

**TEACHING ABOUT ASIA****Cross-Cultural Mirrors:  
Two-Way Reflections**

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Ronald Takaki starts his milestone work *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* with an anecdote that is not difficult for those who have East Asian heritages to relate.

He flew from San Francisco to Norfolk to attend a conference on multiculturalism as one of hundreds educators from across the country. While riding in a taxi to his hotel, the driver and he chatted about the weather and the tourists, and then the driver asked Takaki “How long have you been in this country?” He replied, “All my life,” wincing, “I was born in the United States.” The rearview mirror reflected a white man in his forties. With a strong southern drawl, the driver remarked, “I was wondering because your English is excellent!” As you may already know, the well-known scholar of multicultural studies is just as American as all other American scholars. Takaki’s grandfather came to the United States from Japan in the 1880s. His family has been in America for over a hundred years. Somehow he did not look like “American” to the Virginia taxi driver because his eyes and complexion, like all East Asians, looked foreign and “not-one-of-us” in this country.

It is quite understandable why the southern taxi driver could not see Takaki as American. The driver holds a narrow but widely shared notion of being American, that is, “American” is exclusively defined as European in ancestry. English language, Protestant religious backgrounds, and Caucasian features would be the easiest and most distinguishable traits to include and exclude. An East Asian-looking individual like Takaki does not

fall into the categorization and, therefore, must be an alien and not belong, no matter how well the individual speaks English and how deeply his or her livelihood interweaves with the fabric of this society.

In teaching Asian Studies in the United States, we focus on differences more often than similarities. For example, at times in a Chinese language and culture classroom, one finds that *hanzi* is only taught with the technical order of radicals without infusing a holistic and interpretive approach to the etymology, the appearance, and the meaning of the configuration. The theme of individualism and collectivism is quickly reduced to a simple dichotomy: the individualist American and the collectivist Chinese. Our students tend to be more attentive to the “foreign” and the “difficult” rather than the possibilities to bridge the known with the unknown, the familiar with the unfamiliar. Thus, again and again, we educators create unwanted linguistic barriers and unnecessary cultural distances, although our intention is the total opposite. The reductive and dichotomous approaches to languages and cultures in our classrooms help reinforce the already existent racial and cultural divide, unconsciously revealed and practiced by the Virginia taxi driver.

“Preparing Colleagues with Study Abroad” was the topic of our panel at the 2010 Atlanta ASIANetwork conference. The panel, designed by my colleague James Lochtefeld, offered a platform for discussions on how prepared we are in guiding students in cross-cultural encounters and engagement and how we can learn from one another to be a better and more effective team in leading study abroad tours for American students. Thus, it served as a mirror for self-reflection and self-examination. In the context of liberal arts education, in spite of the advanced degrees that we have earned to become a college professor, not all of us are equipped with cross-cultural dexterity and agility; in fact, some of us, in pursuing global and intercultural curriculum, at times find ourselves in racial and cultural discomfort, not unlike Takaki and the Virginia taxi driver, though on a more nuanced and more implicit level. We all need to be prepared in order to guide our students across linguistic and cultural distances toward the unknown.

In this paper, as a revised written version of my presentation at the panel, I address how to build our own cross-cultural dexterity and agility before we engage our students in the same endeavor. In doing so, I explore two theoretical concepts, based on and distilled from the hands-on experience of conducting short-term study abroad tours with colleagues: a dichotomous mental structure and a third zone.

### **1. A Dichotomous Mental Structure**

Takaki's anecdote reveals an interracial and intercultural gap found in day-to-day life. The gap sometimes takes a more implicit and nuanced expression in academia, not so much by our students (something expected) but by our intellectual and professional peers. Both Takaki and the driver could see each other's images through the taxi's rearview mirror, but could not feel truly connected as fellow Americans. One is distanced by the innocent or ignorant cultural rejection; the other tries to get close by asking unconsciously alienating questions, thus creating further cultural distance.

When we think about a rearview mirror in a car or a general one, we conjure up a reflecting glass surface set into a frame, attached to a handle for use in viewing oneself or an object. It takes two parties for the reflection to work: the mirror and the object, in other words, a dichotomous relation of the reflection and the reflected. A cross-cultural mirror is no exception, though more on a mental level than a physical one. It is not difficult to position ourselves as a mirror to view other cultures and peoples or, in the context of ASIANetwork, to look at Asia.

