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Teaching Asian Religions from Within Asian American Community

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Asian Religions and Social Justice

Our 87 year-old Elder, a third-generation descendent of a Chinese American fishing village in Northern California, gives us a timid smile from behind the bar of the small diner that he and his family have operated since the 1940s. My students and I have just set up a laptop and microphone for recording a first-person account of his life story. The Elder looks over our shoulders, where a man stands with a stern face and his arms crossed—this is a member of the non-profit organization that now operates the village as a park. The twinkles in the eyes of the Elder’s eyes dims, but ever a shrewd businessman, he composes himself immediately. With his usual charm mixed with a fragility that comes with his age, the Elder gives us a narrative that is consistent with the official story of the location, a story that evolves around ecological explanations of the decline of the local fishing industry. Having interacted with the Elder for months before the formal recording, we have started to hear bits and pieces of another version of the history—one that is not going to be caught on tape.

In a separate encounter, the Elder’s cousin, an eloquent and lively woman also in her 80s, practically speeds away in her car as soon as we ask for her perspective on the history of the village. Later we are gently reminded how fortunate we are to be able to collect oral history from these elders, because several other members of the non-profit organization feel that the organization “has the oral history down already.” On other occasions we find

ourselves in the company of enthusiastic younger friends of the Elder who answer our questions for him on his behalf, with the Elder present and sitting with us. As far as the formal recording of oral history from the perspective of the Elder himself, we arguably fail our task. What my students gain is a deep awareness of a communal silencing of the voices of the elders from this village, mostly not with ill intentions in mind, but under the guise of preservation and protection. Complicated ethnic dynamics aside, we also witness, first hand, the subversive violence of ageism in the American society.

My design for this undergraduate Asian Religions Service-Learning course is for my students to experientially apply the Confucian understanding of human relationships and community building, particularly in the reverence of the wisdom of elders, through interactions with elders in our local community in Northern California. Besides the fishing village site, we also partner with local non-profit agencies to offer ESL tutorials, activities organizing, and drumming classes for local seniors. My undergraduate students are asked to use these service opportunities to build relationships, listen to the voices of the community members they serve, and record, when appropriate and with consent, the life stories of elderly community members. Weekly service sessions are followed by journal entries that document 1) their observations of the surroundings, atmospheres, and dynamics during service, 2) interactions with people, 3) reflections on their experiences, and 4) connections to course materials and the larger context of the happening of our society.

The students have reported positively (even those who had negative experiences at the fishing village) on this model of using the Confucian approach to human relationships in their community service. Anecdotes from their service experiences also became

important examples they refer to in our class discussions, particularly on the issue of ethnic and cultural justice in our own locations in the contemporary American society.

Social Justice from the Perspectives of the Religious Traditions

Judith Berling, in her *Understanding Other Religious Worlds*, posits a model of interfaith learning that not only encourages one to step across the boundary into the world of others, but to develop relations with the new understanding (of the other and of oneself) and eventually internalize the process (Berling 2004). Such internalization aims “to give learners voice and the ability to listen, to establish networks of relationships, to build bridges, and to live and move effectively in the world, making it a better place (Berling 2004, 80).” Actual, weekly, practical applications of Confucian model of relationship-building would be one way to promote such internalized approach to interfaith, as well as intercultural, intergenerational, and generally cross-boundary, learning.

Offering my course through the Service-Learning program already requires that I implement the pedagogy of not only sending students to serve in the local community, but for them to practice humility, self-reflection, and critical thinking as they make connections between their service experiences and our course content. The issue of social justice arises, quite organically, from evaluations of the roles of the students themselves, the non-profit agencies they serve with, and the larger system that the services are part of. Coming from the vintage point of both a transnational person and a scholar who teaches non-Christian religious traditions, I am also keenly aware that the prominent social justice discourse, in American popular culture and in the Service-Learning system, is heavily indebted to the history of American Civil Rights Movement and the development of

liberation theology—culturally and philosophically grounded by Christian understandings of equality and morality.

