

TEACHING ABOUT ASIA

Comparing China and the West:

Who is ready for the challenge?

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Comparative culture studies often seem to come up half-empty: the China specialist may object if half the readings focus not on China but the West, and the teacher of Western Civilization may object to half the class's attention being turned away from the subject he or she was hired to teach.

From our experience, we have come to believe otherwise. As the authors of a one-semester comparative course, we have discovered that no one can comprehend a distant culture unless one is capable of comparing it with one's own civilization. All too often, students do not seem to know even the rudiments of the origins of their own way of life.

Cultural amnesia seems to be dangerously widespread both in China and in the West, though for different reasons.

In China, students feel an intense need to understand the West, which is such a powerful influence in their world. At the same time, they are largely cut off from their own deep heritage by the after effects of the Cultural Revolution and related events. Hence, the Beijing Foreign Studies University, through its School of English and International Studies, has since 2003, made obligatory for its advanced students our course entitled *WCwCC* [*Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons*]. Its sourcebook has been published by Fudan University Press in Shanghai.

We believe that this fresh approach to Asian Studies should now be tested in a North American liberal-arts setting. Western students are just beginning to realize how important China is

going to be throughout their 21st century lives. And at the same time, many suffer from serious cultural amnesia due to a long-term devaluing of their traditions.

As Westerners we have learned a great deal about cross-cultural education. 200 students at a time follow this course, making large lectures our primary pedagogical tool. But then, PowerPoint slides have proved to be also important, for reasons that go far beyond the numbers of students. Chinese students find it hard to absorb abstract concepts unless they are attending the class in detail. Similarly, many categories Westerners used to explain their world apply so awkwardly in China that they require radical redefinition if they are to be helpful. Among these categories are *truth*, *reality* and *religion*. Within a comparative perspective, these and similar concepts appear as cultural constructs, indispensable to the way Westerners look at the world but of uncertain application elsewhere. Similarly, an understanding of Chinese civilization depends on a variety of notions that require major reinterpretation if a Westerner is to make sense of them. Among these concepts are *dao*, *yin & yang*, and *qi*.

A quick test can illustrate many of the differences that impede mutual understanding: Think of three words: PANDA, MONKEY, BANANA. Without reflecting extensively, decide which two go most easily together. Most North Americans respond with PANDA and MONKEY, since both belong to a category we have learned: *animals* or *mammals*. Most East Asians, however, respond MONKEY and BANANA, since monkeys like to eat bananas. This kind of connection requires no abstract concept at all; it remains part of the down-to-earth practical world. Neither one of these responses is right or wrong, but they are worlds apart in the way they reflect the use of words and ideas.

Our job is to help people on both sides of this cultural divide understand how the others look at things, how they use their minds to make sense. Our primary tools are short texts, designed to be read on-screen. Drawn from both civilizations over the last 2000 years and more, these are selected and edited to

facilitate this comparative purpose. Texts come with short introductions and study questions that suggest relevant lines of comparative analysis. In addition, we provide introductions to key terms that might otherwise seem confusing. We distribute materials in PDF format and include lots of background that is accessible primarily through clickable links.

In the West, if such a course exists, it probably follows a familiar chronological organization of the kind that has seemed “natural” in the West for the last few centuries. But the Chinese habitually approach history quite differently so we have divided the course into modules (“Encounters”) that focus attention on one of six domains of culture. These carry labels that are necessarily large and vague. For example, Encounter 5 concerns HUMANS AND AUTHORITY, a label spacious enough to include authorities that are spiritual as well as political. The list of readings below will allow interested parties to see the kinds of authors and texts we call on for our comparative purposes.

Further background about us and our project is available on our website: www.comparativeculturestudies.org.

So far we know of no other course like this in the world, though we would be delighted to learn of others that are similar in scope. For this very reason, we look to ASIANetwork colleagues for their responses.

