

SENSORY EXPERIENCES AS ELEMENTS OF ASIAN STUDIES FIELD TRIPS

By James M. Hastings



Worshippers amidst clouds of incense at Mazu Temple. Photo by author.

Wingate University is a comprehensive university twenty-five miles east of Charlotte, North Carolina, with an undergraduate population of about 2,000. Almost 80 percent of our students are from North Carolina and many are from small towns. The student body is 60 percent female and 75 percent Caucasian. Although some of our students are well-traveled, a significant number have never been out of the country, and many have never been on an airplane.

As part of Wingate's emphasis on global education, we have a program of international travel seminars for juniors in which professors teach a two-credit course on a particular topic and then take students for a ten-day, highly subsidized field seminar at the end of the semester. Each year, about 40 percent of juniors participate in the W International program; typically, more than half of the six or seven seminars offered each year travel to Europe, while Asian destinations are less common. Under this program, I have taken student groups to Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia, so my experiences are largely based upon the Wingate seminars.

Festival in Taiwan

As I approached the Mazu Temple in Lugang, Taiwan, with a group of my American students, we could hear the loud explosion of fireworks along with repeated messages over a loudspeaker. I had planned to bring the students here during our weeklong field seminar on religious and ethnic identities in Taiwan in order to observe Minnan culture and especially to visit this particular temple, one of the principal temples

in Taiwan dedicated to Mazu, the goddess of the sea. I expected to find it busy, but this day turned out to be beyond anything I had imagined.

As it turned out, there was a festival taking place that day in which devotees of the goddess had come from different townships on the island accompanied by Daoist shamans and assorted ritual paraphernalia. As we approached the entrance to the temple square, we came upon massive crowds. The air was thick with the odors of incense and gunpowder, punctuated by the repeated explosions of firecrackers. Elaborately costumed figures were dancing in the streets, accompanied by the sounds of drums. Sword-wielding ritual specialists, some of whom appeared to be in a trance, were being led into and out of the temple. The whole chaotic scene assaulted our senses. While everyone was initially curious and excited to see what was happening, after a short while, I found a number of students sitting off to the side, looking miserable. When I asked what was bothering them, they replied that they could not deal with all of the noise, odors, and crowds. They couldn't express it, but their senses were being overwhelmed by the intense and unfamiliar sights, sounds, and odors. They were unprepared and unable to process the scene that was unfolding before them. In short, they were experiencing acute culture shock.

Sensory Experiences and Culture Shock

Since then, I have made a point of discussing with students the symptoms of culture shock. I have them keep a journal in which they are asked to observe and detail their reactions immediately upon arriving



Daoist shaman entering the Mazu Temple in Lugang. Photo by author.

The more conscious students are of their sensory environment, the more likely they are to see, comprehend, and remember what they are experiencing.



Sword-wielding Daoist shaman emerging from the Mazu Temple in Lugang. Photo by author.

in a foreign country, to note the sounds, odors, and other sensory phenomena they are experiencing, as well as their reactions to them. They are further asked to write about specific, intense sensory experiences, such as being in a crowded mall in Singapore on New Year's Eve and feeling claustrophobic; being overcome by the fishy odors in the wet markets; or having their first taste of *durian*, stinky tofu, or—on the other end of the spectrum—papaya. As we all know intuitively and as bioscience tells us, sensory experiences are intimately connected with memory, so they can become a way to recall the emotions and circumstances of certain experiences. The more conscious students are of their sensory environment, the more likely they are to see, comprehend, and remember what they are experiencing. Otherwise, their initial reaction is typically to categorize intense odors, sounds, and tastes as “weird.” Having given students a crash course on local foods, I was gratified that on a recent trip to Singapore, they were able to fan out in a hawker center in Little India to find their own tasty and satisfying lunches within hours after arrival in the country without once referring to them as weird.

