
“What About Their Parents?”—Teaching the Western Classics to Students in China

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IN 1984, I took leave from a liberal arts college in Canada to spend a year as a “Foreign Expert” in the Foreign Language School of Xiamen University. Over the following decades, I alternated between jobs in Canada and China, resulting in a total of sixteen years’ foreign teaching. Although it is commonplace to say that one learns from one’s students, in few other places on earth is that statement so true as in China. Encounters with what Emmanuel Levinas calls the “absolutely foreign” not only instruct the students, they also instruct the instructor.

After half a semester taking the Xiamen students through such standard modern classics as Eliot’s “Prufrock,” Conrad’s “Secret Sharer,” and Joyce’s “The Dead,” a delegation came up after class. “Why do all of the readings concentrate on personal problems?” they asked. “When are we going to read some works that treat social issues?” I was startled by the question because I had been completely unaware of the emphasis. In China, from ancient times to the present, a person’s most important responsibility has not been the western goal of self-fulfillment, but rather the social duties required by the relationship between children and parents. In northern China, at least, it is common after the birth of a child for one parent to address the other as *tā diē*, “his/her father” (他/她爹) or *tā mā*, “his/her mother” (他/她妈), as though the previous individual identity of the father and mother has been subsumed by the relationship to their child. In a scene of a television soap opera I enjoy watching, a husband calls to his wife from a distance by shouting “Liu Ying’s mother!” (刘英娘!). The importance of family is shown in the Chinese lan-

guage by a system of over fifty specific terms to express family relationships, including, for example, special words to indicate not only a relation of cousinship, but also of maternal or paternal cousinship, and whether the cousin is older or younger than the speaker. The communal emphasis of Chinese culture is also well illustrated by eating habits. As everyone knows, rather than separate servings on individual plates, a Chinese meal is served from common plates at the center of a round table

Some scholars think it possible to see stress on community in the Chinese character for human-ness, the essence of being human. This character, *rén* (仁), consists of the radical for person (亻) combined with the number two (二). The implication is that only in a group of at least two does a person become truly human. In a related attitude that surprises and sometimes distresses Westerners, the relation between citizens and their government is regarded as parallel to that of children and their parents. For this reason, the Chinese value order within society as much as most of us value harmony within the family. The congruence between family and state also explains what sometimes seems to us an oddly familial attitude taken by the government towards its citizens. For example, a recent campaign against wasteful luxury has targeted extravagant banquets by newspaper advertisements giving the perennial maternal advice to “Clean Your Plate.”

These fundamentally differing priorities of Chinese and western culture—social and personal—underlay some of my Chinese students’ most surprising responses to the western literary classics.

Near the end of Part One of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes inserts “The Captive’s Tale,” a story told by a Spaniard who had been imprisoned by the Moors in Algiers. The captive tells how he escaped with the help of a Moorish girl named Zoraida who had been secretly converted to Christianity and who allowed him to steal her away from her father in the same way Jessica elopes with Lorenzo in the *Merchant of Venice*. In years of teaching *Don Quixote* in Canada, I found

only a handful of students showing any interest in this episode. A Peking University student, however, said this was the part of the novel that she found most touching, especially the deserted father's appeal to his daughter who is being taken away in a ship, "Come back, beloved daughter—come back to land! I forgive you everything! Give those men the money, for it is theirs; and come back and comfort this wretched father of yours, who will lose his life in the sands of this desert if you forsake him" (Cohen trans.). "What a loving father!" wrote the student, "What fatherly affection! How could Zoraida make the decision to leave her elderly father alone! Is anything in the world more important than family?" Of course, Canadian students, when they thought about the situation at all, saw Zoraida's leaving her father in order to follow her lover as perfectly natural—romantic love trumps filial piety.

