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Helping Students Overcome Fear of “Foreignness” in Teaching Asian Religions

By Robert Steed

The study of Asian religions in high school and college survey courses offers both confusion and the possibility of better international understanding. The purpose of this teaching resources essay is to identify potential pit falls to avoid. Although the focus here is on Chinese religions, the likely problem areas and possible instructional solutions are applicable to other belief systems.

A first common problem for students is their concern about the complexity and foreignness of vocabulary. Instructors should quickly deal with this concern by providing context and usage for important terms and communicate that many translations of terms won't be precise through providing examples.

The Chinese term “*Dao*” that appears in most Chinese belief systems is one illustrative case in point since understanding its different Chinese usages is critical for students. *Dao* is frequently translated into English as “way,” but elaboration regarding its various meanings in different Chinese contexts is critical for student understanding. “Way” in English is a noun, and English nouns connote something solid, fixed, separate, and enduring. “*Dao*” in Chinese, especially the literary forms of Chinese favored by classical religious thinkers, also is usually a noun, but nouns do not necessarily connote something fixed. Nouns in literary Chinese can denote processes that are anything but limited and fixed. “*Dao*” is such a noun and in Chinese can have a meaning similar to the English “way” to imply a process, a fluidity, or flow of change and creation. For example, “*Dao*” in classical Confucianism connotes “the way of being human,” or more directly, the “way” of human culture. However, in classical Daoism (especially the Daoism of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*), the term connotes that creative yet imperceptible flowing source of all things. The Confucian “*Dao*” refers to a way of being human; the Daoist “*Dao*” is more universal in scope. These nuanced variations are not difficult to understand and are imperative for instructors to address early.

Despite the instructor's contextualizing vocabulary, students still may be intimidated by the “foreignness” of terms. One helpful strategy is to take class time to instruct the students in proper pronunciation of the words. This process can be

as simple as saying the word and having the students repeat it until they feel more comfortable with it. A more sophisticated version of this technique is for the instructor to record an audio file of each term properly pronounced and then upload those files to a course website that students can access as needed. They can access the audio files at their convenience to review pronunciation when necessary without the instructor having to divert more class time for that purpose. Once the students feel that they can adequately pronounce words, they will feel less intimidated in discussing those terms.

Once the very basic problem of pronunciation has been addressed, other challenges arise. One of these challenges is the “foreignness” of the practitioners of the religions and their cultures. Some students seem to have a kind of mental block against seeing foreign cultures as anything but strange, exotic, or “weird.” Combine this with clothes, architecture, rituals, customs, languages, and social interactions that are unfamiliar to many students, and “foreignness” becomes a major obstacle to understanding. However, there are several approaches that can aid in removing these barriers to understanding. Some of them are:

1) The instructor can try to find analogues between the foreign culture and the students’ own. In the case of trying to teach Chinese religion to a group of American students, various similarities can be found to help illustrate this point. For example, there is a widely used video that shows a Chinese funeral.¹ At one point in the funeral ritual, the presiding Daoist priest and his assistants begin performing an acrobatic routine that is supposed to show how the priest is descending into the realm of the dead to rescue the deceased person’s soul from “hell.” Students will often express shock at this part of the funeral ritual, saying that it is disrespectful to the dead. The instructor can use this moment to illustrate a point that makes the funeral less “foreign” by asking the students to discuss what constitutes respect for the dead. The instructor can then go on to point out how there are many different forms of funerals, but they all have one thing in common—the desire to honor the deceased. The forms vary, but the underlying intention is universal, which is a point of connection that may help the students bridge the conceptual gap to the foreign religion.

2) If students can find points of contact between their own culture and the foreign culture, so much the better. One good way to do this is using contemporary videos, such as the kind that are posted on YouTube and other Internet video uplink sites by non-scholars. These videos should not be produced by education-oriented companies or be parts of documentaries. Rather, the videos should be light in tone (humor is best), short, and contemporary. A surprising number of tourist videos, music videos, and commercials contain themes or images that draw from religious ideas or practices. For example, one video useful in a Chinese religions class for this purpose is a Chinese Pepsi commercial that shows a group of monks training a novice monk in the “ways of the temple.”² This is clearly a popular

perception of Shaolin monks. However, it is humorous, short, and the students usually laugh at it. They are then more ready to consider the topic of the day, which will have something to do with Chan Buddhism. The commercial can be used to introduce a range of topics for consideration by the class: “Why are martial arts and Chan Buddhism so intertwined in Chinese popular culture?” “What do you think of the implications of using religious traditions to sell a product?” and so on. From seeing these videos, students recognize an idiom that they can “read” and that prepares them to deal with more profound aspects of Asian religions.

3) Using language as a pedagogical tool is helpful. The more comfortable the instructor appears to be with the religion being taught, the more at-ease the students will be. If the instructor appears confident, students are more likely to develop an attitude that they, too, can master the material. They will start seeing it as interesting, or at least manageable. One technique that works well for me is to write the Chinese characters for various terms on the board. If non-Chinese religions are being taught, the same principle holds; simply learn a few words or phrases in the language(s) commonly employed by the practitioners of those religions. Do not test students on them, and do not always write them—emphasizing them too much can create the anxiety that the instructor should try to avoid—but occasionally doing so conveys the impression that even those complicated-looking words, as foreign as they seem, actually do *mean* something just like English words do. If you do not write Chinese, pick a few major vocabulary terms to learn. Dao (way), *li* (principle), *ren* (human-heartedness), and the numbers one, two, and three are good to learn and not too complicated.

Teaching Asian religions often is complicated by their apparently “foreign” nature. This “foreignness” can inhibit students from engaging with the material on any but the most superficial level, as it can seem too strange or intimidating to them. Various strategies for overcoming this include providing context and pronunciation for vocabulary; finding analogues between the topics of study and the students’ own cultures; using light-toned introductory videos or music at the beginning of the class each day; making sure you know your material well and project confidence while teaching it; and presenting the material in a range of formats—not relying only on textbooks, lecture, and class discussion. Many other possible strategies and approaches are available for instructors to use, and each instructor must carefully gauge the composition of the students in the class to decide what will work best, but the basic strategies discussed in this article generally work quite well for the majority of students.

Notes

1. “Taoism: A Question of Balance” in *The Long Search* (BBC/Time Life Films, 2001). This series is available from Ambrose Video at a low-moderate institutional price.
2. “Very Funny Pepsi Commercial,” accessed October 9, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40DykbPa4Lc>.

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