I have conducted short-term study tours to China with colleagues from various institutions who are not East Asian-looking. They all had the best intention to work well with me to provide a meaningful educational opportunity for our students; they all had genuine curiosity and an interest to know the unknown. Nonetheless, I often found myself caught in between the two sides of the reflection and the reflected of the cross-cultural mirror. Given my native fluency in Chinese language, my physical looks, and my Chinese name, I naturally have always

been regarded as an interpreter, a tour guide, and an insider of Chinese culture and society. The first mirror-like reflection always takes place in questions that suddenly identify me as a representative of everything Chinese: “Do you still bind feet in China?” “How do you celebrate the Spring Festival in China?” “Do you guys eat a lot of *jiaozi* at home?” “Cook us a Chinese meal.” Or sometimes criticism on the issues of human rights and intellectual piracy in China would be personally directed to me. I am certainly magnified in size and inaccurately reflected in the cross-cultural mirror held by some of my colleagues, who see me as a one-dimensional individual based on the visible and the tangible. My visible aspects are certainly East Asian, not unlike Takaki’s.

It is indeed much easier and more hands-on to dichotomize, with simple pronouns, “you” and “we/us,” when coming to grips with China. However, there is a much more complex and far less visible essence that makes up an individual or a culture as a whole, and most importantly, dictates the visible and the manifested. Failure to grasp the invisible and intangible complexity falls into a simplistic mental dichotomy between “we” and “you,” thus reducing individuals and cultures merely to superficial and touristic differences and dissecting them into fragments.

Due to the dichotomous mental structure, the cross-cultural mirror is sometimes confined in a fixated frame losing the perspective of the ever-shifting reality. One time on a short-term study tour in China, a colleague asked me to take him and the students to an ethnic restaurant. I was puzzled initially; then he explained that he wanted to go to a local Chinese restaurant. I realized that the word “ethnic” to him meant “Chinese.” True, in the United States a Chinese restaurant is an ethnic one, but as we were in China, we should have switched the mental frame to redefine the word “ethnic,” shouldn’t we? If the mirror is not equipped with portability, the viewer can hardly gain visual agility by relying on it.

In my position between the reflection and the reflected, I must point out the same mental dichotomy frames and fixates

the Chinese, Asian, or any other cultural perceptions in the same way it does with the American one. The colleagues who traveled with me to China were often asked to speak about specialized and particular topics associated with American history, society, and culture. Due to their non-East Asian physical looks, they are often assumed to represent everything American, whether they truly do or not. On one trip, a colleague in economics, who is Anglo-American, was asked for advice about an industrial zone on the outskirts of Beijing. He had studied and published on Chinese economy on a theoretical level, but had no knowledge on the particular development of this zone. While surprised and flattered, he honestly explained to the Chinese local government officials that he needed to understand more in order to give advice. He felt not-so-proportionally reflected in the cross-mirror held by the Chinese. Another time, a colleague's wife was asked at a local teachers' training center to give a presentation on American women and talk about writers like Pearl Buck. The wife was in health care profession and had never studied Pearl Buck; instead she asked the center to invite me to talk about the subject, given my humanities background. The Chinese were dislocated and could not comprehend that I, a Chinese-looking person, would know more about an American subject than an Anglo-looking one. In these reversed cross-cultural mirrors, a dichotomous Chinese mind, just like the American one, constructs inaccurate cultural reflections and falls into a simplistic divide "we" and "you," solely based on the superficial and the visible.

To engage our students in a productive cross-cultural encounter, especially on-site in Asian countries in this context, I believe it is necessary to address and overcome our own dichotomous mental structure, which blocks, although most times unconsciously, our views of the world and turns a blind eye toward our own prejudice and limitations. The dichotomous mental structure only fossilizes the frame of the cross-cultural mirror, because it does not recognize the shifting reality and multiply shaped and layered reflections outside the fixated one-dimensional frame. In essence, the simplistic "we" and "you"

dichotomous divide demands the world fit into a predetermined and predesigned frame; it fails to capture the complexity, the interrelation, and the vigor, characteristic of our global and intercultural age; it simplifies cultures into a dos-and-don'ts manual by only highlighting differences and discarding commonalities; it ultimately reduces our humanity.