Given this attitude, it is also not surprising that students at the University of Macau had even greater contempt than I was accustomed to for Lear's unfilial daughters. And they found nothing cloying, nothing too good—as western students sometimes do—in Cordelia's devotion to Lear. By far the favorite scene of the play for Chinese students was the reunion between father and daughter, in which Cordelia tearfully asks for Lear's "benediction," after which the old king, kneeling on the stage, once again acknowledges the daughter he had disowned: "For, as I am a man, I think this lady / To be my child Cordelia."

Because of the Chinese de-emphasis on individualism, students also regard as normal scenes in the western classics which show a modesty most Westerners are unaccustomed to today. They are not surprised, for example, when the *Beowulf* poet first mentions the hero only by reference to his family and nation—"Hygelac's thane. / A good man of the Geats" (Chickering trans.). Nor do they consider unusual the way Beowulf introduces himself, again mentioning not his name but only his social context—nation, king, and father. De-emphasis on self in traditional Chinese manners often extends to self-depreca-

tion. When one of the heroes of the Chinese classic *Outlaws of the Marsh*, Wu Song, kills a tiger with his bare hands, he tells the villagers whom he has rescued: “I have no talents, I was only borrowing from your predestined good fortune” (Shapiro trans.). It comes as no surprise to Chinese students, then, when in the medieval English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the hero requests permission to take up the Green Knight’s challenge to a beheading contest by telling King Arthur that he is aware of his “weakness, my wisdom so feeble,” that preservation of his life is unimportant, and that his only honor comes from Arthur’s being his uncle—“no virtue but your blood prevails in my body” (Vantuono trans.).

The Chinese believe that emphasis on family should ideally broaden out to a concern for the wider community as a whole. For this reason, Chinese students have a much more positive response to Virgil’s Aeneas than is usual in western students, in whom trying to create some sympathy for the duty-bound hero of the *Aeneid* is an uphill battle. The process of broadening concern in Virgil’s poem begins, as it does in Chinese thought, with filial piety, and the culmination of the first half of the *Aeneid* is a reunion scene between son and father in the underworld that Chinese students find no less moving than that of Cordelia and Lear. From concern only for himself during the sack of Troy, as he rushes to throw his life away in battle, Aeneas is moved to think of his family when reminded of filial duty by his mother, Venus, and then comes to a sobering awareness, as he arrives at the rendezvous point for the war refugees, that his responsibility now extends to the Trojan people as a whole,

Coming from every quarter, minds made up,
With their belongings, for whatever lands
I’d lead them to by sea.

(Fitzgerald trans.)

Some of my Canadian students found this progression reminiscent of the “socialization process” that they had studied

in their psychology classes, but I discovered that the idea of an expanding relational identity was even more familiar to Chinese students. In fact, the development in Aeneas dramatized by Virgil exactly corresponds to the process of Daoist and Confucian “self-cultivation,” a process of widening identification that begins with the self but then extends to family, to community, and, ultimately, to a concern for everything “under heaven” (*tiānxià*, 天下). For traditional Chinese thought, a person who completes this process achieves the ultimate goal of human existence, which is becoming a *jūnzǐ* (君子), or person of noble character. For a culture that believes true humanity can only be achieved through involvement with society, service of the common good is in fact the main road to personal fulfillment, rather than limiting or denying personal happiness. Therefore, Aeneas’ founding of a city as the grand object of his heroic quest seems to Chinese students only to be expected, as does the hero’s final attempt, in Goethe’s *Faust*, to find happiness by, of all things, carrying out a land-reclamation project. Both goals appeal to Chinese students because they are social rather than personal.

