

SOME COLLABORATIVE LEARNING EXERCISES

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Discussion Question “A”:

We know from experience that it is virtually impossible to discuss anything substantial without making generalizations. Yet we also know (at least proverbially) that “all generalizations are false, including this one.” How, then, should we approach the problem of making historical and cultural generalizations? How do we determine a meaningful (and acceptable) level of generalization? What, in other words, are the advantages and liabilities of using generalized concepts such as “Asia,” “the West,” “China,” “the United States,” etc.?

Chinese scholars are fond of identifying the enduring “special characteristics” (*tezhi* or *tese*) of traditional Chinese culture. One representative scholar from Taiwan, Professor Wei Zhengtong, points to ten such characteristics that “defined” China for more than **two thousand** years, from about 200 B.C. until well into the twentieth century: (1) Isolated creation; (2) a long [and glorious] history, (3) absorptive capacity; (4) unity; (5) conservatism; (6) esteem of peace; (7) feelings of local affinity (8) humane cosmological outlook; (9) family and clan system; and (10) emphasis on moral spirit.

Looking at the last **two hundred** or so years of American history, what **ten** enduring and distinctive “special characteristics” of the United States would you identify? Can we come to some sort of consensus on this question?

Our approach to this collaborative exercise will be as follows: First, we will divide the class into several groups, each of which will elect a spokesperson. The task of each group will be to reach an agreement regarding an answer to the question, from which we will then work toward a broader consensus of the class as a whole (through discussion of the points made by each spokesperson; I will write them side-by-side on the board). Each group should work on finding formulations that are succinct, revealing, and as accurate as possible.

Note: What Wei had in mind, and what you all should also keep in mind, are cultural attributes that *best characterize* the society in question. Wei’s list may provide a sense of possible categories of concern, but you need not (and should not) attempt to follow his lead too closely. Also, remember that the cultural characteristics chosen may conflict (as do, for example, Wei’s number 4 and number 7).

Discussion Question “B”:

We are, of course, “socialized” to hold the views we do. The process of socialization begins at birth and never stops, but most authorities agree that childhood experiences exert a particularly powerful influence on us all. Looking back on your own childhood—particularly your early exposure to various stories, myths, and “fairy tales” (whether

communicated to you orally, through books, or via other media, such as radio, television, recordings, etc.)--and using the collaborative approach suggested above, can you agree on 5-10 stories (ideally prioritized) that were particularly important in shaping your world view (attitudes, values, aspirations, etc.)? What cultural messages do these stories convey—at least as you view them in retrospect? Which of them seem “universal” in some sense, and which seem culturally specific to the United States?

Discussion Question “C”:

Let’s consider the abstractions “art” and “religion” from both a “sociological” and a comparative standpoint. For the purposes of our discussion, perhaps we can employ a dictionary definition of the former as “the conscious use of skill and creative imagination in the production of aesthetic objects.” The latter might then be defined as “a faith in, and worship of, a god or gods.” What were the social purposes of each in premodern China? What have been the social purposes of each in modern America?

Viewing the matter more generally, to what extent are art and religion reflections of the political and social values that prevail in any given society? For instance, how might one account for the wider range of artistic productions (in terms of subject matter, media, etc.) in modern America as compared to premodern China? Would this same explanation hold for religious life in modern America and Qing dynasty China? Why or why not? Finally, what about variables such as class? Was Marx correct in asserting that art and literature, like other aspects of culture, are nothing more than manifestations of the economic interests of the dominant class? If so, what is your evidence? If not, what is your evidence?

In short, viewed from a social standpoint, what are the major similarities and differences between the worlds of art and/or religion in Qing dynasty China and modern America? (Realistically we will probably be able to tackle only one topic today. What should it be?)