Joining the Great Conversation

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China is presently choosing a future, hesitating between its crumbling veneer of Marxism and its pride in its pre-Marxist 5000-year history of civilization. One of the many battlegrounds for this choice is education. For most of the twentieth century, China's educational system was tightly focused on science and engineering. China was eager to catch up with the West's technology. More recently, China has cautiously opened up to experiments in education, including the experiment of liberal arts education that includes conversational learning. I was privileged to be part of that experiment. I spent two academic years in China, from 2012 through 2014, conducting seminars on Western classics with high school students. My experience there gave rise to a hope that conversation about the great ideas and traditions of the world can contribute to a better future for all of us.

The decision to offer seminars on classic Western texts came from my teaching at St. John's College in Santa Fe, a "great books" school. Having seen what happens in classrooms at St. John's, including in seminars on Eastern classic texts and among international students, I had come to believe that shaping and promoting conversation about the great ideas of the world might be helpful to our global future in at least two ways. Firstly, there is no evading a world-wide conversation; it is already happening. Any student who studies in different traditions, or even studies seriously the authors of his or her own tradition, begins an internal conversation with voices from different worlds, including the past. It is an important task for anyone interested in education to consider how to host and encourage that developing global conversation.

Secondly, offering seminars on classic texts in China has to do with the nature of the global conversation. People who are trying to learn and are sincerely exchanging ideas about things that interest them can hardly help gaining empathy for each other. Friendship flows from conversation, especially conversation on great ideas from any tradition. I found this friendship in China, and also participated in wonderful, creative conversation with students whose situation and tradition offered new perspectives on texts I have read many times.

China's willingness to explore the possibilities of humanities education had, I discovered, a different goal. China was experimenting with liberal arts as a new strategy for how to catch up with the West. During my time teaching Western-style liberal arts in China, I attended the First Annual Conference on the Liberal Arts in China and was honored to hear some of China's internal conversation on educational policy. The speakers at the conference, held in Xi'an (where the terra cotta warriors are), expressed both worry and excitement about a liberal arts education modeled on Western-style conversational teaching and using Western classic texts. As might be expected in a carefully controlled political regime, they worried that teaching students to think critically–which they rightly identified as the goal of a humanities-oriented education–might be subversive to good order. Nevertheless, they were excited about taking that risk because they believed that Western-style liberal arts education might be the answer to what is often called the "Needham question."

The Needham question was first asked in the 1940s by a British scholar of Chinese history, Joseph Needham, who made an exhaustive study of early Chinese technological achievements and documented how technologically accomplished China had been during its long years of

civilization.[1] China had invented all sorts of impressive things—gunpowder, the printing press—long before the West. Based on this observation, Professor Needham asked the question "Why did the scientific revolution happen in the West and not the East?" Needham's question speaks directly to the psychological wound inflicted on China's national pride when, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the imperializing, mercantile and technological power of the West seemed to marginalize China. Because of its ancient dominance of the East, China has a long tradition of seeing itself as the center of the world. China's own name for itself is 中国, or *Zhōng Guó*; that is, the "Middle Kingdom." Western technological ascendency has been painful to China, so that the Needham question is a burning one for some Chinese and is present especially in the minds of Chinese educators like those at this conference.

Because a liberal arts approach to education encourages creative thinking and the exchange of ideas, it has been suggested as an answer to the Needham question. With this in mind, the Central Committee of the People's Republic warily allowed high schools and universities to undertake experiments in changing the focus of Chinese education from exclusively science and mathematics to the humanities. This was what brought me to China with the mandate to bring Western classic texts and a conversational style of teaching to Chinese high school students at 北大附中, or *Běi Dà Fù Zhōng,* the Affiliated High School of Peking University (BDFZ).

Chinese high school, I discovered, is a warrior culture, which made vivid our reading of the first text I gave them, Homer's *Iliad*. My students identified with the warrior culture of ancient Greece, where excellence in battle was the only way to win glory, honor and prizes. Chinese students,

[1] Joseph Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 190.

fighting their way through the literal and figurative tests of a competitive high school, felt that down to their bones.

All of the students attending BDFZ were high achievers. All their lives they had fought to excel, graduating from test to test, pulling themselves up by academic accomplishments. They were very nice kids, lovely and sweet even, but in that competitive atmosphere they knew the temptation to rejoice as much in others' failures as in their own success. They knew what it was to enter a battle in which there would be both losses and glory.

