

# ***ASIANetwork Conference 2001*** ***Cleveland, Ohio***

*In this issue we feature more papers and highlights from the  
ASIANetwork Conference 2001.*

***Ethics and Politics in China and the West*** Timothy Cheek, Colorado College; Erin McCarthy, St. Lawrence University; Charles Ess, Drury University

***The Impacts of Globalization on Indonesia's Economic, Political and Social Conditions*** Jusef Ibrahim, Petra Christian University (UBCHEA at Teacher's College, Columbia University)

***Strategies for Very Small Asian Studies Programs*** Anne Foster, St. Anselm College; Sharon R. Wesoky, Allegheny College

## **Ethics and Politics in China and the West**

### **Teaching Comparative Philosophy in the Liberal Arts as an Historian**

**Timothy Cheek  
Colorado College**

I have become a convert to comparative teaching. As an Asianist I find it one of the most effective methods of introducing more students to something of an Asian experience, and as a liberal arts teacher I find comparative teaching a valuable tool in my pedagogical toolbox. The experience of teaching comparative East-West courses over the past decade at Colorado College has convinced me that this approach has two fundamental contributions to the liberal arts project. First, as both Charles Ess and Erin McCarthy point out, the work of comparative philosophical study equips our students with the mental tools to become effective citizens in a multicultural democracy inside America and on this planet. Second, comparative teaching teaches me. It is an excellent form of teacher-training, in-service training, and life-long learning for professors. It's fun.

In this paper, I would like to review briefly what comparative courses I have taught, what specific goals I think

they do and do not address for Asianists and liberal arts teachers, what has worked in those courses, and what has not.

#### **What I Have Done**

I have taught five East-West comparative courses at Colorado College. I have co-taught one of them, "HY104: Society, Culture, and History" (which I developed with our European Medievalist, Professor Carol Neel), four times over the past four years. The other four are "Ancient Greece and China" (taught twice with our classicist, Owen Cramer), "Ethics and Politics in China and the West" (taught once with our political theorist, Timothy Fuller), "Freedom and Authority" (adding Chinese texts to this liberal arts survey of "major texts" with William Davis, taught once and planned again for this summer), and finally, "Confucianism: Tradition and Transformation in 20<sup>th</sup> Century China" (taught last fall with Professor Shih Yuan-kang of Chinese University of Hong Kong, who is a specialist in liberalism). Some of these courses are on the Colorado College webpage, which can be accessed through the History Department link, and I am quite willing to share materials with any teacher who can track me down.

There are a couple of things to note about this teaching experience. First, all these courses are co-taught. That is, both the Asianist (me) and the specialist in something Western are in the classroom every class session. I have discovered that Colorado College is unusual in its tolerance, even encouragement, of this expensive option—much to the benefit of our students. At most schools, I am told, the Dean

will not fund such “double staffing.” This is not an insurmountable obstacle, as Charles and Erin make clear. Second, you will note that I am an historian, admittedly keen on the history of ideas. I have worked with a fellow historian, a classicist, a political theorist, a philosopher and a literary scholar. Thus, most of my courses have been cross-disciplinary, as well as East-West comparisons. While this is a good thing, I am struck by the relative methodological precision of Charles’ and Erin’s courses and presentations. It may be prudent to start by taking on one task at a time—either comparative or cross-disciplinarity.

### Goals in the Comparative Teaching of Ideas

William Theodore deBary, in an issue of *Education about Asia*, outlined his basic plan for introducing Asian thought and texts into the undergraduate curriculum. This is the first goal of my comparative teaching. Comparative courses reach students beyond the self-selecting “Asian Studies major” or adventurous course-selector. In conjunction with colleagues in my own and other departments we have aimed to integrate such comparative courses into the curriculum, majors requirements, and all-college distribution requirements in order to “capture” more students. For example, “HY104: Culture, Society and History,” serves as one of the entry points to the History major and fulfills a college-wide distribution requirement.

Second, as Charles in particular points out, cross-cultural juxtaposition of texts and ideas/concepts raises an awareness of assumptions and issues students (and we) bring to philosophical, ethical, or political conversations. Such juxtapositions of things East and West also whet the appetite of some students for new, Asian, examples. Several students have taken purely Asian courses after taking one of these comparative courses.