MAIN READINGS

Introductory Lecture Backgrounds Week 1

Hour 1: Where Comparisons Begin: Mapping Ethnocentrism

Hour 2: Mind-Mapping in Chinese and English

Encounter 1: **LEARNING** (as enculturation)

1.1 Traditional Ideas and Practices Week 2

Key Concepts:

Varieties of Knowledge

Western Texts:

Education in Athens

Spartan Alternatives: Xenophon

Walter Ong: *Agon* in Western Education

China Texts:

Kongzi: On Learning and Teaching

Zhuangzi: What Can Be Learned But Not Taught

Sanzijing: Serious Advice for Children

Zhu Xi: Training Children

Père du Halde: Early Qing Schooling

Comparison Texts:

Traditional Sayings as Knowledge

Kongzi and Socrates: Two Models of Sagehood

1.2 Modern Schooling Week 3

Key Concepts:

Learner-centered versus Teacher-centered Education

Western Texts:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Emile or, On Education*

Horace Mann: Justifications for Free Public

Schools John Henry Newman: *The Idea of a University*

China Texts:

Quotations from Mao Zedong

Qian Qing, Teaching English in a Modern Chinese
University

PRC Education in Recent Decades

Comparison Texts:

Comparative Guidelines for Argumentative Writing

Writing Matters: Copyright and Plagiarism

 Encounter 2: **HUMANS IN FAMILIES**

 2.1 **Traditional Family Practices** Week 4

Key Concepts:

Filiality [Xiao]

Monogamy

Traditional Worldviews Based on Family Models

Western Texts:

Adam and Eve Story

St. Paul on Sexuality

Saint Augustine: The Universality of Original Sin

China Texts:

Zuozhuan: A Wife's Dilemma

Kongzi: On Family Matters

Mozi: On Universal Filiality

Mengzi: Filial Models

Gu Hongming: A Proper Chinese Wife Has No Self

Comparison Texts:

Xenophon: Advice for a Young Wife

Ban Zhao: Lessons for Young Women

 2.2 **Modern Trends** Week 5

Key Concepts:

Romantic Love and Modern Marriage

Western Texts:

Two Models for Modern Western Families: George Lakoff

Abandoning Family Traditions: Philippe Ariès on

Modern Dying

China Texts:

Reforming Family Traditions: Hu Shi on his Mother's Funeral

The PRC Marriage Law of 1950

China Today: Revival of Family Trees

Comparison Texts:

 Howard Gardner: Chinese and American Parenting
 Population Issues, East and West

Encounter 3: **HUMANS THEMSELVES**3.1 **Traditional Views** Week 6

Key Concepts:

Longevity

Western Ideas of the Body as Matter

Comparative Immortalities

Western Texts:

Human Nature according to the Western Tradition

Plato: On Human Nature and Its Diseases

The Classical Four-Humors Theory of Disease

China Texts:

*The Yellow Emperor's Internal Medicine Classic*The *Qiemai* Tradition in Traditional Chinese

Medicine (TCM)

Comparison Texts:

“Why Chinese Do Not Have ‘Bodies’ in a Western Sense”

Comparative Pre-Modern Ideas of *Selfhood*3.2 **Modern Views** Week 7

Key Concepts:

Modern Western Medicine

Gender in Modern Western Cultures

Western Texts:

Human Nature according to Psychology

Sigmund Freud and Psychoanalysis

Jean Baker Miller: A New Psychology of Women

China Texts:

Medical Practices in China since 1900

The Appeal of Psychology in China Today

Liu Xin: “The Mirror and I”

Comparison Texts:

TCM versus MWM: A Sample Case, 2005

Comparative Feminine Beauty

Encounter 4: **HUMANS AND THEIR SURROUNDINGS**4.1 **Traditional Ideas** Week 8

Key Concepts:

Dao: The Natural WayThe Emergence of *Economics* Thinking

Western Texts:

- The Creation of Nature (according to *Genesis*)
- Xenophon: On Agriculture and War
- Desiderius Erasmus: Against the Power of Money

China Texts:

- Guan Zhong: Seeking Profit Is Human Nature
- Kongzi: Compete without Competing
- Zhuangzi's Eden Story
- Mengzi: Against the Profit Motive
- Han Dynasty Debates on Iron and Salt

