

# China and the West

## *A Fresh Strategy Against Provincialism*

BY JOHN G. BLAIR AND JERUSA H. MCCORMACK

A teacher's work against provincialism never ends, but sometimes a new idea offers fresh hope. The strategy introduced here was developed in China for students with good English and an interest in understanding the Western world. For them to understand such a distant world, they must be able to relate what they learn to what they already know—they must be able to compare it to China. This means learning to look at the Chinese way of life as if from the outside, both comparatively and historically. Chinese students today, for a variety of historical reasons, know little about their cultural roots. Perhaps partly for that reason, they have taken to comparative culture studies with enthusiasm. We believe this comparative approach holds promise for American students as well.

As many teachers know, students in the West also suffer from cultural amnesia, having little informed sense of the origins of their own civilization. They often resist studying their heritage, either because they think their personal variant of it subsumes all the rest, or because they think the past is over and done. Studying a radically *other* way of life, such as that in China, can get their attention and offer new perspectives on their own culture. Westerners cannot escape some awareness that China is now—and will continue to be—a major factor in the world of the twenty-first century. The Chinese world is so different that Westerners can no longer pretend their usual presumptions suffice as a basis for understanding life on that side of the world.

Ethnocentricity, the universal human tendency to see one's own kind at the center of things, is a key factor in framing comparative studies. We start by comparing maps of the world as viewed by different nations. In each case, a nation places itself in the center of things. Students then grow up internalizing the world map they see on the classroom wall. They soon forget that maps are maps, i.e., artifacts. They come to believe that the world looks like *their* map. For example, consider that it is difficult to get Americans to believe that Mexico is notably larger than Alaska, because their traditional Mercator projection maps exaggerate all land areas closer to the poles.

Since people typically believe themselves to be at the center of the world, the only viable premise for encouraging dialogue across the distances is to formulate a kind of cultural Golden Rule. We ask others to take our culture seriously by offering to take theirs with equal seriousness. That opens the way to what at least initially must be non-judgmental studies of very different ways of life.

Occasionally, observers express reservations about exposing students to a pluralistic view of the world precisely because it acknowledges there to be more than one legitimate way for a civilization to be organized. They may ask, "At the end of such an exposure, will students become disaffected with their own roots?" John Blair's childhood experience suggests otherwise. When he first went to school (in 1939), he met other five-year-olds in kindergarten who drank Coca-Cola. That seemed remarkable to him, because it was forbidden in his house. He hastened to report these new facts to his mother. She, a doctor's daughter and a conscientious parent (that she



Figure 1. Standard Chinese map of the world. Source: Map purchased in Beijing, 1988.

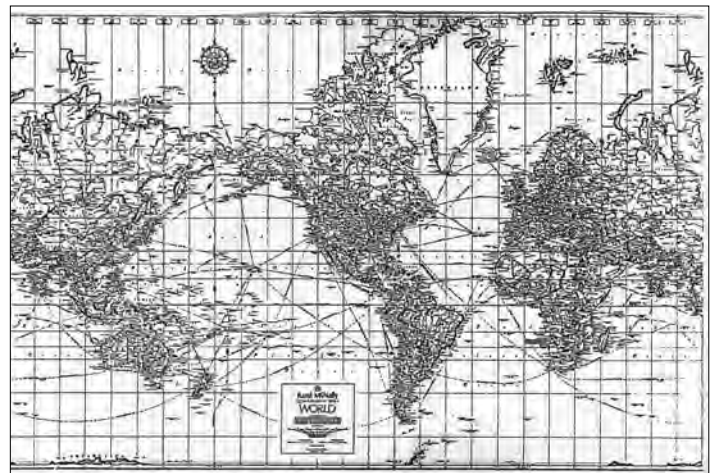


Figure 2. Traditional US map of the world. Source: World Map, Rand-McNally, 1990.

