

# Introducing and Concluding the Chinese Religion Survey Course

by Jonathan R. Herman

When teachers of Chinese religion meet to discuss pedagogical strategies, our conversations usually reflect an almost prurient fixation on one aspect of the syllabus. While my colleagues and I certainly acknowledge the importance of course organization and methods of evaluation, we invariably devote most of our attention to the selection of readings and films, as though it were self-evident that the textual and cinematic resources exclusively determined the success or failure of the course. Needless to say, there are many other crucial components of Chinese religion pedagogy that are too often overlooked, and even the best material is insufficient to overcome an unfocused or misdirected presentation. In this essay, I will offer some specific strategies for the first and last class meetings of the general survey course in Chinese religion, though they are also applicable to virtually any broadly based introduction to Asian thought and culture. The information and conclusions contained herein are based on my own experience that such a course ordinarily attracts a wide variety of students with little or no background in anything Asian, many of whom have enrolled chiefly to fulfill a distribution requirement. Thus, it is crucial at the onset to convince the students that what they are about to undertake is indeed significant. Similarly, it is equally if not more crucial at the completion to reflect upon what that significance is. Of course, these points must first be clear in the teacher's own mind; the examples given in this essay reflect my own priorities.

## THE FIRST SESSION

Even before giving students the opportunity to read the syllabus in its entirety, I ask them to answer a logic problem presented to them on the blackboard, a variation of one included in the study chronicled in Alfred H. Bloom's *The Linguistic Shaping of Thought* (1981):

*If all circles are large,  
and if all triangles are circles,  
then, are triangles large?*

When asked to give a response of "yes" or "no", a clear majority of students ordinarily reply in the affirmative, having treated the problem as they would any syllogism by logically combining the first two premises to reach the obvious conclu-

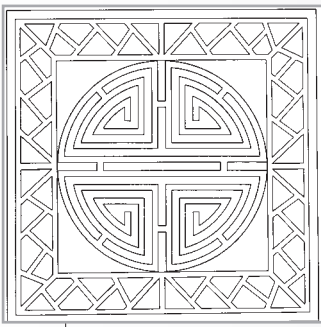
sion. Similarly, they are not surprised to learn that most Americans included in the original study corroborate this answer. However, I then point out that although this consensus is indeed correct by Western standards, it by no means represents a universal way of reasoning. When the question was initially posed in Chinese to Taiwanese subjects, many said that it made no sense, that it is incomprehensible that triangles could be circles; and when pushed to choose between "yes" and "no", this time the majority opted for the latter, relying on their own observations that not all triangles are large by necessity.<sup>1</sup>

This, I suggest to the class, is not simply a clever anomaly or an insignificant difference of opinion. This is a case that cuts to the core of how distinct cultures may have very different basic assumptions and perceptions informing their respective world views. While it is self-evident to most Americans that this problem can be abstracted and solved by elementary symbolic logic, it is equally self-evident to the Chinese that one of the initial premises is inconceivable and that the conclusion is clearly contradicted by the existing empirical evidence. Essentially, this study gives the students their first insight into a world view whose epistemology—whether for linguistic, cultural, biological, or other reasons—does not allow for the abstraction of a premise that is so obviously counter-intuitive or of a conclusion that is so obviously counter-factual. At this point, having gotten their first glimpse into the concreteness of Chinese perception, the students may begin to appreciate some otherwise baffling aspects of Chinese religion, such as the emphasis on the here-and-now as the locus of ultimate meaning, the absence of a single creator god existing over and against the universe, or the hierarchical ordering of deities paralleling the organization of government bureaucracies.

In short, this introductory exercise alerts students to the theoretical challenge of engaging other intellectual or spiritual paradigms, gives them a brief (albeit oversimplified) preview of the Chinese world view, and brings that preview to bear on specific dimensions of Chinese religiosity. It also lends itself to a discussion of alternatives to the categorical rejection of "other" as inapplicable and the naive embrace of the exotic. A survey course in Chinese religion offers something of a first encounter, and one key to negotiating that encounter successfully is a dialectic between identification with, and distancing from, the "other" people and cultures that are encountered. To a great extent, this dynamic is the organizing principle that underlies the subsequent course work.

## THE FINAL SESSION

As the students are winding down their first encounter with Chinese religion, it is less important for the instructor to review what they have encountered than to offer them guidance in processing and integrating the fruits of that encounter.



