ENGAGING ASIA: SOME ISSUES AND APPROACHES

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Why study another culture? From a humanistic perspective, as Devon G. Peña reminds us, "the knowledge, values, and traditions of ethnic peoples . . . [can only] strengthen the overall richness and vitality of collective human knowledge." Clifford Geertz argues, in a similar vein, that the greater the reach of our minds—that is, the broader the "range of signs we can manage somehow to interpret" in our effort to understand the cultural ways of "other" people—the more expansive and rich our own "intellectual, emotional and moral space" will become.

At the same time, sympathetic engagement with the "other" defamiliarizes what may appear to be normative. That is, an honest effort to appreciate the way "alien" cultures see the world provides us with fresh perspectives on our own society. The more we can understand what it is like to be the "other," the more likely we are to understand ourselves. George Marcus and Michael Fischer put the point this way: "Cross-cultural [comparisons] . . . have an important role to play in carrying out projects of repatriated ethnography, in defining novel approaches to taken-for-granted domestic phenomena, in framing questions, and in suggesting alternatives or possibilities among domestic subjects that are only revealed by comparative contrast with other cultural material."

There are, of course, many different routes to cross-cultural understanding. One approach, which I have found useful, is to focus on what Nelson Goodman refers to as "ways of world-making," or what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe as "the social construction of reality"—that is, how groups of people ("cultures") arrange things, ideas and activities into coherent systems of meaning. The fundamental assumption underlying this approach is that an understanding of another culture requires a genuine appreciation of how the people in that culture view the world—how they are socialized to accept a certain vision of the way things are, and the way things ought to be. The question then becomes: What sort of cultural logic determines whether something in a given society is perceived as "natural," "right," "beautiful" or "true"?

To be sure, culture is neither static nor monolithic; it varies over time, across space, and according to factors such as age, social class, gender and ethnicity. Cultural categories are constantly contested, erased, invented and reinvented. Moreover, the larger the cultural entity, the more problematic questions of categorization become. In a provocative recent article, titled "Is Chinese Culture Distinctive?," Andrew Nathan, a political scientist, expresses doubts that "hermeneutical" (impressionistic) claims for widely acknowledged "national" characteristics can be sustained by rigorous empirical investigation. Coming at the problem from another direction, Milan Kundera writes in The Unbearable Lightness of Being: "Insofar as it is possible to divide people into categories, the surest criterion is the deep-seated desires that orient them to one or another life-long activity. Every Frenchman is different. But all actors the world over are similar—in Paris, Prague, or the back of beyond."

Despite such questions and qualifications, I would argue that within any given self-defined social group—regardless of its size and geographical spread—there are certain broadly shared perceptions, values, and inclinations that provide its members with a collective identity or orientation. This notion of "sameness" helps the group make sense of difference. As Marshall Sahlins points out, "In order for [cultural] categories to be
contested . . . there must be a common system of intelligibility, extending to the grounds, means, modes, and issues of disagreement." How, he asks, could a society function, and how could any knowledge of it could be constituted, if there were not some meaningful order in the differences? In Sahlins' words: "If in regard to some given event or phenomenon the women of a community say one thing and the men another, is it not because men and women have different positions in, and experience of, the same social universe of discourse?"

A number of Asian scholars have bitterly criticized this notion of culture, accusing its exponents of contributing to various "totalizing" and "essentializing" orientalist projects, including the rise of "academic modernization theory" and "imperialist development policy." It has been blamed for creating a "neat divide between 'Oriental' culture and 'Western' reason," and for providing "the most convenient" explanation for the "willful backwardness and irrationality [of so-called traditional societies] in the face of rapid global modernization." In the view of critics such as Judith Farquhar and James Hevia, this sort of "reification" of ideas and values, which they blame on the theories of Talcott Parsons and others, has led to a "static and stagnant" conception of culture which justifies Western aggression and represents imperialism as "a salvation project."

I do not believe that all, or even most, of those who have employed this so-called Parsonian notion of culture in their academic writing are guilty of such crimes. Nor am I convinced that the long-posted relationship between ideas, values, intentions, ideologies and other forms of consciousness on the one hand and human behavior or "action" on the other is wrong-headed. One can, I believe, position culture in what Farquhar and Hevia refer to as "the materiality (and messiness) of everyday life" without disengaging it entirely from the realm of thought or creating a "static and stagnant model" of Asian societies.

Putting motives, materiality and messiness aside, this much seems evident: Most of us give very little thought to the systems of meaning that shape our lives. We seldom ask, for example: How do such systems come into being and how do they evolve? How do we learn about them and internalize their messages? Do competing systems of meaning exist and, if so, how are conflicts and contradictions resolved? To what extent do my own particular "ways of world-making" affect the way I approach other cultures?