Note the differences in Figures 1 and 2. These maps illustrate how American and Chinese children literally grow up with different world-views.

was and still is at age 100 in 2007), remained inflexibly convinced that Coca-Cola was not good for children. So he was still not allowed Coca-Cola. What Blair had earlier thought to be a rule of the world turned out to be simply a rule of his house. It was his first encounter with what we now call *comparative culture studies*. The rules of home remained unchanged, but they were, for the first time, recognizable as such: no longer universal principles, but home rules—*one family's* way of living.

Similarly, in comparative culture studies, recognizing the legitimacy of others does not change who one is or where one comes from. With rare exceptions, humans continue throughout their lives to see the world through the lenses they acquired growing up in their home culture. Awareness of cultural differences, however, opens the door to respecting the fact that others look at the world differently. The enemy is not ethnocentrism, a human universal, but *unthinking ethnocentrism* that denies legitimacy to another way of life.

Some may seek to escape ethnocentrism by adopting a "cosmopolitan" view of the world, one that seems to be anchored in no particular culture. This approach may seem plausible with the presumption that "rationality" is a timeless, placeless tool for discover-

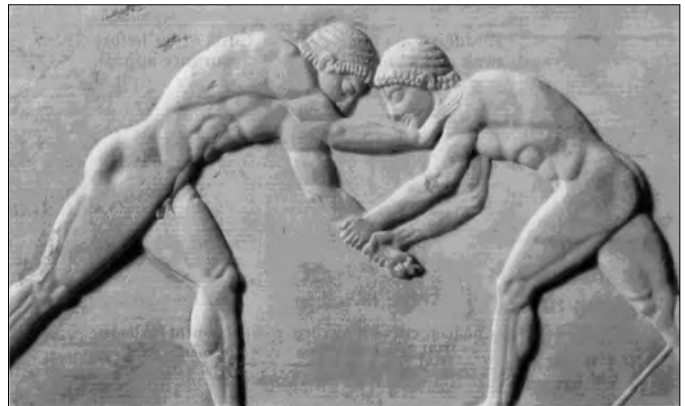
ing universal truths. Upon critical inspection, however, this orientation turns out to be only a more sophisticated form of Western ethnocentrism. We believe it makes better sense to acknowledge cultural differences as primary. Difference can then become a basis for dialogue.

The proposed assault on provincialism, by means of a comparative culture course, combines elements from studies of both Western and Chinese civilizations. Its fundamental intellectual approach is drawn from anthropology. It also draws inspiration from World History, though it focuses not on the world as a whole, but on two major civilizations. In our experience, it is actually easier to study two civilizations rather than one, because attention automatically goes to elements that help compare and contrast the two. Although one can never cover all aspects of either term of the comparison, it helps to acknowledge that no culture study can ever be complete. Civilizations are always more complex than anything we can say about them. This comparative course at least allows us to call attention to significant aspects of both China and the West in a way that illuminates both.

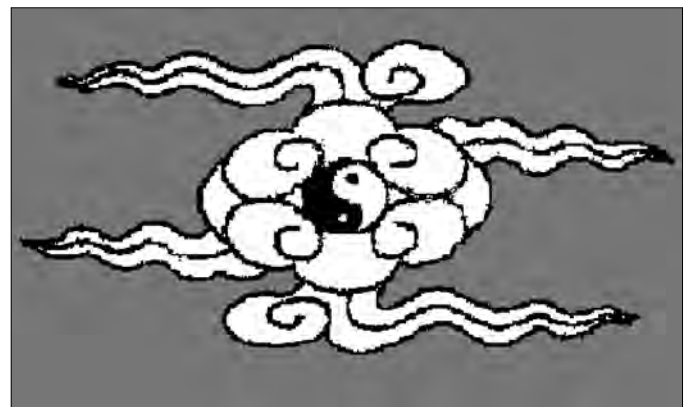
The sourcebook for the present course is entitled *WCwCC: Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons*. Adapted to the USA, the title might be *CCwWC: Chinese Civilization with Western Comparisons*. Or, more simply, *Comparing China and the West*. The course materials consist of short excerpts, mostly from major thinkers from the last 3,000 years or so, arranged not chronologically but thematically according to cultural domains (such as health, family, governance, worldview). In this way, the primary perceptions focus on cultural differences in kind. Changes over time are acknowledged by dividing each domain into “traditional” and “modern” segments. To avoid imposing ethnocentrically Western ideas