The social focus of Chinese culture finds expression in daily acts as well—in the refined civility called *lǐ* (礼) that characterizes interpersonal relations. For this reason, elaborate concern for preserving one’s sense of self-worth and that of those one deals with is another aspect of traditional European literature which is especially familiar to Chinese students. The frequent complaint of Westerners that they aren’t able to get a “straight answer” out of the Chinese most often results from the Chinese belief that it is rude to give an explicit denial. A request that cannot be fulfilled will therefore either be simply left unanswered or answered in a way that only indirectly implies rejection. Thus, when a Westerner thinks he hasn’t got an answer, he has got one; he just doesn’t realize it. When working as an administrator at the University of Macau, I proposed a new program to the rector, and after he said, “That’s very interesting, we’ll have to consider it later” (以后再说), I embarrassed everyone by

bringing the proposal up again a few weeks later. This same concern for preserving “face” is exhibited in what seems to Westerners the puzzling reluctance of Chinese students to ask questions in class or participate in class discussions. They are prevented by fear of making a mistake or unperceptive comment in front of their peers.

Because of this pervasive concern to avoid inflicting or incurring embarrassment, Chinese students know exactly what Beowulf is doing when he arrives in Denmark and with elaborate consideration for Hrothgar’s feelings tells the coast-guard that he has come only to offer some “advice.” Likewise, when Hrothgar remarks to the herald announcing Beowulf’s arrival that he knew the hero as a child and once did a favor for his father, the students understand his implication. There is an earlier situation of indebtedness, what the Chinese call *gu nxi* [关系], with Beowulf, which allows Hrothgar to justify accepting the hero’s help while at the same time preventing Beowulf’s intervention from appearing to have been completely unreciprocated.

Stress on the individual was not the only assumption of western culture challenged by the reactions of my Chinese students. In the West, the foundational interpersonal relationship has long been that of husband and wife, rather than of parent and child. A man “shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” In contrast, the Chinese are often reluctant to abandon the primacy of the child/parent relationship even when they marry. After one of my graduate students in Xiamen married, she and her husband only lived together during the week—on the weekends each went back to stay with their respective families. When my wife and I remarked on what seemed to us the oddness of this arrangement, we were told that it was actually “very modern and western”—in rural households married children never leave the family compound at all.

When romantic love and public duty come into conflict in China, the latter—at least theoretically—takes priority. And for this reason, Chinese students are surprisingly evenhanded

in their assessment of the famous scene in Virgil's poem where Aeneas and Dido debate the hero's decision to leave Carthage. The Chinese students understand, in a way the Canadian students never did, that Aeneas could legitimately regard his duty to the Trojan people as more important than his love for Dido. Watching an early Chinese soap opera in Xiamen during the mid-80s, I and my family were startled by a scene in which two young factory workers were being married by the Party Secretary in his office. He jokingly apologized that the ceremony wasn't taking place in a church, but the young man, pointing to a large map of China on the wall, replied that it didn't matter because, he said, "China is our god" (中国是我们的上帝). This scene returned to mind years later when I was attempting to understand the reason for at least some of my Chinese students' oddly sympathetic attitude towards Aeneas' central defense in the lovers' quarrel. To Dido's excoriating indictment that he is abandoning her simply because he's grown bored with their relationship, Aeneas replies that his overriding desire is reaching Italy, "hic amor, haec patria est" ("This is my love, that is my homeland") words closely paralleling the priority expressed in the Xiamen soap opera. As a PKU student wrote, "This value system is surprisingly similar to the Chinese attitude that common good prevails over self-interest. In Chinese society, people are expected to have great and high aspirations, but they should aim for the welfare of the whole people instead of being self-oriented. It is regarded as a stigma to concentrate on the pursuit of one's own happiness."

My assumptions about the pre-eminence of romantic love in the minds of young people were also challenged when I discovered that Chinese students of the 1980s did not share the common western attitude that "the world is well lost for love." In fact, having taken them through the tomb scene of *Romeo and Juliet*—which never failed to evoke deep sympathy for the lovers from my Canadian students—I was dumbfounded by their first reaction: "Why did Romeo and Juliet act so unreasonably? What about their parents?"