Here are some additional questions we might consider from the standpoint of our own society and others, keeping in mind the variables noted above:

(1) How is knowledge organized? What are the primary categories of concern? How are things "named" and arranged, or renamed and rearranged? What realms of knowledge are especially prized? [For one example of naming practices, see the "Appendix" that follows the bibliography, which focuses on street names in contemporary Taiwan]
(2) What is the relationship between language and thought? What are the dominant symbolic structures and forms of communication in the culture?
(3) How does geography influence culture? How do cultures organize space? How do the people of a given culture view "the other,"
(4) How is time conceived and measured? How do cultures view their own history? How is "history" distinguished from "myth" (or is it)? Who are the historical heroes and villains of any given society, and why are they viewed in this way?
(5) How is government organized? How is it justified? How is it viewed by society at large? What is the place and purpose of law?

(6) How is society organized? What legal, moral and cosmological assumptions inform the social order? What are the dominant moral values of the society? Where do they come from? How are they expressed and/or reinforced? Are they related? Do they ever come into conflict? What are the mechanisms of social control?

(7) What are the organizing principles and basic assumptions of religious life? What role(s) does religion play in the society?

(8) What are the major categories of art? What sort of a vocabulary exists for talking about aesthetics? What sorts of artworks are especially prized? Why?

(9) What are the major categories of literature? Which forms of literature are most prized? Why?

(10) What are the most important rituals of the society (both secular and sacred)? How do people enjoy themselves (amusements, games, etc.)? What are the major holidays or festivals? Why are they important?

Questions of this sort lend themselves not only to illuminating comparisons between various Asian and Western cultural values, but also to fruitful comparisons between two or more Asian civilizations. Such comparisons might be relatively narrowly focused--for instance an analysis of gender issues in the novels Tale of Genji and Dream of the Red Chamber--or they might deal with broad issues of historical change, such as the complex relationship between imperialism, nationalism and modernization in nineteenth and twentieth century China and India.

The problem with such comparisons, as hinted at above, is that they seem to suggest--at least to some scholars--an "Orientalist" mentality, either in their tendency to treat Asian culture as if it were timeless and unchanging, or in their apparent acceptance of Western categories of analysis and concern. According to Edward Said, "inventor of the concept, Orientalism may be defined as a discourse about "the East" constructed by "the West." In the eyes of Said and his followers, Orientalism has served as an instrument of imperialist power, supporting colonial enterprises and paternalistic privileges. By dividing the world into the "Orient" and the "Occident," Westerners, including well-intentioned scholars, have "essentialized" (i.e. stereotyped) Asian civilizations, denying them their own voice, obliterating their distinctive national and/or regional characteristics, and stigmatizing them collectively as "unchanging," corrupt, despotic, and so forth. Orientalism as a Eurocentric construction thus implicitly or explicitly asserts the "superiority" of Western civilization.

Said has identified a set of four conditions without which Orientalism could not have occurred in the West: (1) European expansion into Asia; (2) the "sympathetic identification" of Western observers, including scholars, with Asian cultures; (3) an impulse on the part of Westerners to classify nature and man into new conceptual categories; and (4) the emergence of a comparative history that grew out of Western contact with Eastern civilizations. Imperialism, in other words, created a way of looking at the world that placed Europe at both the center and the apex, in a position to dominate other people not only militarily and economically but also intellectually.

There is much worth pondering in Said's interpretation, although it certainly has not gone unchallenged. Some scholars--many of them Asia specialists, and a number of them Asians--have criticized Said for oversimplifying an extremely complex historical
process, and for failing to acknowledge that Western scholarship on Asia has become increasingly more rigorous, empirically grounded, and methodologically sophisticated during the twentieth century. Others have pointed out that Orientalism has never been a purely Western invention, and that the Asian people subjected to Western imperialism were not as "silent" or as "incapable of representing themselves," as Said has asserted. In the words of Arif Dirlik, "from the beginning Asians participated in the construction of the orient." Thus, Orientalism must be viewed more broadly as "a problem in Asian modernities," not simply "a problem in Euro-American modernity." Considered from this angle, the contemporary "self-orientalization" of Asian intellectuals, which Dirlik discusses at length, appears not as a manifestation of powerlessness, but as a sign of newly acquired power.

A crucial question remains: Is it, in fact, possible to establish and transmit cultural understanding across boundaries of language, culture, space and time? A forum on "Universalism and Relativism in Asian Studies," published in the Journal of Asian Studies (1991) provides a convenient point of departure for this kind of debate. In his "Introduction," David Buck identifies "cultural relativism" and "evaluative universalism" as the two most common interpretive paradigms in the field of Asian studies.

Cultural relativism grows out of skepticism over "whether any conceptual tools exist to understand and interpret human behavior and meaning in ways that are intersubjectively valid." Said, influenced by Michel Foucault and other "post-modern" thinkers, puts the matter this way:

The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language, and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer.

Evaluative universalism, by contrast, is predicated on the possibility of intersubjective understanding based on "objective" standards of rationality and truth.

But how, realistically, can we reach this sort of appreciation and understanding--especially if Orientalism is as big a problem as some scholars insist? One approach, advocated by the ever-provocative Wendy Doniger, is to assume "the self in the Other" as an initial step, and then to "go over to the other side," and thus to "end up with difference." The key point, Doniger emphasises, is that "similarity must not be allowed to become normative." She writes:

The challenge [of meaningful cross-cultural comparisons] lies in choosing as the Other in whom we assume an initial likeness an Other as other as possible, as
different from us as possible, perhaps one we don't like or understand at all at first and have to work hard to like or understand. The comparison that chooses an Other in which the initial likeness is more immediately apparent is more ethnocentric; it is easier, and ultimately it proves [i.e. demonstrates] less.