about “modernity,” it is identified not by specific dates, but as the process of seriously calling into question traditional beliefs. That definition situates Western modernity as gaining momentum as of the sixteenth century; in China the parallel process begins in the late nineteenth century. In each case, the core traditions that began to be challenged were radically different from the start. Small wonder that “modernity” turns out to imply quite different characteristics in these two cultures.

Thus, approaching two major, long-lived civilizations encourages a focus on their most basic and enduring orientations, different as they may be. Though it is hazardous to focus on a single image to epitomize a whole civilization, here are two images that call attention



Two Greek Wrestlers in *Agon*. Source: Newspaper advertisement, unknown paper, 2002.



Ming Dynasty Symbol. Source: Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century Ming textile pattern scanned by Karin Blair, early 1990s.

## ON THE MARGINS OF ASIA: DIVERSITY IN ASIAN STATES

Edited by Charles Keyes



This collection of ten articles from the *Journal of Asian Studies* focuses upon ethnic diversity in Asia. The articles are grouped under five main headings: Premodern Roots of Modern Ethnicity, On Understanding Human Diversity in Asia, Migrant Minorities and Ethnic Pluralism,

States and the Politics of Ethnic Minorities, and Ethnic Conflict and Ethnonationalism. The editor's introduction, “The ‘Other’ Asian Peoples of Asia,” sets the stage for the articles to follow.

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to some characteristics that play a large part in Western and Chinese civilizations, both traditional and modern.

One's first impression may well be that these two images are not comparable because they are so radically different. Indeed that is part of the point. These two cultures have always functioned very differently in the ways they organize life for their people.

The Western image calls attention to two individuals in confrontation. Westerners tend to identify themselves as distinct from the others around them, as individuals who achieve selfhood by distinguishing themselves from others. As a result, when individuals interact, some form of contest often results. The Greek word was *agon* [contest], a competition between individuals formally defined as equals. The winner is recognized as the “best”—until the next contest. As such, *agon* constitutes a *modus operandi* actively underpinning many Western practices, then and now: intellectual debate,

sports, politics, law, and market economies. Competition, after all, is simply a modern word for *agon*.

On the Chinese side, this Ming Dynasty image implies symmetry and balance—overall stability and harmony. This harmony depends on the subordination of individuals to the group; conflict is actively avoided. The main emphasis is on symmetry and order. What is represented formally in this image is a cloud—which asserts its internal proportion and harmony. As a symbolic image of a world order, it is cultural, not religious, because the Chinese world does not involve transcendence in any Western sense. At the center of this Chinese image is a *taiji* symbol that represents a dynamic alternating dominance between two principles, *yin* (dark) and *yang* (light). These are complementary opposites, central to a vast totalizing system of correspondences that has served for more than 2,000 years to situate everything likely to occur in the Chinese world. As the alternation of *yin* and *yang* might suggest, “reality” to Chinese minds is always changing—quite the opposite of the Western emphasis, which seeks to define reality as permanence.

