

## **Bringing US Freshmen into the Chinese Cultural Conversation: It was Indeed the Year of the Mouse**

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This paper was going to be “Bringing US Freshmen into the Chinese Cultural Conversation: It Was Indeed the Year of the Mouse.” I have changed its title and subject because of experiences over the last few months that have shown me a much richer context for doing cross-cultural work, namely Hong Kong. I will be happy to talk with you some other time about the original topic, a freshman course designed to introduce American freshmen to issues of history and politics in a Chinese context, largely through electronic texts and discussion groups. But to be quite honest, that sort of course is not so much a matter of cross-cultural engagement as it is of cultural inculcation, since, as you know, the first year of American undergraduate college is still a period of general education, a time for students to find their way in life, and the teacher’s function is often to paint colors on the fresh canvas, not to say the *tabula rasa*, of the youthful mind.

So rather than that somewhat simpler project, I will be talking about an experience of teaching MA students here at City University in Hong Kong, an experience that I describe in my new title as “Teaching Cross-Cultural Studies to Cross-Cultural People.”<sup>1</sup> That sounds a little absurd, doesn’t it?—to teach people something that they already know, something that is in their bones. I am used to the absurdity of teaching Chinese literature and culture to people who are at least outwardly Chinese, and that experience has taught me to be a little more humble about the business, but still, isn’t it rather futile to go, as one says in

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<sup>1</sup> CTL 5606, “Cross-Cultural Studies,” Semester A, 2000-2001 (Zhang Longxi and Haun Saussy).

Chinese, 大聖門前賣三字經？ Who better than Hong Kong people can tell us what it is like to be cross-cultural, to engage with multiple cultural registers and milieux? In that case, what am I doing in the front of a classroom, when the people who should be the real teachers are sitting in the students' chairs?

For justification, I have to reach back to another exemplary predecessor in my profession, that unlicensed free-lance professor of morals, Socrates. As you remember, Socrates wandered around the market, not dispensing knowledge, but asking questions so as to make people aware of what they already knew. The point was to put people in a position to better understand, critique or make new uses of the knowledge that was already in them. Rather like Mencius claiming that the teacher's job is to awaken the springs of morality that all mankind possesses, in the form of the famous "four beginnings" (四端), the Socratic teacher wants to awaken memory, not fill a blank slate.

Now that I have Socrates and Mencius harnessed to my project, I can feel a welcome jolt of self-confidence, though it is quite undeserved. My job will be to awaken awareness, and to combine my narrower and more unconscious experience of cross-cultural existence with the experiences of my students, by asking questions and telling exemplary stories.

Before I talk more about the class I taught here, I should give some definitions. We are all familiar with the term "cross-cultural": it designates things that relate to more than one traditional milieu of culture. Hidden in the term is the idea of an encounter, a cross-roads, as well as that of a hybrid, or a crossing. I've also found useful a distinction drawn by Fernando Ortiz, a historian of Cuba, in his 1941 book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*.<sup>2</sup> In that book Ortiz tries to separate two dynamics which he calls acculturation and transculturation. We see acculturation in the efforts of people to accommodate themselves to a

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<sup>2</sup> Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Tr. Harriet de Onís. Reprint—Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

foreign culture seen as more powerful, more desirable, or more authoritative: when a colonial power sets up an educational system to turn Africans into Frenchmen, or Incas into Christians, we see a planned acculturation that aims to eliminate the old, local culture in favor of the new imported culture. Transculturation, for Ortiz, is a different matter. You have transculturation when the objects or beliefs or attitudes of two communities meet and fuse and produce something quite new that is, nonetheless, involved with the traditional backgrounds that contributed to it. Ortiz's favorite example is the adoption of tobacco as an article of daily use and enjoyment by Europeans in the process of American colonization. Although smoking dried leaves was a habit of the American Indians, and endowed by them with ritual and religious meanings, it was something new and strange to the colonizers, who for decades were uncertain how to understand it. It was, for example, a religious issue to decide whether smoking was a form of eating, in which case it would have to be controlled during the periods of fasting ordered by the Church, or whether it was a form of medicine, which would lead to a different set of conceptual categories and practical decisions. In the end tobacco, like coffee and many other substances from the Americas, came to occupy a space midway between the categories of "food" and "medicine," and therefore altered the mental landscape of consumption among European peoples. If you were to map that landscape, the picture that came into effect after the introduction of tobacco would be qualitatively different from that before. Tobacco use by Europeans, like any transcultural event, "marks a date"—it opens a new period in the relation between people and commodities.

