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Exploring Classical Thought and Culture in the East and the West: Teaching *Hamlet* and *The Banquet* in the Civilization and Literature Humanities Core

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Introduction

Grove City College (GCC), a small, Christian, liberal arts college located in Northwestern Pennsylvania, has a richly developed humanities core curriculum that exposes students to various major themes, concepts, and achievements of human civilization. Students engage amazing examples of music, art, literature, history, political thought, philosophy, and religious views spanning thousands of years, and they discuss ways in which these cultural elements function to hold groups of people together throughout time within social formations commonly called civilization. In other words, students are tasked with exploring that which civilizes the human.

However, most of these humanities courses at GCC focus almost exclusively upon Western civilization. To be sure, the excellence and exceptionalism of Western civilization is worthy of continued study. But, several professors at GCC, myself included, recognize that we should not forget that there were and continue to be wondrously exceptional civilizations with their own amazing literatures and systems of thought in other parts of the world. Given the inescapable global realities today, educators at GCC and elsewhere should encourage students to engage elements of these great civilizations.

In my Civilization and Literature course, I pair various classical Western pieces of literature with related texts from China. In this presentation I will discuss a class activity that

pairs Franco Zeffirelli's film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with the Chinese film directed by Feng Xiaogang titled *The Banquet* (also known as *The Legend of the Black Scorpion*), which retells the Hamlet story within an ancient Chinese imperial context. Both films seek to present the Hamlet narrative within specific historical contexts, one being medieval Denmark and the other being 10th-century imperial China, during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. I firmly believe that to be an educated person in our increasingly globalized world, one must understand oneself in relation to other cultures. Indeed, one does not necessarily have to agree with nor embrace all things from all cultures, including one's own, but one must at least have some literacy, some engagement with, some understanding of and reasoned encounters with cultures and civilizations other than one's own. Liberal arts and humanities courses such as GCC's Civilization and Literature offer, in my view, one possible educational venue in which to pursue such cross-cultural, intertextual learning. **[SLIDE]**

My Background

In 2008, while teaching at the New York Institute of Technology, I was asked to help develop the writing curriculum for a joint-venture project in China with the Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications. That was my first experience with Chinese culture and education. I returned to China in 2009 as a volunteer at summer camps for Chinese orphan children in Kunming. Then, during the summers of 2010 and 2011, I volunteered as a professor at the Yanbian University of Science and Technology, teaching English literature courses and directing a conversational English program. These teaching experiences introduced me to diverse perspectives and helped me better understand the significance of one culture learning about other cultures through the study of literature and film. I realized the educational significance of Chinese students engaging American and British literature and film through their own cultural

lenses, and I decided that the education of my American students would be similarly enriched by reading, engaging, and discussing Chinese literature and film from their own cultural and experiential perspectives. [SLIDE]

I began teaching at GCC in 2014, and in 2016 I was asked to teach a section of Civilization and Literature. Here was my opportunity to integrate some Chinese texts and films into the curriculum. I pair Plato and Aristotle with Confucius, and we read Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, discussing it in conjunction with the contemporary Chinese film *Red Cliff*. Later, we watch and discuss *Hamlet* in relation to *The Banquet*. In the unit on Gothic literature, I have students read Su Tong's *Raise the Red Lantern* alongside some classic American Gothic tales. In the final unit, we discuss Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking* in relation to the Chinese films *Purple Butterfly* and *The Flowers of War*. I am convinced that our students at GCC, and indeed American students in general, benefit from such exposure to Eastern cultures, concepts, ideas, and perspectives, particularly given our increasingly global world and the significant rise of China as an important and influential figure on the world stage.

Wm. Theodore de Bary of Columbia University describes global perspectives in the core curriculum as "education for a world community" (10). This educational concept emphasizes first and foremost developing educated people who can then participate within the socio-political and economic spheres of the contemporary world. He notes that people must be educated to understand themselves in community with other people internationally. Such an education, according to de Bary, must focus on the universal bonds that unite people in true community (*The Great Civilized Conversation* 10).