It is well to remember, however, that these comparative courses *do not* do justice to deBary’s call (or most Asianists’ desire) to introduce students to the historical, philosophical, and lived complexities of one or more traditions of thought (*jiao*) found in what we now call Asia. DeBary emphasized that at least five related core texts or classics needed to be read in a single course for students to begin to grasp the world of thought in which a particular text, say the *Gita* or the *Analects*, finds its meaning. That is something for an Asian philosophy course or Asian history course to do. However, a good comparative course can leave suitably irritating ragged edges to spur the active student to further study and to inoculate the less active student against thinking they “now understand” Sanskrit thought or Confucianism.

There is another form of comparison in such courses: diachronic comparison, as well as synchronic. As an historian, I am particularly sensitive to changes over time and the radically different contexts that apply in one place in, for example, different millennia. Courses that take comparisons between Asian and Western experience, or China and Europe, over several centuries have the added value of linking cross-cultural comparison to cross-temporal comparisons. This was one of the unanticipated benefits of the HY104 course,

which basically takes 60% Western Civilization and juxtaposes it with 40% examples from China (or other civilizations). In short, when we spend five class sessions reading “The Apology” and the “Crito” from Plato’s *Socrates* in juxtaposition with readings of two books in *The Mencius* we discovered the biggest “aha” for most students was not, as we planned, the discovery of Mencian Confucian thought, or even the radical differences between pre-Qin Chinese thought and modern American assumptions. Rather, most students experienced a stunned recognition that Plato was weird! This paragon of the Western tradition turns out not to be a democrat, and the Athenian polis turns out not to be a Jeffersonian democracy. (Well, in practice you could say the U.S. in Jefferson’s time was remarkably similar in its slave and gender relations to Plato’s Athens, but that’s for our American History colleagues to handle. . .).

The tools of comparative analysis we articulated in order to deal sensitively and critically with *The Mencius* actually provided leverage for our students to pry Plato/Socrates and Athens out of the triumphalist narrative of American civilization they had walked into our class carrying. Similarly, we found *Beowulf* and *Song of Roland* also “made fresh” by applying the tools of “making sense of folks really different from me” that we had developed for *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

Learning some tools for approaching the “other” with critical respect is the third major goal of comparative teaching. Below, I suggest one of my major lessons from teaching comparative courses is the need to provide explicit *scaffolding* for students to use in making their own comparative studies. This scaffolding is nothing other than our professional and critical assumptions—as Asianists and as members of an academic discipline—made concrete. Once made explicit, we reassess them, adjust them, and model them for our students to try out. For example, I regularly use a check-list, a “Guide to Source Interpretations,” which leads students through the basic reasoning and critical testing any professional historian applies to a primary text—essentially, a combination of close reading and putting the information in context. Comparative teaching makes us do this fundamental professional and liberal arts work more explicitly. And these are the tools I want my students to have.

I want my students to approach “the new” or “the different” with self-confident respect, assuming that others may be fundamentally different from the people they know, and extending the benefit of the doubt that these new people or ideas may have something interesting, valuable, and honorable about them. After applying careful study to these newly-encountered people or ideas, I also want my students to apply explicit, rational, ethical judgements. They may not approve, upon reflection, of the exploitation of labor in contemporary China or Mughal India. Fundamental to that application of critical ethics, however, is reflexivity: what they apply to the critique of the other, say China’s occupation of Tibet, they should apply to themselves, say the United States’ occupation of Indian lands. Finally, I want my students to be pragmatic. It won’t do to throw up your hands and say, “Wow,

people sure can be mean to each other!" I want them to ask, "What am I going to do as a responsible person based on this increased understanding I have?" I don't know what each student should do in particular, but I want to leave them VERY uncomfortable with the idea of doing nothing.

### What Worked

Introducing Asian content, bringing assumptions and issues to awareness, and challenging students to adopt responsible approaches to living in a multicultural world are a tall order for a three- or four-unit college course. But such goals sustain me through the blue books and paper grading. In practice, however, what actual teaching strategies have worked in promoting these goals in my courses? With the obvious caveat that I may not have always applied these techniques well, here's what has worked for me.