I hope the above example has not been confusing, but has helped to delineate the logic that I am calling cross-cultural. You have, in the case of tobacco, two fairly well-defined cultural backgrounds, but when they meet, their intersection creates a kind of conceptual turbulence. (I mean the kind of turbulence that occurs when, for example, several streams of water are made to go through a single pathway: the directional flow of each stream is somewhat different, and perhaps more water is introduced than can go down the drain at one time; backflow and cross-currents

perturb the linear progress of water through the system.) At time  $t$ , no ready-made mental category is available to classify certain specific products of the Americas, in the minds and practices of the Europeans who nonetheless are drawn to consume those products. The new product actively reshapes the minds of the people who use it; the new habits and ways of thinking at time  $t+1$  cannot be reduced to the conditions of the previous understanding. I think that that has been true for every genuine, consequential cross-cultural interaction, and the business of cross-cultural studies, it seems to me, is to explore the history of individual cases and draw them together to make a general account of the “turbulence” that is created when people encounter people and artifacts from a culture that is not their own.

Having distinguished acculturation (which is one-sided) from transculturation (which is mutual and delivers a new hybrid product), I’d like to go on and distinguish cross-cultural research from the current slogan of multiculturalism. Cross-cultural study is simply the recognition of a condition in which we all exist; multiculturalism is an attempt to pronounce upon values and to name the desired outcome of a certain meeting of cultures. If I can split hairs, cross-cultural study recognizes multiculturalism as a milieu but does not necessarily push an ideology of multiculturalism, whether that ideology is seen as leading to integration or separatism.

Hong Kong is an obvious example of cross-cultural existence. You have only to look at the language people use here, Cantonese with its infusions from English, Portuguese, Hindi, rival Chinese dialects, and various languages of convenience invented to make trade possible among people of different mother tongues. Or you can look at the hybrid political regimes under which the Crown Colony, and later the Special Administrative Region, has been governed since 1842. Nor does cross-culturality necessarily begin then: you could of course look to a previous past in which the trading, raiding, farming and administering populations of South China negotiated with one another to form a distinctive way of life that you would not pronounce identical with the way of life on the

Northern plains, the Yellow River valley, the mountains of the southwest or other areas we habitually think of as parts of “China.” But 1842 has for us all a certain obviousness as a beginning, and I will fall in with that habit. In general it will not surprise you if I say that the distinctiveness of HK arises in large part from that parenthesis of British domination, 1842-1997.

Hong Kong has its distinctive history and—necessarily—its own culture. But what is the defining culture of Hong Kong? Market culture? A greater degree of “modernity” (however that is defined)? “Westernization” (however defined, and let us note that there is no intrinsic, generally accepted definition of the “Western”)? Facile answers are always on offer, and we need to get beyond them.

In the world context, the beginning of British administration in 1842 puts Hong Kong in some relation with North America, the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent, etc., even and perhaps most meaningfully Ireland, through the common experience of British colonization. Or rather, let us say this more specifically and narrowly, for in cross-cultural study you always gain by being more specific: these different areas were overpowered and administered, not by “Britain” (a political amalgam), nor in fact by “England” (a subpart of Britain), but largely by a marginal population of Scotch-Irish Protestants who were encouraged to expand beyond their home territories, for reasons of state, by successive governments headquartered in London. To understand the hybrid forms of culture and government produced by “British colonization” in these diverse parts of the world, one would want to focus in on the experiences, expectations and attitudes of that particular British minority, try to retrace the channels of communication and historical memory that connected (if they did) the various emigrant populations, and see how their successive encounters formed them as well as the people they dealt with. One consistent motif throughout this history is a flair for sensing opportunities in the labor market (to speak euphemistically: consider African slavery in the New World, a Spanish invention put to use by an international group of traders) and connecting labor markets with

regional appetites for arms and drugs (rum, opium, whiskey). It's not my job to moralize, but to investigate, and I do think that the "British" element in Hong Kong culture needs to be analyzed in the perspective of that particular population that played the largest role in the formation of plantations and trading networks previous to the normalization brought by an official colonial regime.