Teaching Asian religions and cultures in the United States, if we recognize them as lived and living traditions that are global, trans-local, and local in our own neighborhoods, requires acknowledgement that the history is filled with injustice and suffering. Chinese Exclusion and Japanese Internment are only the now distant major historical marks that pale in comparison to daily struggles of Asian ethnics under ongoing discriminations and unfair treatments. One of the root problems is the general failure, both outside and inside of the Asian communities, to recognize the values and strengths of the worldviews and histories that come with the people--that the Asian traditions lack insight in how to empower and liberate their own people.

While the Confucian tradition is not the only Asian religious tradition covered in my introductory-level course, it is also one tradition that is difficult to teach in the American context. The influences of Confucian values and practices are pervasive in the daily lives of East Asian, and even some South East and South Asian, households in our local community, but virtually no one would actively self-identify as Confucian. On the other hand, Confucianism is also a tradition where the social and political aspects of human existence are always on the foreground of discussion. Confucius, who was as much an ambitious political advisor as he was an outstanding educator, created an entire educational curriculum to train politicians-to-be in self-cultivation, self-reflection, and critical analysis of historical and anecdotal events.

Many scholars before me have advocated the Confucian educational model as inspiration for modern higher education (see references and additional readings). The part

that I find most relevant for my introductory level students is the morality of empathic relationships. In a powerful piece on Golden Rule explaining the difference between the Western/Christian (“Treat others how you want to be treated”) and the Confucian (“Do not treat others how you wish not to be treated”) iterations of the rule, Qingjie James Wang argues that the core value in the Confucian version lies in an empathic understanding of the experiences of others rather than relying on an external force as example of perfection (ie. God) (Wang 1999). The underlying assumption of such empathic understanding first comes from the worldview that all beings are connected by the shared material of *qi* (life force) by which we can resonate with each other, and the Confucian cultivation to intellectually and metaphysically extend oneself to experience others through that connection. Social justice, in the Confucian iteration, comes not from an external source of authority, but an internal sense of relation between self and other. It requires one to first recognize the shared essence of humanity (*qi*), humbly reach out to share that human experience, and then to return with a new knowing of not only the other but also of the processed self. In other words, proper relationship-building is in itself an act of social justice.

Other Asian Religious Perspectives on Social Justice

The approach of exploring and applying different understandings of morality from Asian religions is of course not limited to the Confucian tradition. In my course I also introduce to the students how Daoist and Buddhist communities and textual sources articulate various perspectives on sources of ethical standards, solutions to human conflicts, and tips on relationship-building. Understanding religious traditions as

important sources that inform cultural values in ethnic communities, I argue that understanding these models shed more light to our understandings of the power dynamics within our multicultural local community. Insisting on a single, civil, universal model of social justice does not necessarily bring more justice to the table.

For a Daoist perspective on ethics, I recommend “Respecting Different Ways of Life: A Daoist Ethics of Virtue in the *Zhuangzi*” by Yong Huang. In this piece, Huang introduces fables from *Zhuangzi* to explain the Daoist mode of relative ethics. Students find these fables, and the relative ethics, easy to understand especially when they are put into small groups to discuss about them.

For Buddhist ethics of practicing compassion with wisdom, works by Thich Nhat Hanh have proven to be effective and accessible to my introductory level students. *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* provides a more proactive stance than most Buddhist approaches to larger social issues, but still consistent with the Asian emphasis of inner-cultivation and self-reflection before action (Thich 1998).

From the culturally-derived models of social justice, our listening and learning in the local communities should eventually lead us to models that are derived directly from the local community itself. My colleague and friend Ofelia Villero worked many years with a community of Filipino women in San Francisco who survived breast cancer. With Villero’s facilitation, the community of women conceptualized their own model of healing and care—*Buong Pusong* in Tagalog, meaning “whole heart”. In this internally constructed and articulated model, the women demand the medical system and social services view them holistically, not as diseased individuals but as ones who have the support of their Catholic

faith, families, and friends. This is an excellent example of what extensive community engagement in pedagogy should produce.

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