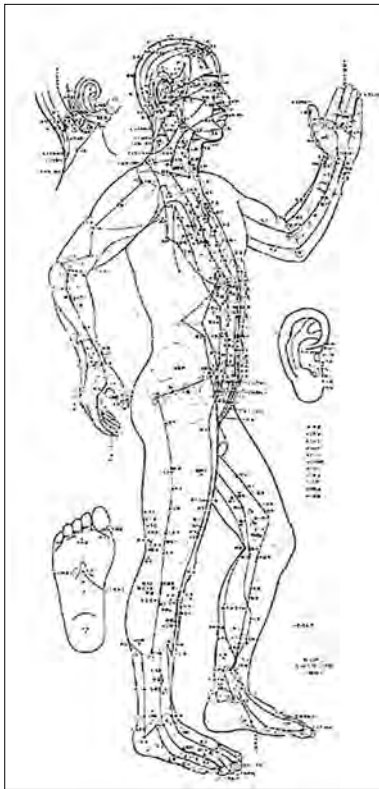


Figure 3. Modern Acupuncture Man.  
Source: Personal collection of the authors.



Figure 4. Vesalius' Man, 1543.  
Source: Andreas Vesalius: *De corporis humani fabrica libri septem* (Basel: Ioannis Oporini, 1543), 174.

apply universally, not just within the domain of Western civilization. As one science student asked, “In China, water is still H<sub>2</sub>O isn't it?” The answer is yes, but only if you bring to the question a mental framework that has been sufficiently conditioned by modern Western science to think in terms of molecules and their combinations. In the Chinese tradition, water is first of all a primary metaphor for the way things are constantly changing. Left to itself, water never stands still

As this too-brief sketch suggests, our comparative approach uses each civilization to highlight the central presumptions of the other, implicitly acknowledging their legitimacy. Calling inherited ethnocentrism into question, however, remains difficult for anyone who grows up in a single culture. It is especially difficult for Westerners, because our civilization has claimed for so long that its postulates are universal. In the West, this presumption lies behind both science and religion. The Bible's *God* is explicitly the creator of all that is, the *One God*. Similarly, the “Laws of Nature,” as pursued by scientists, are understood to be “laws” precisely because they are deemed to

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**Awareness of continuities in Chinese civilization gives perspective to Western assumptions about how civilizations develop. Once Westerners study China comparatively, a different perspective may emerge.**

but keeps on moving, always seeking a lower level. Yet it has the power to wear away stone, thereby illustrating how yin, which initially yields to yang, tends, paradoxically, to be stronger in the long run.

Venturing one step further into a Chinese view of the world, one needs an additional concept, *qi* [pronounced *chee*]. Qi is vital energy that animates everything that exists, even mountains and oceans that Westerners typically see as inanimate. Yin and yang are the two modes of movement of qi. The Chinese see human health as the free-flowing movement of qi through all parts of the human body along invisible channels known as meridians. Thus, each civilization views human bodies very differently.

In traditional Chinese medicine, blockage in the flow of qi as vital energy constitutes disease. The body image that fits with this concept (Figure 3) has no muscles, no implicit means of self-assertion. Instead, the body is the site of transit for larger forces that seek to maintain their flow. The Western body image (Figure 4) places emphasis on muscles and focuses attention on the individual as the origin of action. Setting this representative man in the framework of Roman ruins reinforces the Western emphasis on musculature that dates back to classical Greek statues. The background also hints at how Vesalius' precise observation and dissections promise to improve on Galen and his Roman civilization which, by the sixteenth century, only survived as ruins. These illustrations suggest why these two medical traditions remain radically disjointed, despite recent efforts to combine them.

Comparatively, neither the Western nor the Chinese view of the body—or of water—is right or wrong. Indeed, it would seem silly to suggest that a way of life that has proved viable for thousands of years for millions of humans could possibly be dismissed as merely right or wrong. Nor is it certain that one or the other of these approaches is inherently superior. It is the differences—contextualized in their different worlds—that are worth pondering. Some Western cultures, for instance, have long based their approach to life on asserting “universal” truths regardless of others’ preferences. The Chinese worldview, on the other hand, has long placed great emphasis on survival and continuity. As a result, China has been recognizably itself for longer than any other civilization on earth today. From past experience, one must predict that this will still be the case in a century or two. As far as the West is concerned, the jury on its long-term viability is still out.