This is terribly sketchy, of course, but enough, anyway, to show that in the cross-cultural character of Hong Kong today you find many themes that connect this four-hundred square mile parcel of earth with many far-flung regions, and that these themes are not simply consubstantial with England, Great Britain, the political Commonwealth, the parliamentary system of government, the use of the English language, or other badges of "British" identity or relation. Cultures are not pigeonholes, in my view, but problems and forces among which people navigate their lives. Nor is culture a purely intellectual classification of things; it has effects on lived reality. In the university, cross-cultural study should be an opportunity for discovering the basis of attitudes one otherwise takes for granted, and in particular, for tracing the multiple heritage of ideas and wishes that every Hong Kong university student brings to the classroom.

The fact of cross-cultural inheritance is rather widely recognized, but recognition most often takes the form of simplifying labels. It is important for people to be able to put their experience into cultural categories: thus, if your parents are always after you to make a decision about marrying an appropriate person (perhaps one selected by them!), you can deal with that pressure by classifying it as "traditional Chinese behavior." And so forth. People internalize cultural specificity and cultural difference, not because they don't know any better, but because it is useful to them to have such markers as ideas of national character and emotional investments. On looking at them analytically, I find the labels phenomena of contact, but not yet of transculturation. (A parallel on a more scholarly plane would be the copious register of "contact" and "impact" studies.) "Contact," thus phrased, is easier to understand because it is relatively static, the mental operation consisting just in

reducing the unknown to the known, the individual case to the category. These reductions of difference to cultural labels are testimony to the fact that people are living in a situation of multiple cultural options, but the characterizations are too simple, too inert, to render an adequate account of the historical contexts in which people live their cross-cultural lives. They are, in sum, more an effect of the situation than a viable framework for understanding it.

The course I am describing presented, through readings and lectures, case studies of acculturation and transculturation in various contexts. Zhang Longxi and I chose to avoid, in the first part of the course, the classic “East-West” confrontations, but to pursue situations from parts of the world not apparently connected to Hong Kong: Africa, the Caribbean, Germany. Once the definitions and some case studies were in place, we looked at literary works and translations (translation was, of course, a key metaphor for the problems we wanted to approach), and finally we moved on to a film representing Hong Kong consumer culture (*Chungking Express*). The students were to produce a final paper responding to a rather open-ended assignment: each was to choose a cross-cultural object and elucidate its origins and meaning through context, documentation and analysis.

The papers we received were fascinating. As we might have foreseen, a great number of them were written about food and weddings. Food assimilates (it becomes part of the eater) and distinguishes (among categories such as clean and unclean, among tastes, among seasons, regions and classes). Marriages pose a communicative problem, in which two families must find a way to address each other through commonly-recognized symbols: the weddings we read about involved differences of religion (church weddings or not, and for what reasons?), family background (differences among Chinese regional cultures and their Hong Kong derived forms), and economic attitudes (how much to spend, and how to spend it?). From the point of view of someone investigating cross-cultural consciousness, there could be no unsatisfactory paper, because every paper testified to experience of the phenomenon filtered

through some form of awareness. Some papers succeeded better in posing the problem of cultural hybridity than others, however, and I shall give some examples to show how I judged the results.

