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## TEACHING COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

# But Do They know It's February in China? And Other Questions of Authority and Culture in Comparative Classrooms

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In this essay I recount three interesting questions students have asked me in comparative classroom settings, each of which I see as helping to problematize assumptions about the material they are studying as well as teachers' responsibilities in unearthing and responding to these underlying prejudices. I outline the difficult position in which comparative philosophy teachers at times find themselves in (i.e., occupying the role of cultural representative for a variety of cultures and traditions). I then conclude with several pedagogical strategies to support teachers negotiating such cross-cultural conversations.

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**Keywords:** Comparative Philosophy; Pedagogy; China; Assumptions; Religion; Orientalism

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As teachers we have all encountered our fair share of odd questions. Sometimes funny, sometimes bizarre, often a bit out of left field, our students ask questions that can give us pause. In this essay I explain three of the more odd questions I have gotten as a teacher of comparative and nonwestern philosophies, and I use these questions as a lens to think about certain problems and challenges that arise in comparative classrooms.

Before I begin, however, it might be useful to examine why we should pay attention to odd questions. As specialists in Asian, nonwestern, or comparative philosophies, most of us have spent five, ten, or even more years immersed in different cultures, languages, or traditions. We have often traveled extensively, perhaps even living abroad, and in this process of our specialization it is easy to forget what the starting place and basic assumptions are for our students, who may not yet have been exposed to other cultures in any meaningful way. While some questions are merely odd, others point to problems that arise in the separation between the experience of the specialist and of the student; these questions can draw attention to issues underlying teaching comparative philosophy, especially for students with little to no exposure to nonwestern philosophies. In discussing these seemingly strange questions, I want to be very clear that my intention is not to ridicule these students or their questions, but in fact the opposite—I hope to take something that could be ignored, brushed over, or laughed at, and make it the focus of a serious inquiry into how we can better respond to the needs of our students. As I teach at a regional state institution, most of my students are from Florida and surrounding areas of the southeastern United States; few have much exposure to Asia before they enter my classroom. None of my courses have prerequisites, and several fulfill a Foreign Culture requirement for any major, so I often see students who not only have no background in Asian, nonwestern, or comparative philosophies or religions, but who are also taking their first philosophy or religious studies course.

### **But Do They Know It's February in China?**

The first question to be considered here came out of a comparative ethics course taught in a spring semester. It happened that we were just beginning to talk about Confucian ethics at the time of Chinese New Year. Being a lunar holiday, Chinese

New Year falls on different days each year, usually during the Gregorian calendar's late January or early February. After I explained this a bit, one student, looking thoroughly confused, raised his hand and asked, "But do they know it's February in China?" The student was concerned that because Chinese people celebrate Chinese New Year as a holiday on the lunar calendar, they might not *know* that it is *in fact* February.

This is, I think, an excellent question for pointing out that even in explicitly comparative classrooms, where a good bit of time and energy has been spent setting up the point that there are genuine differences in philosophies and worldviews, we can fail to reach foundational assumptions about objectivity, neutrality, and western perspectives. The student recognized the presence of philosophical differences, but nonetheless assumed that others (in this case, Chinese people) still basically have the same operating framework—the student's framework. Reflecting on this question in class, we were able to think about what it means for it to be February—the idea that some of our givens are socio-historically located in contingent factors, and that the Gregorian calendar, the names of the months, their duration, and even times of day (noon, for example) come out of a particular European (and, in the case of the calendar, Christian) perspective. Not only this, but the very idea of the seven-day week with weekend or Sabbath day(s) comes out of a European and/or Judeo-Christian context. The problem here was that the student was taking the western perspective as a neutral position, and not recognizing that even how we organize our time is culturally bound. This question provides an opportunity to think about how often this is probably the case for most of our students, regardless of explicit attempts to destabilize such assumptions.

### **Can I Be Shintō in Florida?**

In a course on Japanese philosophy, after several weeks of discussing Shintō, one student, thoroughly taken by some of the ideas and practices, asked "Can I be Shintō in Florida?" On the surface, this question points to the fact that Shintō is most often associated with Japan and Japanese people—it is generally closely identified with the Japanese archipelago as a sacred place and with the Japanese people as a sacred

lineage.<sup>1</sup> The question also brings up student assumptions about the kind of thing that religion is—he was assuming he could assent to a set of beliefs and “become” Shintō or “convert” to Shintō, even though he lived in Florida and was not ethnically Japanese.