By being encouraged to observe and analyze their own sensory experiences, students began to associate them with particular cultural environments. For instance, I have often had students disturbed by the odors in wet markets and on the streets of Singapore and other Asian cities. By having them focus more directly on those odors, I found that they began to be able to identify them with distinct environments in particular ethnic enclaves. Some even claimed that on crowded streets they could distinguish between the body odors of Indians and Chinese. Odors that had once been simply “weird” became objects of observation and analysis.

While students still experienced the symptoms of culture shock, they had a way to categorize and understand them. In particular, by focusing on the sources of culture shock—whether experiential, situational, oral, or aural—they were able to view discomfort somewhat more dispassionately. One group of female students explained to me that their greatest feeling of culture shock occurred in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, when they were approached by a family from Iran who tried communicating with them in a language none of them understood. At first, they felt threatened, nervous, and—as they later explained—overwhelmed by the situation in which, for the first time in their lives, they had to interact with people who spoke no English at all. Yet they took a collective breath and tried to communicate through gestures. By doing so, they were able to understand that the family simply wanted a photograph taken with them. The students felt that they had truly overcome their initial shock and had learned something about cross-cultural communication and the universality of human experience. It turned out to have been a big lesson from a relatively minor encounter.

When field trips involve travel to foreign destinations, it is no longer enough to study only the theme or topic of investigation. Given the potential richness of field trips to foreign destinations, it is insufficient to treat the theme or topic of investigation merely as an intellectual exercise. Students need to be educated as well in the experiential aspects of the field trip so that they are aware that they are not there as just passive observers. Moreover, foreign field trips are invariably interactive, and the more interactive they are, the better. Many study abroad programs now incorporate some training in cultural sensitivity and other aspects of the travel experience. For instance, Wake Forest



Children serenading at primary school in Piuma, Taiwan. Photo by author.

University requires all students to complete a one-semester course in what might be termed “travel studies” before they begin any program abroad. Among other things, students are taught to recognize the symptoms of culture shock, enabling them to better cope with it. I do so, as well, and begin my travel seminars with a reading and discussion of “Why We Travel,” an insightful meditation on the deeper meanings of travel and tourism by the travel writer Pico Iyer. One of the principal lessons of travel, he writes, is “how provisional and provincial are the things we imagine to be universal.”¹ Once students grasp this concept, especially if it is their first time outside the United States, it becomes easier for them to understand and accept cultural differences, such as why Taiwanese don’t offer them ice-cold beverages, why Indians eat with their hands, or why they need to remove their shoes to enter some Asian temples. In short, for field trips in Asia, it is almost as important to study the travel experience itself, on a physical, sensory level as well as an emotional one, as the academic and cultural content.

Practical Applications

Having prepared students for what they might face in adapting to a foreign culture, how can you maximize their experience? Specifically, how can you encourage them to focus on their sensory experiences to develop a deeper, more intimate acquaintance with the culture? Through trial and error, I have arrived at several interrelated practices and methods that may seem self-evident yet are all too often overlooked by tour leaders: 1) Get off the bus and walk; 2) Visit places tourists don’t go; 3) Use local contacts whenever possible; 4) Expect the unexpected!

Get Off the Bus and Walk

This is not always possible, but I try to plan excursions that involve as little time as possible on an air-conditioned tourist coach. Not only are students literally reduced to gazing at another culture through a piece of glass, eliminating any possibility that they might experience its sounds and smells or interact with its people, but it causes them to barely notice even its sights as they either doze off; update their Facebook status; or focus on interacting with others on the bus, apparently uninterested in the passing scenery. In cities, I opt for public transportation, which is generally less expensive and often more convenient than clambering off and onto a private bus. In some countries, a bus is a magnet for beggars, touts, and others who create a gauntlet for the passengers as they disembark. Walking allows more direct contact with local people, and students can absorb the atmosphere: sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. Having noticed that students in an unfamiliar environment tend to cluster together, I encourage them during



Students practicing contemplative calligraphy at Foguangshan Monastery, Taiwan. Photo by author.

their free time to travel only in small groups, as they are more likely to be approached by curious locals and to have meaningful interactions. No matter what the country, people will cross the street to avoid a large, boisterous group of American students!