## **2. A Third Zone**

To prepare the colleagues with their views on Asia and to guide our students in complex and ever-shifting intercultural landscape, first and foremost I need to liberate myself from the dichotomy and enter into a third zone. If we regard ourselves as both a mirror and the mirror's object, that is, as both the reflection and the reflected, we would come up with fresh and agile approaches to teaching students and working together with colleagues.

In the mirror that I hold, I see not only my colleagues and students but also their mirrors to reflect me holding my mirror to reflect them holding theirs to reflect me...back and forth. There is an infinite chain of reflections and the reflected in the relation between a mirror and its object. The moment we only recognize "my" or "our" mirror, forgetting that we are objects of other mirrors or discarding the existence of other mirrors, we fall into a dichotomous mental structure and give no regard to the perspectives and positions of the other. Then the cultural exclusion, reduction, and misrepresentation continue to happen. East Asian languages, cultures, and looks would forever remain foreign and alien in a Virginia taxi driver's mind and other similar minds. Conversely, American topics and identities would be forever owned and claimed by a certain group of Americans as perceived by some educated circles in China. On whichever side we find ourselves, we would continuously anticipate the uncomfortable cultural and racial divide in the new global age.

The American dichotomous mind and the Chinese one can be bridged seamlessly in the third zone, where knowledge and self-knowledge are revealed without interference of any frames. The mirror reflections, passing through the third zone, form

two-way traffic. Although the images, colors, and shapes may differ from one mirror to another, we see with objectivity and clarity that Americans and the Chinese alike use a framed and conditioned mirror to view one another, and either group feels free to break the deeply seated frames of physical looks, linguistic differences, and mental categorization. Mutual awareness of this dichotomy, whether in oneself or another, would be a major breakthrough in helping to bridge different cultures. The third zone serves as an interstitial space between “we” and “you,” a space that allows one to exist beyond dichotomous traps, which include categorization, limitations, reductions, and inflations. In this interstice, equipped with intimate and specific knowledge of both Chinese and American cultures, one makes a conscious choice not to blindly identify with either but stays anchored by a few distilled cultural paradigms. Specifically, they are the framing mechanism of a mirror and the unawareness of the duality of the reflection and the reflected in one. One translates these paradigms into specific contexts and interactions to seek a common ground and shared mental constructs between cultures. The commonalities are always more hidden than visible at first sight, due to the overwhelming yet surface differences. Nonetheless, these distilled paradigms, if applied with solid cultural specifics, can help us with speed, agility, accuracy, and height in leaping back and forth across cultures and languages, no matter how remote they appear to be from one another.

Our profession tends to teach students differences more than shared interests and limitations. The difference-oriented approach is in fact itself a simplistic reduction of cultures and languages; it does not necessarily help with connecting Asia but increases the Takaki/taxi driver divide and the we/you dichotomy in teaching and research in our field, thus impacting our students’ worldviews. We cannot afford to only focus on differences, but need to take a step further, that is, tap into our shared limitations and shared inability to come up with an accurate knowledge of one another and of ourselves. The similarity is hidden underneath the surface of customs, languages,

and physical looks. The moment we realize that people universally possess an essentially similar mirror—though framed with different materials, shapes, and colors—connections across cultures, languages, religions, and borders happen instantaneously, and intercultural/interpersonal understanding grows magically.

The awareness that I am just an object in other people's mirrors that are not so different from mine gives one a sense of intercultural and interpersonal humility. Such humility is much needed to help with cultural/racial divide as encountered by Takaki, and much needed to be applied to our teaching about Asia.

Most importantly, the interstice between the reflection and the reflected transforms the two actions to simultaneity and integrity. Stagnated frames and fossilized dogma/practices find no place in the third zone. While an intercultural disjuncture or crisis in a dichotomous mind becomes something fluid and malleable in an interstitial space, it presents both challenges and opportunities for us as educators to broaden our mental horizons and for our students to obtain firsthand knowledge of being a global citizen in its true sense. In the Chinese language, the word "crisis" is *wei ji*, in which *wei* means danger/challenge and *ji* opportunity. The ancient Chinese wisdom embraces crisis as the seed for future greater opportunity. It seems to me a perfect summary of the third zone in my reflections, and a non-dichotomous way to end this paper.

### Reference

Takaki, Ronald T. *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1993.