This question points out a more complex issue that students often have with regard to their assumptions about religious traditions. Coming out of a primarily Protestant Christian background, many students think that the central feature of any given religion is its belief system. However, for many traditions, this is simply not the case. While beliefs and worldviews are certainly involved, practices and cultural or community activities can often be understood as more central than any particular belief. Furthermore, with some traditions the idea of membership by assent to belief would be extremely odd, and helping students to think through why not all traditions are equally available to anyone, laid out like a membership buffet, is particularly important. Most people don't really choose to “be” Shintō, for instance, by assenting to a belief. As Satsuki Kawano writes in her book on ritual and religion in contemporary Japan:

[M]ost people I met in Kamakura tended to downplay personal faith in specific religious doctrines when explaining their ritual actions, such as praying to the tutelary *kami* or ancestors for health and protection. In fact, Japanese people today are known to emphasize ‘the primacy of action’ over belief in explaining their ritual actions. . . . Ritual actors are more frequently concerned with praying for the well being of themselves and those close to them, than with theological issues. The attitude of ‘do it and see if it works’ is widespread. And performing rituals might eventually lead to personal commitment to religious ideas and doctrines. (Kawano 2005, 1–2)

It is not uncommon for teachers of religious studies to have to spend a great deal of time and energy helping students to see that while contemporary American,

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<sup>1</sup> There are some exceptions to this, primarily in terms of Japanese people who have emigrated elsewhere, but also with Shintō in America among some non-Japanese people.

primarily Protestant, discourse about religion prioritizes belief, religious and community practices are at least equally important in understanding religion more generally. In East Asia, however, this goes even one step further, as religious beliefs are often not mutually exclusive across different traditions (one can “be” Buddhist and Confucian, or Buddhist and Shintō, without contradiction), and this is in part due to the importance placed on practice. Instead of my student’s question about becoming Shintō being one of assenting to or agreeing with a Shintō worldview, it would be interesting to consider the same question along the lines of the habits, practices, and community activities associated with Shintō, and what sense we could make of those outside of a culturally Japanese context.

The idea of “becoming” Shintō has its roots in the assumption that anyone can just choose to convert to a new religion, and many students who take comparative or nonwestern philosophy courses are on a personal, spiritual quest, purposefully seeking a “new” religion as a means of personal transformation. This is an issue most noncomparative courses do not face: how many students take a Modern Philosophy course hoping to become a Cartesian? This kind of quest has its roots in orientalist structures of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, which saw the East as a repository of ancient wisdom; this Eastern Wisdom becomes an amalgamation of everything that is desirable about a tradition without any of the features disliked about Western ones. This is particularly clear in regard to the way Buddhism was introduced by western scholars to the west:

What I intend by Buddhism, is the system of metaphysical and social philosophy, organized by Shakyamuni, or Gautama Buddha. Neither am I speaking here of Buddhism in its modern development, as modified by intermixtures either with the popular forms of Brahmanism, or with the older superstitions of the countries where it afterwards gained a footing: for that view of it will come more properly before us, when we pass from Hindustan to China, and the other regions where it still possesses a complete ascendancy. In different words, we shall be dealing now with a philosophy rather than with a religion. (Hardwick 1863, in Masuzawa 2005, 127)

In calling Buddhism a “philosophy rather than . . . a religion” Hardwick is here seeking to “purify” the Buddhism(s) that were on the ground in Asia of their ritual, cultural, and political dimensions, and instead focus just on what he saw as the core of ideas of Buddhism. For students who are on these sorts of personal quests, understanding the imperial and colonial histories between “East” and “West” is valuable so that genuine engagement, both personal and academic, is possible. But it is also key that they understand the difference in purpose and methodology between a personal journey and an academic pursuit.