As might be expected, the ideas of my Chinese students concerning religion also differ from those prevalent in the West, although the study of religion in China has changed dramatically in recent decades. When I first came to China, Confucianism was still considered one of the “four olds” (old customs, old culture, old habits, old ideas) which were to be completely eradicated from Chinese life. Returning from Hong Kong at the end of Spring Festival in 1985, I was told by a customs inspector at the port of Xiamen that I couldn’t bring Singleton’s edition of Dante’s *Comedy*—which I was only reading—into China. When I asked the reason, he pointed to the word “divine” in the title, and said that all religious books were banned. (After I praised his knowledge of English and explained that I was a professor at the university, he relented.) Times have clearly changed. At PKU, beginning in 2004, I have taught the *Divine Comedy* nearly every year.

In general, however, it remains true that most educated Chinese have an aversion to other-worldly views. Chinese intellectuals lament the increasing materialism of their society and acknowledge its need for a centering spiritual or ethical framework. But this doesn’t necessarily mean a conventional religious faith. This widespread conviction was eloquently expressed by a student in an essay on *The Magic Mountain*:

The majority of Chinese people have lived thousands of years in a secular world without a supernatural God who serves as the center of the universe and the core of social values. I concede that human beings of different races share similar natures, but the underlying concern about the existence of God hinders me from understanding the anxieties of modern western writers such as Mann. There is an alternative way to maintain a society without the help of a religion. I find that having a faith is really a good thing. But while theists personify their faith as a God (or gods), I regard my faith as an ideal—that is, the well-being of all people in general.

The social centeredness of Chinese culture also influences student reactions to depictions of the world to come in the western classics. Thus they immediately approve of Virgil’s

concept of the afterlife, in which only public acts count. Personal achievements or personal shortcomings merit only a mediocre status in the underworld of the *Aeneid* (in the *lugentes campi*, “mourning fields”). For serious punishment (in Tartarus) or significant reward (in Elysium), a person needs to have done socially destructive or constructive deeds.

Other aspects of Roman religion found in the *Aeneid* are also familiar to my students in the light of traditional Chinese beliefs, for example, emphasis on proper fulfillment of rites in anticipation of a tangible reward. In one of many such scenes in Virgil’s poem, before his descent to the underworld, Aeneas makes offerings of seven bulls and seven ewes, states his requests of the gods (almost demands), and then enumerates how he will repay the anticipated favors by temple-building and sacrifices. I discovered a similarly practical attitude towards religious observance on a visit to the Beijing Botanical Garden with one of my former students who was in the midst of applying to American graduate schools. I was surprised to learn that she had recently prayed at the park’s Sleeping Buddha Temple. When I asked her if she was a Buddhist, she replied that she was not, but that it is a common custom of students applying for foreign study to pray at that temple because its name, “Sleeping Buddha,” in Chinese is *wòfó* (卧佛). These characters—*wòfó*—are thought to sound like the English word “offer,” as in “receive an offer of admission.”

Almost all of my Canadian students had religious beliefs which were monotheistic and exclusivistic, and for this reason it was new for me to teach the *Aeneid* to students whose polytheistic and syncretistic religious tradition made them receptive to the multiplicity of gods in Virgil’s poem. The Chinese, like the ancient Romans, believe that if one god might give protection, why not two? The tour bus driver on a recent trip my wife and I made to Xian had both a Jesus picture on his windshield visor and a Buddhist medallion hanging from the rearview mirror.

However, the tradition of syncretism that makes the polytheism of the *Aeneid* and the complex mixture of religious

beliefs in *Beowulf* easy for Chinese students to understand is of course an obstacle to their study of Dante. In particular, the students object to the *Comedy's* treatment of Virgil. Virgil is excluded from heaven because there is only one truth, a truth which he was prevented from knowing by his having lived before the time of Christ. This doctrine is hard for any modern reader to accept, but especially so for the Chinese, since Chinese thought values harmonious accommodation of beliefs over abstract debates about which religion is correct.