Space limits do not allow us to give a wider range of comparative examples, so we have selected these few that exemplify the broader tendencies we find. Nonetheless, readers may well feel the need to see in brief how traditional Chinese concepts fare today. Because Chinese culture functions in its own distinctive ways, the New and the Old may appear strangely mixed up to Western eyes because “reality” is perceived so differently.

China’s newest orientation is also its oldest orientation. Under Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, underway for over a quarter of a century now, China has returned to its longest-standing criterion for measuring good government—prosperity. All the great thinkers in the Chinese tradition, though they differed on how to achieve prosperity, have agreed on this criterion. Our earliest textual example comes from Guan Zhong in the sixth century BCE, even before Confucius. Deng Xiaoping, as of the late 1970s, justified his reforms on the grounds that nothing could be accomplished if China remained poor, as it had under Mao Zedong’s leadership. Among other misjudgments, Mao encouraged population growth to “make China strong.” The population doubled between 1949 and 1979, seriously diluting most of the gains made possible by strenuous revolutionary effort.

But “prosperity” is a thoroughly pragmatic value. It has no specific content but implies responding successfully to whatever present conditions exist. China’s present involvement with market economics represents—not a conversion to a Western model—but a Chinese-style adaptation to the conditions of now. This is one reason we do not foresee a “democratic” future for China. For thousands of years it operated very successfully with a centralized model of governance—a model once again paying off in terms of prosperity. Recent economic histori-

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ans have shown that only as of the nineteenth century did China fail to keep up with itself as the most successful economy in the world. From this perspective, the twenty-first century is beginning to look like a return to what Chinese nationalists perceive as “normal.”

Awareness of continuities in Chinese civilization gives perspective to Western assumptions about how civilizations develop. Once Westerners study China comparatively, a different perspective may emerge. For one thing, they are likely to see science and religion as much less at odds than they had previously thought. In the Western view, both science and religion presume a beginning and an end. For instance, the Christian story begins with *Genesis* and ends with *Apocalypse*. The science narrative differs primarily in the outer limits it identifies—the *Big Bang* and the *Heat Death of the Universe*. By contrast, the dominant Chinese view does not attempt to objectify events by placing them as markers within a narrative that has a beginning, middle, and end. The Chinese focus on the present and how best to cope with its difficulties—a pragmatic concern that often overrides claims of abstract principles.

The core of Chinese values in actual life remains much closer to home, to family and to the larger socio-political hierarchies that family relations reenact on a small scale. The name of the central value is *xiao*, traditionally translated as *filial piety*. A better translation might be *familial loyalty*, because the central notion turns on the duty of subordination to elders and superiors, within the family and beyond.

Imagine a mother who calls a neighbor and friend to say that she needs help moving some heavy furniture; she asks if the friend’s teenage son might be available to help. An American mother would be likely to respond: “I’ll ask him”; a Chinese mother: “I’ll send him over.” In this tiny contrastive episode are embedded a host of cultural assumptions about parents and children, about neighbors, and the interactions among all of the above. Our job as teachers is to identify such culturally resonant instances and then to unpack them as fully as we can.

In this hypothetical situation, the Western mother automatically respects her son’s right to an independent response; in China, the son would not even be consulted. Lurking here are contentious issues concerning “human rights.” Anyone who wants to take such issues seriously would be well advised to reread the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, composed of some thirty articles. The first two-thirds concentrate on Western-style human rights with a political and legal orientation, derived from Enlightenment concerns. The last third emphasize social and economic rights (food, employment, education). In international discussions, whenever human rights come up, the Chinese consistently focus their attention on the latter, proclaiming how much they have improved “human rights [socio-economic]” for Chinese citizens. Meanwhile Westerners decry how the Peoples’ Republic persists in denying the “human rights [political-civic]” of its citizens. As far as public discourse is concerned, a dialogue of the deaf has prevailed for many years.