So much was at stake, after all. With a few exceptions, each of them was an only child. On each of them, as if on the tip of an upside-down pyramid, pressed the weight of the focused hopes of two parents, four grandparents and possibly as many as eight great-grandparents, all anxiously hovering. We saw this most clearly during the days of the big test, called the Gāo kǎo（高 考). Chinese high school students are required to take this test at the end of senior year in order to see whether they are eligible to apply or likely to get admitted to any Chinese university. Only those who do well on the test will get into the prestigious places that offer the possibility of a life of wealth and power in the structure of Chinese hierarchy. Glory! Honor! Prizes! To do badly on the test means a second rate-life, a disappointment to the family, and perhaps even a slide into poverty and obscurity.

The Gāo kǎo is administered simultaneously at various sites all over China, and the campus of our high school was one of the regional battle-grounds. On Gāo kǎo weekend, the school shut down. Tension knotted up the air. The gates to the school were locked, and security guards marched importantly about in flak jackets and helmets. An ambulance waited nearby in case the pressure was too much for some students. Those of us who lived on campus were confined to our dormitory rooms. Yellow tape marked off the test centers, as if they were a crime scene. Red banners

raised above the entryway festively but ominously marked the occasion with giant yellow characters: "Welcome students to the 2013 Annual Gāo kǎo Examinations." On the afternoon of the last day of the test, a crowd gathered slowly outside the campus gates. Parents, grandparents and even some great-grandparents had come to wait for their child. They stood patiently, often holding flowers. When at last the test was over, exhausted students began to issue out of the gates to their families. The crowd parted for them, scanning their faces and trying to read expressions. How had the battle gone? Would there be glory, honor and prizes? Or would there be shame, humiliation and want?

The students in our little section of BDFZ, called the Dalton Academy, had chosen a somewhat different path. Dalton Academy catered to students who had decided to go to college or university in the United States, which meant that they did not take the Gāo kǎo. Even so, whether because of their early years pointed toward the Gāo kǎo, or simply because they had no other concept of education, they rarely thought of anything other than how to get the right answers on a test. Many of them simply transferred the cloud of anxiety around the Gāo kǎo to the SAT or the TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language), on both of which they had to do well to get into an American school. They spent enormous amounts of time and money on test preparation study and extra courses, sometimes skimping the work I asked of them in my humanities class.

I disliked their pre-occupation with tests so much that in my classes I never gave them any, which mystified them. As far as they knew, doing well on tests was the only point of school. It would be like telling a soldier not to prepare for battle. How could they win glory if they did not take tests? My argument—that a person might genuinely be interested in learning—seemed to them a quaint, if charming, frivolity. They could not afford to indulge in it.

I pushed the argument anyway; it was part of my job. Dalton Academy sought to accomplish two tasks simultaneously. First, it was one of the experiments that were being conducted all over China to see if a liberal arts education might be part of the answer to the Needham question. Second, the Dalton Academy was geared toward preparing students who intended to go to the United States for college. These students had a practical and immediate interest in learning how to be comfortable with English and with the kind of seminar learning that they were likely to meet on an American campus.

On the first day of class, we plunged into the two tasks set by Dalton Academy, both of which would require these students to think differently about what can happen at school. They were used to lecture classes almost exclusively. For all of their years in the classroom, their voices had only been raised when they were sure of the answer to something. The humanities do not work that way, however, and I wanted them to become comfortable with exploring questions that had no sure answer.

"Was Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek armies, a good king?" I asked.

Silence.

I wrote the question on the whiteboard. "What do you think? Was Agamemnon a good king?" More silence. People looked down and fiddled with pens. Finally, the silence became so uncomfortable that one student, Janie, restively broke it.

"No," she said with an angry air, as if it made her mad that she had been driven to speak. "He should not have taken away prizes from his best warrior, Achilles, and humiliated him. That is stupid. A good king isn't stupid."

We were started. Of course, it still took time and lots of encouragement, but discussion has an almost physical momentum, especially among competitive people. Each expressed opinion calls forth

an equal and opposite opinion. I asked Janie a few questions—Why do you think Agamemnon did such a stupid thing? What might worry him about Achilles?. This caused Sam to react and speak up with the opposite opinion to hers: "A good king should control a powerful warrior or his authority is threatened. Agamemnon is smart to think Achilles is a problem." Anne agreed. "Achilles acting like child weakens the army. A good king must be strong."