There are many other aspects of Christian theology in Dante that are difficult for Chinese students to understand—baptism, the Virgin Birth, the Atonement, eternal damnation, the resurrection of the body—but I have found these ideas are for the most part equally strange to western students. A unique problem that I have encountered at PKU is that many students do not seem familiar with the western concept of sin. Because of the predominantly secular nature of Chinese society most of my students find strange the concept of an act which is not only proscribed by human society but which also brings the perpetrator into conflict with a supernatural power. The difference becomes clear when we discuss the contrasting Western and Chinese attitudes towards suicide. Dante considers suicide a sin because the body is created by God, and therefore belongs to God, not to oneself. Confucian thought also considers suicide a serious fault, but as an offense against one's parents rather than against God. As explained in *The Classic of Filial Piety*: "Our body, skin and hair are all received from our parents; we dare not injure them. This is the first priority in filial duty."

The most fundamental difficulty Chinese students have understanding the Christian classics is the concept of Original Sin, which to them seems as bizarre as reincarnation seems to western students. The Chinese are puzzled because the idea of Original Sin contradicts an optimism about human nature found in the major schools of Chinese thought. The view of Mencius that human beings are essentially good is emphasized in *The Three Character Classic*. This summary of Chi-

nese philosophy, which up until the beginning of the last century was memorized by every Chinese school child, begins with the flat assertion that “People at birth are naturally good.” Because of this positive outlook, I have found that Chinese students much prefer Goethe’s to Augustine’s conception of human nature. In response to Mephisto’s complaints about human beings in “The Prologue in Heaven” in *Faust*, God says, “The gardener knows, however small the tree, / That blossom and fruit adorn its later years,” and “A good man in his darkling aspiration / Remembers the right road throughout his quest” (Kaufmann trans.). In Chinese philosophy, as well, “process and change take priority over form and stasis” (David Hall and Roger Ames, *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*), and for this reason, Chinese students find Goethe’s concept of salvation as an ongoing process of spiritual ascent, a continual striving towards perfection without ever quite reaching it, much easier to accept than the static bliss envisioned by Dante.

Of course, attitudes in China are not static, and many of those I have briefly outlined here are being transformed by the influence of North American and European culture. The changing appearance of my Chinese students over the years has been a good indicator. Student dress and hair style at Xiamen University in 1984–85 were absolutely uniform: white shirt and black pants, with a buzz cut for men, and solid color blouse and blue or grey pants, with pigtails or a ponytail for women. Now students in China look like students anywhere in world. As I discovered long ago, it’s a mistake to go up to a Chinese student wearing a University of Michigan sweatshirt and ask him how he liked Ann Arbor.

Despite the winds of change, however, the differences I have discussed here persist. In my experience, most Westerners have difficulty seeing their identity as fundamentally relational. They prefer to regard themselves as more or less autonomous beings entitled to be free from interference by society and free from most obligations to society—or at the most responsible only to their immediate families. And this

attitude seems to be growing stronger. At the same time, emphasis on the communal in China is also weakening, and newspaper editorial pages frequently lament the increasing self-absorption of the younger generation.

Although the generalizations presented here are personal, unscientific, and anecdotal, they have at least helped me make some sense out of teaching western literature to Chinese students. In some ways earlier western literature is alien to Chinese students, but in some interesting ways it is also uncannily familiar. And both the foreign and familiar make for rewarding experiences in the classroom. The most satisfying thing for me about teaching in China over the years—and what I hope has also been profitable for my students—is being exposed to a radically different set of core values. The attempt to enter the viewpoints of others, the attempt—however incomplete—to see from the inside how the world looks to people with completely different assumptions, is a challenge but also an absolute requirement, given the current situation of the world. Professor Christopher Ricks, explaining in a *Guardian* interview (January 29, 2005) why he loves literature, cited William Empson:

Empson said one of the reasons we have arts and literature is that they give us sympathetic access to systems of belief that are not our own . . . the thing that Empson most valued in the arts was that [they] allowed him to realise that intelligent, sensitive, compassionate and very good people could disagree with him. It is only through works of art, or people you are very fond of, that you learn this.