### **How Would the Buddha Say “Bless You”?**

In the few minutes before an Introduction to Buddhism class began, students were chatting with one another, and as happens, someone sneezed. One of the students took this as an opportunity to ask how the historical Buddha would say “bless you.” Not unlike the first question, this also highlights the invisibility of perspective—the fact that “bless you” is a shortened form of “God bless you,” used by Christians and others in the English speaking world as far back as at least Pope Gregory I and the plague of 590 C.E. However someone might have responded to a sneeze during the time of the historical Buddha, our current customs come out of a particular time and place that is very different from those of the historical Buddha. How someone in that time and place might have responded to a sneeze is an interesting question, but not one I was prepared to answer. Students often assume that someone who teaches comparative or nonwestern courses is such an expert that she approaches the status of a magical knower, one who has access to all facets of all cultural/historical issues. As she emphasizes the difficulties in separating out philosophy and/or religion from one another and from other cultural expressions, students can come to see the teacher as a representative of insider traditions, whether or not this is the case.

Working with students on the many dimensions of “insider” and “outsider” vocabulary can be helpful in transforming this idea of teacher as magical knower into teacher as scholar. Furthermore, foregrounding issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and membership or identification means that students are confronted with the complexities of identity with respect to their teachers, in ways that are often surprising to

them. Sometimes students do not see teachers as complex persons, and so an explicit focus on roles and responsibilities of scholars can be valuable. Introducing vocabulary and methodology from the academic study of religion, such as the distinction between anthropological and theological approaches to religion, or problematizing the very concept and category of “religion” itself can be useful here (See McCutcheon Handout). It can also be useful for students to reflect (in my case) on being taught about East Asian philosophies and religions by someone who is not ethnically East Asian. I often ask students to think about this in the context of whether or not someone of a different nationality could come to know more about the U.S. than they do—if that sort of thing is possible, then the academic study of a given field is not reducible to or does not require a specific set of identities, but rather a specific set of methodologies.

### **Culture, Authority, and Comparative Philosophy**

One thing we can learn from these kinds of odd questions is that attending to similarities and differences between cultures and traditions is not enough. In comparative classrooms, we need creative strategies for unearthing ambient assumptions and engaging traditions on their own terms, from out of the realities of imperial and colonial histories. In what follows, I give a few strategies that I have found to be useful, and I hope other teacher-scholars will take this as an invitation to share their own strategies for comparative classrooms.

I frame almost all of my comparative courses around the idea of practicing what we might call a postcolonial “hermeneutics of sensitivity.” I borrow this idea from Bryan Van Norden, who describes it as a combination of the principle of charity, an hermeneutics of faith, and an hermeneutics of suspicion (Van Norden 2012, 4-9). I use this language explicitly, and spend class time developing these terms and strategies in light of the particular course material of that class. In brief, the principle of charity is a disposition of intellectual humility. It requires one to begin with the assumption that others are reasonable, and that any fault or lack of understanding is (at least initially) the burden of the one who is trying to understand. Students are often disposed to find texts whose language is difficult to be boring, stupid, or



wrong. When we begin from the principle of charity, however, then the onus of interpretation is on us—if we don't understand, we must return to the text to try and find out what we missed, or how our assumptions are preventing our understanding. Hermeneutics of faith and suspicion, coined originally by Paul Ricoeur, can be useful as *complementary*, not *oppositional*, strategies of meaning-making. When given a particular issue to try to understand, one can adopt the ambient assumptions of the given context and follow them through to interpret the issue (hermeneutics of faith), and one can also look for explanatory factors outside of the given assumptions of the context-specific tradition (hermeneutics of suspicion). For instance, when trying to understand the issue of *tulku* reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism, one can look internally to the tradition for an explanation of what happens and why (high levels of spiritual accomplishment lead to *siddhis*, or powers, one of which is the ability to control one's rebirth), *and* one can look externally to studies of the political function of the heads of monastic complexes for an explanation of why tracing leadership lineage might be important.