So let us, in our cross-cultural investigations, constantly try to imagine ourselves at a certain place and time (either "at home" or "abroad"), with a particular "alien" outlook--informed by a specific (self-selected) philosophical or religious orientation (Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc.), as well as a certain age, gender, and social status. With this sort of "self-awareness" we can then respond "authentically," but in diverse ways, to any given idea, issue, image or artifact, whether "foreign" or "familiar." This sort of consciousness-raising effort has the virtue of revealing tensions and divisions within a given culture, but it can also be directed toward a project of deeper cross-cultural understanding. Instead of accepting "Orientalist" constructions of Asian societies, we will be, in effect, engaging--at least periodically--in the opposite process: an Asian evaluation or critique of the "other." In short, with enough background and genuine cultural understanding, we can generate an authentic "Chinese," "Tibetan," "Japanese" or "Indian" response to a "foreign" painting, poem, person, historical event or story.

Some related readings:


APPENDIX (an example of naming practices in contemporary Taiwan):

A few years years ago, while wandering around the city of Taibei (aka Taipei), Taiwan, I noticed that a great many of the streets had names that reflected explicit Confucian values (this is still the case today). Why do you think this is so? Can you think of another place where street names reflect moral values? What about other values (political, social, etc.)? Think about how and why communities give names to things--not only streets, but also cities, towns, mountains, rivers, parks, buildings, etc. Here are some examples (by no means all) that illustrate the way public morality is promoted in contemporary Taiwan (most of these are major Taibei streets):

A. Traditional values:

Four Basics Road (Siwei lu--referring to the four core Confucian values of ritual [li], righteousness [yi], integrity [lian] and a sense of shame [chi], as all Chinese know), Great Unity Street (Datong jie), Glorious Intelligence Road (Guangming lu), Great [Moral] Principle Street (Dali jie), Central Harmony Street (Zhonghe jie), Moderation Road (Zhongyong lu), Eight Virtue Road (Bade lu), Upright and Righteous Road (Zhengyi lu), Humane Love Road (Ren'ai lu) Humane People Road (Renmin lu), Esteem Humaneness Road (Chongren lu), [Moral] Accomplishment Road (Chenggong lu), [Moral] Self-strengthening Street (Ziqiang jie), People's Harmony Street (Renhe jie), Moral Action Road (Dexing lu), Morality and Kindness Street (Dehui jie), Establish Virtue Road (Lide lu), Esteem Virtue Street (Chonde jie), Esteem Humaneness Road (Chongren lu), Constant Virtue Street (Changde jie), Cherish Virtue Street (Chongde jie), Five Constant [Virtue] Street (Wuchang jie), Ultimate Good Road (Zhishan lu), Ultimate Sincerity Road (Zhicheng lu), Righteous Practice Road (Xingyi lu), Practicing the Good Road (Xingshan lu), Civil Virtue Road (Wende lu), Shared Virtue Street (Tongde jie), Shared Virtue Road (Tongde lu), Refined Intelligence Road (Xiuming lu), Loyalty and Filial Piety Road (Zhongxiao lu), Loyalty and Bravery Street (Zhongyong jie), Loyalty and Sincerity Road (Zhongchang lu), Loyalty and Righteousness Street (Zhongyi jie), Loyalty and Submissiveness Street (Zhongshun jie), Honoring Sagehood Street (Zunxian jie), Beautiful Virtue
Street (Meide jie), Bright Virtue Road (Mingde lu), Inculcate Benevolence Road (Yuren lu), Faithfulness and Righteousness Road (Xinyi lu), Culture Road (Wenhua lu), Renew the People Street (Xinmin jie), Renew the People Road (Xinmin lu), Expansive Love Road (Boai lu), Moral Principle Street (Yili jie), Kindness to the People Street (Huimin jie), etc.

B. Some "modern" values:

Nationalism Road (Minzu lu), Nationalism Street (Minzu jie), Democracy Road (Minquan lu), People's Livelihood Road (Minsheng lu), Patriotism Road (Aiguo lu), Establish the Country Road (Jianguo lu), Victory Street (Shengli jie), Enrich the Country Road (Fuguo lu), Flourishing of the State Road (Guoxing lu), [Cultural] Renaissance Road (Fuxing lu), Glorious Recovery [of the Mainland] Road (Guangfu lu), National Revival Street (Guoxing jie), etc.

[NB: Taipei street names also include the standard directions (in fact, some of the above-mentioned roads are divided into "north," "south," "east" or "west"), a great many place names from the Mainland (cities, provinces, mountains, etc.), a few people (Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, Roosevelt and a few philosophers; I don't recall seeing streets named after Confucius or any of his major disciples), etc. And, of course, there are lots of streets and roads names after auspicious themes: longevity, peace, happiness, good health, good fortune, and so forth.]