Comparison Texts:

- Pastoral: Cultural Parallels

4.2 **Modern Dilemmas: Economics versus Ecology** Week 9

Key Concepts:

- Capitalism(s)
- Market Economy
- Modernization as an Economic Concept

Western Texts:

- Milton Friedman: On Adam Smith Today
- Karl Polanyi: Fictions in Free Market Economics
- The Limits to Growth: The Club of Rome*

China Texts:

- The Chinese Economic Miracle
- The Terrible Cost of China's Growth

Comparison Texts:

- Ecology at the Start of the 21st Century: J. R. McNeill,
Something New under the Sun

Encounter 5: **HUMANS AND AUTHORITY**5.1 **Traditional Authorities** Week 10

Key Concepts:

- Justice and Natural Law
- Lizhi, Fazhi, Renzhi* in Chinese Governance

Western Texts:

- Aristotle: On Greek Governance
- Justinian's Code: Roman Legal Categories
- Western Types of Government

China Texts:

The Duke of Zhou as Regent
Kongzi: Right Priorities
Mengzi: When Rebellion Is Right
Xunzi: Why China Needs Hierarchies
Extra-legal Punishments: The Castration of Sima Qian

Comparison Texts:

Two Theorists of *Power*: Niccolò Machiavelli & Hanfeizi

5.2 Modern Authorities

Week 11

Key Concepts:

Social Contract
Rights and Human Rights
Liberty versus Equality

Western Texts:

Copernicus and Science as Cultural Authority
Thomas Hobbes: Humans Need a Sovereign
Jean-Jacques Rousseau: On States and Sovereigns

China Texts:

Sun Zhongshan: Three Stages of Revolution
The PRC Dual Governing System
Wei Luo: The 1997 Criminal Code of the PRC
Deng Xiaoping: PRC Perspectives on “Human Rights”

Comparison Texts:

“Rule of Law” *versus* “The Rule of Law”: Randall
Peerenboom, *China’s Long March toward Rule of Law*

Encounter 6: **VALUES AND WORLDVIEWS**

6.1 Traditional Orientations

Week 12

Key Concepts:

Divination
Fundamental Mindsets, Western and Chinese

Western Texts:

The [Hebrew] Ten Commandments
Epictetus: The Art of Living Stoically
Jesus of Nazareth: The Sermon on the Mount
Varieties of Judeo-Christian Ethics

China Texts:

Yijing: The Book of Changes
Zhuangzi: On What We Can Know

Xunzi: “Do Not Look to Heaven for Explanations”

Fortune or Misfortune: “Old Sai Lost His Horse”

Comparison Texts:

Ming Critiques of Christianity

6.2 Modern Tendencies

Week 13

Key Concepts:

Quantification

Probability

The Idea of Progress

Western Morality and Ethics

Western Texts:

René Descartes: “I Think Therefore I Am” [*Cogito Ergo Sum*]

Robert Pirsig: Two Ways of Knowing

Pragmatism as an Alternative: Richard Rorty

China Texts:

Hu Shi: On John Dewey on Experience

Five Chinese Generations since 1949

Comparison Texts:

Contemporary Socio-economic Systems: Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy*

Review: Post-Modern Challenges to Western Traditions

Week 14

Preface: THE INTERNET AS POST-MODERN

Encounter 1 CULTURAL UNLEARNING

Comparative Skepticisms: Jacques Derrida and Zhuangzi

Encounter 2 HUMANS IN FAMILIES

Same-Sex Marriage

Encounter 3 HUMANS THEMSELVES

Euthanasia

Encounter 4 HUMANS AND THEIR SURROUNDINGS

Post-Modern Science: Chaos Theory

Encounter 5 HUMANS AND AUTHORITY

Supra-National Authorities: The European Union

Encounter 6 VALUES AND WORLDVIEWS

Post-Modern Study of Humanity: Anthropology

Postscript: POST-MODERNITY AS “EASTERNIZING”?