I think much can be said for moving beyond the politics of self and focusing upon the community of commonality. We dare not erase the uniqueness of cultural expression which

provides beauty, delight, charm, joy, pride, fulfillment, wisdom, and human flourishing. Yet, to privilege the unique to the exclusion of the common may threaten to push us back into our tribal identifications and to burn bridges of commonality that supply avenues for conversations and thus community—we cannot have community without communication. One key goal for introducing examples of Chinese culture and thought into my Civ Lit class is precisely to remind students that there are many civilizations throughout human history and that these civilizations share much in common. Without first recognizing shared thoughts and perspectives, how can we ever engage in conversation through which global communities of deeper understanding can be fashioned, so that shared humanity can be recognized, and so that mutual human flourishing through cooperation and collaboration can be pursued? Maybe such a grand goal for a single course is naively unrealistic, but I suppose we must start somewhere. **[SLIDE]**

Course Activity

In the unit titled “Shakespeare in the West and the East,” students are asked to watch Franco Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* and Feng Xiaogang’s *The Banquet*. To focus the students’ inquiry on specific themes from Western and Eastern perspectives, I ask students to consider and discuss the following questions:

1. Explain, analyze, and discuss how *Hamlet* and *The Banquet* treat epistemology: how can we know truth and reality? Be sure to indicate and explain points of agreement and disagreement between the films.
2. Explain, analyze, and discuss how *Hamlet* explores the power dynamics of succession and how *The Banquet* explores dynastic power and clan politics in ancient China. What issues and concerns are similar? In what ways are these issues culturally different?

3. How do these two films represent love? How is love defined? What kinds of love do we see? What do we learn about the importance of human love? [SLIDE]
4. What do these two films say about the nature and dangers of revenge and its relationship to justice? Discuss any similarities and differences you notice.
5. Discuss how the films represent justice. Analyze how Shakespeare explores mercy, forgiveness, and grace in relation to justice. To what extent do we see mercy and grace in the Chinese context? How does *The Banquet* relate fate and justice? Explain.
6. Discuss the function of art and artifice in these two films. How do these films represent the wearing of masks? How do masks in *The Banquet* relate to notions of face and shame in Chinese culture? Point out and discuss any similarities and differences you see.

I believe that good critical inquiry begins with analyzing what different things—in this case cultures—have in common. Realizing mutual understanding is important, because it builds bridges of commonality over which cultural conversations can take place. But, I do not think we should stop at the common. Deeper understanding develops through engaging the differences, and my hope is for these discussion questions to encourage such critical conversations. [SLIDE]

Conclusion

David Jasper, a professor of literature and theology from the University of Glasgow, Scotland, has extensive experience teaching literature in Beijing. A unique challenge in teaching cross-culturally is what he insightfully calls missing the metaphysics of story. We can comprehend the story itself, even via translation, but necessarily missing are the underlying cultural assumptions and worldview presuppositions that inform the production and consumption of texts. The challenge for reading, interpreting, and teaching texts of one culture to students of another is somehow to provide access to the missing metaphysics of story (Jasper 589). One can

begin filling in the gaps through lectures, documentaries, and other contextual information. But, I think it also requires intertextual or dialogic reading of the sort Bakhtin was most famous for discussing. It simply will not do to read one or two texts and check off the global or multicultural box on the curriculum design template.

I propose we build intertextuality into our intercultural courses such that multiple texts from the same culture are being read in relation to each other. This approach will necessarily challenge the constraints of our reading lists. I do not think my course is perfect or even ideal, but I think I have made a good start in my own pedagogy of intercultural dialogic reading. I'm trying to scaffold the texts trans-historically and cross-culturally, such that texts within similar time periods speak to each other and then inform our reading and discussion of later texts. So, for example, we read Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, and Sun Tzu early in the course and discuss them in relation to each other. Later, we explore how Plato's philosophical views on reality inform Hamlet's struggle with knowing truth accurately, in addition to considering ethics in *Hamlet* in relation to Aristotle's teleological views. Similarly, we explore Sun Tzu's view of military administration and Confucian views of good governance and family devotion in relation to how *The Banquet* portrays and explores fratricide, regicide, mandates of Heaven for good governmental administration, loyalty to right rule, betrayal of family, filial piety, clan loyalty, notions of saving face, and so on.

This, at least, is my current plan. I look forward to further discussions on how to revise and improve this course so that students can be encouraged to bridge the distances between cultures, to recognize our shared humanity, and to foster deeper relationships that lead to greater mutual understanding and collaborative human flourishing.

Works Cited

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