Janie felt Sam and Anne's disagreement as a challenge to her, and turned on them combatively, saying with some scorn that Agamemnon could have found a less stupid and greedy way to control Achilles if he was afraid of him. Sam swelled a little. Other voices came quickly forward to soothe the waters. More than American students I have taught, Chinese students seemed to dislike disharmony in discussion and tried to heal it.

In the classes that followed, we spent some time with Achilles sitting in his tent, trying to decide which is the best life, short but glorious or long but obscure. I asked my students, "What do *you* think is the best life?"

A pause, and then someone, nearly whispering, ventured: "The best life has lots of money." There were suppressed giggles.

"Okay, good," I said. "Suppose you have lots of money. What do you do with money?"

"Buy things," someone else said boldly, and got a laugh.

"All right. Obviously, you don't want money itself, you want the things money can buy. What things?" I wanted to know.

Lots of ideas poured out at that: "Clothes, jewels, travel, a big house . . ."

"Why do you want these things?" I asked. They thought that was a ridiculous question. There was no *why* about wanting things. You just wanted them.

Tom joked: "I want what my friends don't have!"

"So," I said to him, "you want your friends to envy you, or to be impressed by you?" They looked at me with an "of course!" expression that was tinged with a little surprised embarrassment—I gathered that people rarely said that aloud. "Why do you want that?" I pressed.

"I would feel proud," Tom answered, after a moment.

"You want glory and honor, like a Greek warrior?" He agreed, relieved that we were talking about the book again. Yes, he was like a Greek warrior that way.

Allen jumped into the silence and announced: "I want to be rock star."

"Why do you want that?" I asked. He grinned, sure he had figured out the answer: "Glory and honor!"

"Really?" I teased him back. "You don't actually like music? It's just a way to get money, glory and honor?" Allen's music was a byword around the campus. He played in a band every extra moment he had. He admitted that he loved music for its own sake.

I asked: "If you had to choose between money and music, which would you choose?"

This question seemed to hit a sore place. Faces turned downwards. Perhaps it named something that many of them hid within. They might like music, or art, or anything, but they had obligations to their families. All of them, as only children, were their family's best hope for wealth.

"I won't choose," said Allen, bravely. "I want both." The circle lightened, and I thought they would applaud.

Class ended and students stood up, chattering excitedly in Chinese. I took this as a good sign.

As the book and the semester progressed, there were a variety of reactions to how we were reading and talking. A few wrote the whole thing off as an easy credit because there were no tests and no one was forced

to join the conversation. These, I believe, had spent so much of their lives looking at school as a source of glory, honor and prizes–separate from the private personal places where their real interests lay–that they did not know how to treat it otherwise.

Lots of students, though, loved what went on in our class, even though they still thought it a charming luxury that they could not afford to indulge in very much. If an SAT test loomed, work for my class was likely to be the first thing shorted. And yet the figure of Achilles became powerful in their minds. Living in their own warrior educational culture, they felt for how angry he was when the glory, honor and prizes he had worked for were taken from him. They understood, too, why his reaction to that was to wonder whether these things had ever been worth his life.

Homer's answer to that question is not obvious, but perhaps it has to do with the scene at the end, which is for me one of the greatest moments in Western literature. King Priam of Troy comes into the Greek camp, by night and alone, to beg Achilles to give him his son Hector's corpse for burial. Achilles and Priam, Greek and Trojan, victor and vanquished, magnificent and broken, have both lost people they loved and know they will themselves die soon. Achilles shares this mortal sorrow with the king of the enemy city. As one of my Chinese students put it, in a lovely English sentence: "Achilles and Priam weep together, in the dark, in the quiet of Achilles' tent, with the army sleeping around them."

My students and I concluded that Achilles' lasting glory was not won on the battlefield. His greatest glory is that he grew great enough to feel for all human loss and sorrow, even those of his enemy. Reflecting on this, I wondered if Confucius meant something like this when he put the quality of "*rén* (仁)," or "humaneness" at the center of his answer to the question of what is the best life. If so—and it will be the job of people like my Chinese students, with learning in both traditions, to decide—then the insight is

neither Eastern nor Western but belongs to us all. It is the basis for a human conversation that can include the whole Earth and make a better future.