I also think it is important that this be a “postcolonial” or “postmodern” hermeneutics of sensitivity, in the sense that as cross-cultural scholars and teachers, we help students to move beyond solely Western frameworks and concepts, looking at interpretive strategies, problems, categories, and concerns from within nonwestern traditions, and when appropriate also take those strategies, problems, categories, and concerns to be relevant to the project of philosophy in general. That is, not only do we need to pay attention to *li* 禮 when we study Confucianism (Ruism), but we might take *li* 禮 as an interpretive category relevant to non-Confucian philosophers. This also means that language, culture, and a careful balance between insider and outsider discourses needs to be prominent. As a postcolonial or postmodern hermeneutic, this kind of interpretation also requires not only an acknowledgement of the historical realities of imperialism and coloniality, but the ways in which academic projects should actively resist oppressive hegemonic power structures. This includes not only resisting the imposition of western languages, categories, and concerns onto nonwestern traditions, but also attending to the ways in which the histories of our disciplines have been complicit in orientalist misrepresentations.

On a study abroad program that I co-lead, part of the reading and classroom work we do involves historical, colonial, imperial, and missionary issues with China. We also, however, examine issues of internal colonialism and self-orientalism, locating these issues not narrowly (i.e., West=Bad, East=Good), but more broadly by looking at how colonialism and orientalism have and do structure our current world in complex ways. For instance, after being in Guilin for a week or two, we take students to the nearby “village” of Yangshuo. While Yangshuo is certainly much smaller than most cities in China, it is now a major tourist destination, both for Chinese and foreign tourists. In order to help students prepare to think about some of the issues raised by this, they read selections on the tourism of Han majority Chinese in China, especially as it relates to “folk” or “minority” tourist locales (See Oakes 1995 and Petersen 1995). This reading helps them to see that not everything is being packaged for a “western” tourist audience, and that there are significant issues of oppression and abuse internal to Chinese tourist structures.

Finally, I would like to offer a few techniques I have found to be useful for practicing this kind of postcolonial hermeneutics of sensitivity in the comparative classroom. I use a variety of activities aimed at identifying assumptions, both on the part of students and with the text. I often have students read selections on orientalism, and use clips from contemporary film, TV, commercials, etc., to illustrate the pervasiveness of certain orientalist ideas and practices. I devote class time to discussions of insider/outsider/anthropological/theological perspectives, and have students identify the pervading perspective and the implications for that perspective on the ideas or practices in question. When time permits, I also do a variety of relevant hands-on cultural activities, and relate them to the texts or ideas we study. For instance, in my Chinese Philosophy course we usually do calligraphy, one of the arts that is important across different traditions, and students often comment on how surprisingly difficult it is—the hands-on experience builds on their desire for increased cultural competence while also making some theoretical and textual issues more concrete, and giving students an increased respect for the time and practice involved in artistic competence.

In pursuit of this hermeneutics of sensitivity, I also actively discourage certain kinds of comparisons. It is not unusual for students to compare the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) to the Bible, for instance. After the first time this comes up, in which we discuss many similarities and differences, I ask that the students try to refrain from understanding the *Analects* through the (much more familiar) text of the Bible, so that they give the *Analects* a chance to speak for itself, with its own language, ideas, and concerns. Then, after they have given the text a chance to *be* without a Biblical lens, we can return to comparative projects and possibilities.

Comparative courses can be incredibly rich experiences for students (and for teachers!), but they do come with an attendant set of concerns that need to be foregrounded. As I have discussed here, one opportunity for understanding how to structure a good environment for students is to pay particular attention to what their questions might have to tell us about where students are coming from. This is not a one-off project, however. This way of approaching student questions is recursive, building on and adjusting from previous iterations, and sometimes starting over again.<sup>2</sup> Designing a new comparative course, or building comparative elements into previously noncomparative courses, can help us to see ourselves as students again, and to reignite a passion for discovery and learning about the world.<sup>3</sup>

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

### Author Information

Sarah Mattice is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of North Florida. She is a founding member and current President of the Society for Teaching Comparative Philosophy. Her research specializations are in comparative and nonwestern philosophy, especially East Asian philosophy and aesthetics. She regularly teaches courses on Chinese philosophy,

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<sup>2</sup> It is my hope that, in service of continued refinement for all of us, other teacher-scholars will share their own odd questions, students concerns, and strategies for responsible comparative classrooms on the Society for Teaching Comparative Philosophy Blog, at [stcp.weebly.com/blog](http://stcp.weebly.com/blog).

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank the members of the STCP, the attendees at the Inaugural STCP workshop, and the *ASIANetwork* blind reviewers for their helpful comments on this essay.

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