At this juncture, the specifically sinological task is really over, and the key here is not to introduce new information or theories about the Chinese world view, but to provide some new tools for the students to begin reflect-

ing critically on what they have just learned as well as their own attitudes and presuppositions. Toward this end, I again ask them to respond to a question written on the board, though this one is drawn not from a research study, but from the title of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's reflective essay, "Is the Qur'an the Word of God?" (Though this essay does not actually address China, it is hardly irrelevant, as Islam is China's largest minority religion.) During this presentation, I summarize what I take to be the central *problematik* of Smith's essay, that the world seems to have been historically divided into two halves, with each half so sure of the answer that they have never asked the question seriously. To be a Muslim is to reply with a firm "yes"; even to ponder another alternative treads close to blasphemy. On the other hand, non-Muslims do not really reject the authority of the Qur'an as much as they simply do not consider it. This is a case much like the circles and triangles problem, where what is self-evident to one side is anathema to the other, and vice versa. Furthermore, the conceptual/moral universe inhabited by those who respond "yes" is very different than that of those who respond "no". Yet Smith is not chiefly interested in demonstrating that this divide exists, that one single issue can so richly symbolize how impenetrable conflicting religious paradigms may be to each other. Rather, what seems most to interest Smith is that "we have also come to accept such a fact without disquiet,"<sup>2</sup> that no one has ever found this issue particularly interesting. On the one hand, civilizations have historically responded to religious divergence with both militant absolutism and detached tolerance. On the other hand, the academy has been content to observe and chronicle the reality of religious diversity without confronting the need to make intellectual sense of that reality. What does it, in fact, mean that people perceive the world so differently, and how does one craft an intellectually honest resolution to those discontinuities?

And certainly, these intellectual issues are not totally isolated from the social exigencies of cultural clashes; recent events like the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*, the ongoing struggles over sacred space in Jerusalem, and, of course, the Tiananmen Square massacre all serve to illustrate what often occurs when paradigms collide. It is hardly a coincidence that as the academy struggles to find alternatives to a cloistered positivism and a promiscuous relativism, the world's religious traditions and ethnic nation-states are being forced to confront the implications of both absolutist and tolerant responses to religious and/or cultural pluralism. By expanding the students' psychic map to include China with all of its perplexities and incongruities, we may also remind

them that the encounter is not merely an academic abstraction, but a reality in which they themselves are participating, perhaps now a bit more self-consciously than before. "You thought you were only knocking off a 'non-Western' requirement," I tell them, "but I've just upped the stakes." It has been my experience that many students choose to continue the conversation long after the close of the term.

## CONCLUSION

Obviously, I am not presenting these strategies as techniques that I believe every scholar of Chinese (or other Asian) religion should adopt. Rather, I am suggesting that it is important for the instructor to articulate in his or her own mind the significance of the survey course and to construct the course accordingly. Of special importance is the overture, which helps establish the disposition the student brings to the material, and the closing curtain, which is really the last chance to shape what the student takes from the course and how he or she integrates it. My own agenda is strongly tied to my concerns—both intellectual and social—about issues of religious pluralism and cultural diversity, and the strategies described here have provided a useful frame for connecting those concerns to the course material. I offer this to my colleagues as one possible model. n

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**JONATHAN R. HERMAN** is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia State University. He is the author of *I and Tao: Martin Buber's Encounter with Chuang Tzu* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

## NOTES

1. In fact, the question as posed in Bloom's study required an even greater level of abstraction for an affirmative reply, yet the results were still very dramatic. Samples of 173 Taiwanese subjects and 115 American subjects were asked: "If all circles were large and this small triangle 's' were a circle, would it be large?" Bloom reports that 83 percent of American subjects said "yes" and 75 percent of Taiwanese subjects said "no", and that this disparity was even more pronounced when questions were posed orally. See Alfred H. Bloom, *The Linguistic Shaping of Thought*, Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981, 30–33.
2. Smith continues, "This is curious. The radical divergence might well make both groups more restless with their own answers than either has often thought it necessary to be. At the very least, there is an intellectual challenge: how is one to rationalize the divergence, to conceptualize it, to interpret it intelligibly? Are our minds to be content to accept lying down the total divergence, unreconciled, on a major issue?" See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Is the Qur'an the Word of God?" In *Religious Diversity*, edited by Willard G. Oxtoby, New York: Crossroad, 1976, 27.

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