### Co-teaching.

In small classes (20-30 students) co-teaching provides the opportunity for a seminar-style environment in which students can explore, explain, and ask questions about the juxtapositions. Co-teaching itself allows us to stretch and learn material beyond our graduate training. Charles and Erin show that these goals can be achieved when actual co-teaching in a class is not possible. Careful preparation and consultations with colleagues on campus and at meetings like ASIANetwork can help. Indeed, working actively with colleagues on campus helps build your Asian Studies community, by creating what I like to call "liberal arts Asianists" out of colleagues trained in other areas. Also, such collaboration is surely one of the goals of liberal learning.

### Comparative assignments.

The heart of comparative courses is, naturally, comparing. From reading assignments to formal papers I have framed these comparisons for students. The ones that work are focused enough to get at the detail and the significance of the issues raised in the texts under comparisons; the assignments that did not work were either too vague (compare "The Apology" and *The Mencius*) or too specific (why doesn't Socrates like Meletus?). Some reading assignments that have worked to promote class discussion are: "What seems to be the point of Mencius' extended consideration of the story of the King who saw the Ox [I.A.7]? Try comparing Mencius' reasoning here with Socrates' cross-examination of Meletus in "The Apology" [46-8 in Penguin ed.]" It was clear where students needed to start, but simple information did not finish the discussion. We moved smoothly into issues of analogical reasoning and what "proves" an ethical point. A paper assignment that worked, but which assumes some class experience with such questions is the second paper assignment for the politics and ethics course: "What assumptions inform Kant's and Chu Hsi's proposals for what the morally serious person should do?" [In both courses, we used the 1999 edition of the deBary Columbia reader, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, while only assigning about one-fourth to one-third of the pages.]

### Problem Based Learning (PBL) or inductive reading assignments.

Successful comparisons of this sort rely, in my experience, on inductive close reading of the texts by students with some guidance from the teacher. The guidance is largely to model and to correct methods of professional *scholarly reading* (either rigorous philosophical reasoning or attentive historical contextual reading) and to provide *basic background* and to answer points of fact to help understand what the text is pointing at. Half my class time and most of my assignments are devoted to this exercise. I am just beginning to learn from other colleagues at Colorado College about PBL—problem based learning. Those of you familiar with PBL will see the obvious application. In PBL the instructor sets a problem for groups to solve—it must be, as I suggested above, both concrete enough to "do" in the time available and significant enough to garner student (and professorial) interest. The key contribution of PBL methodology is a clever set of small group arrangements. There is no time here to explain it; I only raise it to suggest you ask your campus colleagues.

### Islands of Context.

In terms of actual content, how can we do justice to historical and social context when covering hundreds or thousands of years of not one but two or more cultures? My colleague, Jim Matson, hit upon "islands of context." This addresses three problems in comparative teaching: the natural confusion students have in the face of unfamiliar information, and more importantly, it provides a guard against reading Asian material in an unreflectively Western or presentist frame. Finally, it also helps students identify social, structural, or fortuitous parallels and differences in the production and use of the texts we read. For example, in HY104 as well as "Ethics and Politics in China and the West" we constructed the courses NOT to cover every century between Confucius and Wang Yangming or Plato and Kant, but chose "islands of context"—pre-Qin China and the Athens of Socrates to Aristotle, the Tang and Medieval Europe of the Frankish kingdoms (Charlemagne plus), Renaissance Florence and Song urban culture. Whether it was the more historically-social or philosophically-textual course, such focal arenas allowed us to approach something of deBary's call to read texts in social and ideological context. One note: such choices make these courses *comparative* and not *global history*. The different perspectives and questions global history takes—and its role for teaching Asian Studies—would be worth a panel at next year's ASIANetwork conference.