Visit Places Tourists Don’t Go

Popular tourist sites cannot always be avoided and shouldn’t be. However, there are more chances for authentic experiences elsewhere. Sometimes, when working through a local travel agency, it requires some patience and explanation. In guiding a group to Taiwan, I had specific types of places in mind to visit. Though I included popular locations such as the National Palace Museum in Taipei, I also wanted to visit an eco-lodge in the mountains, an aboriginal village, a Buddhist monastery, the distinctive Hakka town of Beipu, and the Mazu Temple in Lugang. What I initially got back was an itinerary that included the National Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, the National Revolutionary Martyrs’ Shrine, and other popular and frankly less-than-interesting locations. It seems that the vast majority of the agency’s clientele were septuagenarian mainland Chinese tourists who were interested in these places. Although it might have been mildly interesting to visit these places amidst crowds of thousands of shoving Chinese elders, we had this experience at the National Palace Museum, and it was not what I had in mind. Ultimately, we were able to spend most of our time in places that were little-visited or visited primarily by local Taiwanese. One such place was the Shilin Night Market in Taipei, which brings me to my next point.

Use Local Contacts Whenever Possible

Night markets are a unique institution in many Asian societies, and in Taiwan, they traditionally formed near temples in order to attract evening worshippers. It is here that visitors can have a uniquely Asian experience, feeling the pulse of the society while trying foods not available elsewhere. I knew that I wanted students to visit a night market, and Shilin has a reputation as one of the biggest and best, one that has traditionally appealed to college youth. Yet night markets are chaotic, and trying to maneuver successfully through one with twenty or more students presented formidable logistical challenges. Eventually, through a friend of a friend who taught at a university near the market, I arranged for a group of local student volunteers to guide my students through the market, pointing out their favorite places there. I broke my students into groups of three or four, who then went through the market with two or three Taiwanese students who were compensated for their efforts. Not only were they able to see and enjoy more of the market than they would have been able to do in a large group, but

they also learned what appealed to Taiwanese students, and some even formed lasting friendships.

Because the course is about ethnic identities in Taiwan, I knew I wanted to visit an aboriginal area, although I was not certain what there was to do there. Through a network of contacts among Taiwanese academics, I connected with a young woman who had done her doctoral research on the aboriginal peoples of Sandimen in southern Taiwan and had extensive contacts there. I let her make all of the arrangements and, until the day we arrived, was not sure what we would be doing.

We began by visiting several boutiques featuring designs by aboriginal artists, part of an ongoing cultural revival movement; we then proceeded to an aboriginal bead-and jewelry-making enterprise where students were assisted in making their own beads. We were taken to the small township of Piuma, where a young aboriginal woman made a PowerPoint introduction. She was a social worker and involved in a community reconstruction movement. As we walked around the village, being introduced to the residents, a spontaneous parade developed, led by local children; and, once we arrived at the local school, the children gave an impromptu concert. Finally, the local women produced a wonderful meal for us, served in the local community center. All in all, it was a chance for students to not only observe and interact with aboriginal Taiwanese people, but to truly connect with them, as well. But it meant relying on a local contact, someone I had never even met, and hoping for the best.

That same evening, we arrived at Foguangshan, one of the largest Buddhist monastic institutions in Taiwan. In my research, I had learned that they had a guest house for visitors and had arranged for us to stay there overnight. I was assured they would have a program in place for us, but again, I did not know what it would entail. As it turned out, the guest house was simple but comfortable, much more like a hotel than a monastery, and our assigned guide was a wise-cracking Austrian Buddhist monk. We were shown around, given some basic explanations about Buddhism, and then students were given an opportunity for engaged learning. They were given brushes, ink, and a worksheet of Buddhist sutras to trace in order to practice meditation through Chinese calligraphy, with which none of them was familiar. Yet they became totally absorbed in the process for more than an hour, never quite realizing that the point of the exercise was to experience Buddhist mindfulness and concentration. Further practice of mindfulness was required when we were invited to have lunch with several hundred monks, nuns, and Buddhist pilgrims—a simple vegetarian meal that required students to sit looking straight ahead without speaking for half an hour. None of these events had been planned by me; I simply put myself and the group in the hands of our hosts and hoped for an interesting and informative experience. Managing the unfamiliar in field trips warrants further discussion.

