looms large more in terms of political systems. It seems to be associated with a perceived kind of Middle Eastern, mostly Ottoman Turkish, system of governance and culture. After reading many articles, I'd say азиатчина means a nondemocratic system riddled with corruption, bribery and patronage where the rulers reap the financial rewards of power but don't do much work. Back in 2007, one Russian blogger living in the Eastern part of the country decried the leaders' вопиющая азиатчина (flagrant Eastern manner) and suggested the main leaders of the party should be called янук-бей (Yanuk-bei), азар-бек (Azar-bek) and близнюк-эфенди (Bliznyuk-effendi).

In Ukraine, азиатчина is often contrasted with some concepts described by neologisms: европейскость (European-ness), русскость (Russian-ness) and украинскость (Ukrainian-ness).

You can tell these are folks trying to figure out who they are and who they aren't, who they want to become and who they don't want to be. It's not a pretty process. I send them best wishes — and a dose of политкорректность.

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