This stalemate might not be necessary if people took the time to read the actual document, to understand how it has been received differently in China and the West, and, finally, to define their terms with care. Only then can one analyze dispassionately the functioning of the different political systems, and the pressures felt by leaders on both sides.

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begin to understand that, behind the flotsam and jetsam of Western popular culture that washes across Chinese life today, the West has a coherence and a value that was invisible to them earlier. They admire and respect the Western skill of critical thinking, for instance, though it remains alien to the daily pressures of their lives. In addition, many of our students have said they now, for the first time, see a reason to take their own heritage seriously. One student engaged us in the following dialogue:

“It seems that you in the West have many political parties.”

“Yes, at least two and in some countries more.”

“We here only have one Party.”

“Yes, I know.”

“But you have only one god, whereas we have many gods.”

“True.”

“It looks like everybody lives with ones and twos. But somehow they got applied differently.”

She had caught the comparative spirit of the course.

**Excerpt from the *Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons Curriculum***

Below is a sample reading list for *Encounter 6: Values And Worldviews*, which includes two weeks of work near the end of the one-semester 2007 version of this course. Excerpts from the listed texts total about 11,000 words in English each week, exclusive of short introductions and study questions.

**Encounter 6: Values and Worldviews**

6.1 Traditional Orientations (twenty-seven pages)

Week 12

Key Concepts:

Divination

Fundamental Mindsets—Western and Chinese

Western Texts:

The [Hebrew] Ten Commandments

Epictetus: *The Art of Living*

Jesus of Nazareth: The Sermon on the Mount

Varieties of Judeo-Christian Ethics

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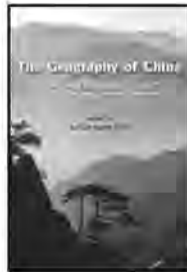
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*Zhuangzi: On What We Can Know*  
*Xunzi: "Do Not Look to Heaven for Explanations"*  
Fortune or Misfortune: "Old Sai Lost His Horse"

Comparison Text:

*Ming Critiques of Christianity*

### 6.2 Modern Tendencies (twenty-four pages)

Week 13

Key Concepts:

Quantification  
Probability  
The Idea of Progress  
Western Morality and Ethics

Western Texts:

René Descartes: "I Think Therefore I Am" [*Cogito Ergo Sum*]  
Robert Pirsig: "Two Ways of Knowing"  
Richard Rorty: "Pragmatism as an Alternative"

China Texts:

Hu Shih: "On John Dewey on Experience:  
Five Chinese Generations since 1949"

Comparison Text:

*Contemporary Socio-economic Systems*

### Follow-up Possibilities

Readers interested in meeting the authors are invited to attend the AsiaNetwork conference in San Antonio, March 14-16, 2008. They are organizing a panel entitled *Comparing Asia and the West*.

WCwCC: *Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons* (Fudan University Press: Shanghai, 2006) has an unusual format: 150 pages in print, plus a CD-ROM with 1,067 pages in Acrobat format designed to be read on-screen. This format allows it to be affordable for Chinese students (about \$4). Currently, this publication is not for sale outside of China. Those interested in obtaining a copy should contact the authors by email at WCwCC.2006@yahoo.com. More information is available on their Web site <http://comparativeculturestudies.org>.

The authors seek to negotiate—for 2009—a test of their materials in an American classroom, either through a one-semester, temporary team-teaching assignment for themselves, or through a controlled experiment whereby other teachers use their materials in return for feedback. In the process, they hope to clarify whether or not it would be appropriate to publish a version of the sourcebook for use in the USA. ■

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**PROFESSORS JOHN G. BLAIR** and **JERUSHA H. MCCORMACK** are currently visiting professors at Beijing Foreign Studies University. They each came to comparative culture studies from thirty years of university teaching in European English departments, have both published several books and numerous scholarly articles in their original fields of nineteenth and twentieth century American and Anglo-Irish literature and culture, and they have lectured widely in Europe, the USA, and China, with occasional appearances in Africa (Blair) and Japan (McCormack).