Expect the Unexpected!

In my experience leading field trips for undergraduates in India, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore, some of the best and most extraordinary occasions for experiential learning occurred serendipitously. They were unplanned and unexpected. Yet, in retrospect, I have begun to realize that there are ways to plan for the unexpected, to increase the likelihood that such things will occur. How? By following the earlier recommendations to get off the bus and walk; go places tourists don't go, and, if possible, take advantage of local connections. Walking tours maximize the possibility that the group will encounter something unexpected, such as a wedding, funeral, or festival. At the very least, students will observe and become involved in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

While visiting a historic temple can be interesting, visiting a busy and popular temple can provide much more insight into Asian

religiosity. Also, as we discovered on our visit to the Mazu Temple in Lugang, there is always the possibility of unexpected ritual activity that will challenge the senses. Another memorable example is when we visited the Sultan Mosque in Singapore. It was not a Friday and the mosque itself seemed to be largely deserted, yet there was a large crowd in the small square next to it that enthusiastically surrounded one area. Ringing the crowd were small kitchens from which emanated the delicious odor of cooking meat. It seemed to be some sort of festival, so we asked if we could observe. As we were guided to the front of the crowd, we could see all too well what was happening. Behind the mosque was a pen of sheep, which were being led out one by one, slaughtered in the appropriate halal manner, and immediately strung up to be skinned, gutted, and chopped into pieces. Suddenly, my students found themselves standing fifteen feet away from a dozen or more blood-soaked men with large knives while blood was splattering uncomfortably close to them. "Muslim men with knives," they were thinking as they began to back away in trepidation. It turned out that it was the last day of the pilgrimage to Mecca, Hari Raya Haji, a religious holiday celebrated in Singapore with the sacrifice of up to 3,000 sheep. It was another unplanned but teachable moment involving the senses, as they experienced the cries of the sheep; the process of slaughtering them; the thud of the cleavers; and the odors of blood, spices, and cooking mutton. Many of them experienced acute culture shock mixed with unwarranted fear, but that allowed us later to discuss Islamic religious practices and foodways in a manner that ultimately made more sense to them than if it had been explained in a classroom.

Wet markets are another venue certain to provide sensory experiences, some expected and others not. For most Asians, there is nothing particularly noteworthy about visiting a wet market. Yet for American students who have never seen meat or fish that was not preportioned and wrapped in plastic in an odorless, sanitized supermarket, it can provide a powerful comparison and insight into Asian foodways. Moreover, they are able to use all of their senses as they see, feel, listen, smell, and taste their way through the market. Even visits to local Asian markets near one's university can provide similar unfamiliar sensory experiences.

Conclusion

Sensory experiences are a significant element in international travel. While my emphasis is on travel within Asia, these principles are equally applicable to local field trips to Asian communities, markets, and events. Training students to be aware of such experiences and to view them analytically and comparatively can contribute to the learning experience and deeper cultural understanding. Equally important are interactive activities, including purposeful walking. In some instances, these activities can be planned, or they may be unplanned and fortuitous. Yet, by consciously aiming for the possibility of unexpected occurrences and preparing students with tools for reflecting upon them, one who is leading such field trips can increase the likelihood of such occurrences. ■

NOTES

1. Pico Iyer, "Why We Travel," *Salon*, last modified November 19, 2013, <http://www.salon.com/2000/03/18/why/>.

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