One paper discussed cultural differences in cell phone usage. The author proposed the cell phone as a culturally neutral object, a piece of technology that would provoke different responses in different cultural contexts. In Japan, said the author, when receiving a phone call people apologize to those around them, go off to a corner of the room or train compartment, speak quietly, think of it as a violation of decorum to be conducting a private conversation in front of others. Whereas in Hong Kong, to continue the author's comparison, people are not one bit embarrassed about pulling out their phones in restaurants and other public places; on the contrary, you yak as long and as loud as you can, without paying attention to the people around you. The author's explanation was that Japan is a collective society and Hong Kong an individualistic, or more precisely familial-individualistic, society, and cell phone behavior simply gives these mores another situation in which to be expressed. I think this was not a bad paper, but it came to its conclusion a little hastily, without interrogating technology (which surely is not a purely neutral insertion into cultural milieux) and without asking questions about the "national character" format of explanation.

A second paper considered the adaptations multinational commercial companies make to local cultures when designing their advertising campaigns. Obviously these campaigns are created with great investments of time and money in focus groups, market psychologists, consultants of various kinds, but still they are anticipating reactions from audiences that are culturally conditioned to welcome some kinds of message and not others. The product, one assumes, is basically the same: Nescafé is no different from one country to another, but the image of Nescafé must be. The computer industry has a word for this: *localization*, the superficial rewriting of the user interface to suit local languages, units of currency, etc., while the cogs and wheels of the programming remain unchanged. The paper then sought to describe what attitudes the



advertisers were trying to project, what kinds of responses they hoped to evoke, in their Chinese and US ad campaigns. The paper was fairly sophisticated about the “national character” issue, seeing the desirable images projected by ad campaigns not as self-evident realities but as wishes: you sell to the Chinese audience by showing them themselves as they would like to be, not as they really are, and by suggesting that your product fits in perfectly with that enhanced self-image. I would still have wanted to see in it a little more ethnographic breadth and historical depth. The paper conceived of the dialogue of viewer and ad as a kind of tête-à-tête, while it would be more accurate to think of each brand as competing with other, similar brands in a kind of mental space. And as for history, despite the thirty years of monopolization of public space by centralized political messages in the greater part of China, it is far from true that advertising is new to “the Chinese”; branded products such as beer and cigarettes were being sold through advertising more than a hundred years ago, and you can still admire the ingenious ad campaigns invented for the purpose (cigarette cards, calendars, and other images now sold as nostalgic kitsch). Nonetheless, the paper put a finger on some of the pragmatic issues of cross-culturality as a marketing problem.

A paper on the cheongsam / changshan / 長衫 corresponded to my expectations of a cross-cultural study. The author of this paper noted the curious history of this garment, from its ancestral form as a jacket worn by Manchu horsemen and women to its early-twentieth-century form as a relatively unadorned type of everyday dress for women, and on to its transformation, via Shanghai and Hong Kong tailors, into a culturally marked “national costume” for Chinese women, with variant shapes designed for different occasions, and today recognizable as having different meanings according to the occasions and cities where it is worn, the fabrics used, the intentions of the wearer and so on. In short, this paper caught onto the unpredictable, indeed improbable turns taken by this object, which was by no means fated to become the Chinese national costume but took on that role through a series of unrelated events over a period of two or three generations.

These papers show students grappling with the issues of cultural contrast, and sometimes settling for a mere restatement of the problem; they show an alertness to differences and a quick classificatory intelligence. They also help me measure the challenges of this field of research. The difficulty of thinking about transculturation is that it has to be specific, historical, multi-factorial, and it has to approach analytically many categories that we all find it easier to adopt without question. These are cases where I think the experiment has ended with an easy, though premature, resolution of the question. To carry it farther, one needs to ask how “cultures” and identities got formed in the first place, and take hybridity back to the supposed “pure” cultural regions. The lesson is ultimately about freedom and constraints: if categories emerge from the turbulent interaction of old categories and new experiences, if the forms of culture are unpredictable, how do we seize the strategic moments at which they might take a different (and preferable) turn?

I think it should be apparent why this sort of research is useful, maybe even necessary, for Hong Kong people. It gives them a chance to resist seeing their identity dissolve into the categories of “Western” (ie. Anglo-American) or “Chinese”; above all, to resist the “or”; to resist the commodification of easy identifications. I would like to think that this work done in a classroom helps to form a sensibility that is up to the task of knowing itself as Hong-Kongish.