### Strategic secondary sources.

Along with close reading of primary sources, our usual practice of selecting interpretative essays, articles or book chapters has a key role in comparative teaching. Happily, there is an increasing body of such work, much of which works in the classroom. The comparative philosophy of Roger Ames and David T. Hall, beginning with *Thinking Through Confucius*, is a prime example. One very successful essay in

comparing Chinese and Western philosophy is by our commentator, Henry Rosemont, Jr. His essay, "Classical Confucian and Contemporary Feminist Perspectives of the Self," provides a provocative reading of "care ethics" in Carol Gilligan and reciprocity in Classical Confucianism. Rosemont successfully models a big "so what" and a rigorous line of argument. Students react strongly to it, both positively and negatively, and we have a heyday.

### What Didn't Work

*Metaphysics taught by an historian.*

In the ethics and politics class, when we came to the readings of Han cosmology, especially the canonical version of "The Doctrine of the Mean" (*zhongyong*) students stumbled. They had similar trouble with the matched text by Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*. Students got stuck on the figurative language of the "Mean" and the nice distinctions between kinds of virtues that Aristotle draws. This really made it clear to me that I cannot cover all aspects of a text or a set of ideas without further training. Sometimes it is more effective to leave such topics, here the example of metaphysics that are strange to our students' post-enlightenment modernist sensibilities, as one of those ragged edges that we acknowledge we haven't addressed and which can impel students to take a more specialized course.

*Overly-advanced material.*

Similarly, it is possible—because I have done it—to assign overly ambitious comparative essays. When I was teaching 20<sup>th</sup> Century Confucianism with Professor Shih we dealt with US-based New Confucians, such as Tu Weiming, as well as communitarian thought in Anglo-American philosophy. Thus, we read Alasdair Macintyre's excellent essay, "Incommensurability, Truth and the Conversation Between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues." Aiya! Not only the students, but I, too, had a hard time with this one. Macintyre's writing is brilliant, but dense. It really took four class hours to map out the basic sinews of his argument and the concept of "incommensurability." What I learned was that just as we have to choose and limit the time periods we cover in comparative teaching, we must also limit and choose the methodological tools or issues we will introduce in the class. When I am overly ambitious, the students, in fact, ultimately understand and retain less. This experience has taught me the necessity of paying attention to the *gap* between how trained philosophers or historians think and how beginners, students, deal with the same material. Thus, like riders on the London underground, we need to "mind the gap."

"Mind the Gap" refers to the need to provide what historian and education professor Bob Bain calls "the scaffolding." We always do, but in comparative teaching it is even more critical that we provide students with active models of the kind of thinking we want them to do. When I don't "mind the gap," when I fail to provide the scaffolding, the students and I fall in—they're frustrated and angry that they cannot make reasonable sense of the comparisons I am asking

of them.

### Conclusion

I would like to conclude by emphasizing four good things comparative teaching can do for you, your students, your courses, and your campus.

First, co-teaching or working with colleagues to develop your own comparative course contributes to *professor's progress*—our professional and intellectual development. It's a great form of in-service training. As Charles and Erin say they can learn from Asianists, obviously, so, too, can Asianists learn tools of formal philosophical reasoning, of political theory, of literary criticism from such brave comparativist souls who come to ASIANetwork meetings. Indeed, that is precisely why I am here today, why I come to ASIANetwork meetings, why I signed up to do this panel and take the time to reflect on my teaching. I hope YOU will do this next year and I will enjoy sitting and learning at your panel presentation. This is surely an outstanding example of the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Second, successful comparative course will provide your students with tools for approaching the "other" (in different times or cultural spaces) with critical respect and challenge them to consider issues of adaptation and assimilation of philosophical and other ideational tools across cultures, from Christianity in China to Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism in America, from how others have done this appropriating work—what Erin calls constructive cross-cultural philosophy—to how they might do it themselves.

Third, comparative courses provide one effective method for introducing Asian content into your courses, thereby enriching the liberal arts curriculum. This is especially relevant for small schools with a limited number of or no Asian specialists.

Finally, developing comparative courses can provide the occasion for a campus conversation that brings interested colleagues from different departments and programs into cooperative dialog. Whether your institution supports actual co-teaching or simply co-development of comparative courses, this conversation will build worthwhile links across disciplinary and area studies divides. One need only to think of the intellectual sparks and great philosophical fun that the recently-departed and much-honored colleague, David Hall and our friend Roger Ames have created with their comparative collaborative efforts over the past decade. We can do the same thing, each in our own arena.