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Using Ignatian Pedagogy to Teach Chinese Literature

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“Using Ignatian Pedagogy to Teach Chinese Literature”

Final Project for the Ignatian Pedagogy Certificate Program

By

Dale Hoiberg

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Description of the Topic

Students in my Chinese Literature in Translation (LITR 245) class, using the Ignatian paradigm, analyzed the context, feelings, and actions of the main characters of five modern and contemporary Chinese short stories.

Purpose of the Project: Questions to Answer

- 1) How can Ignatian Pedagogy (IP) be incorporated effectively into a course (LITR 245) on Chinese literature?
- 2) Will guidance from/by the various domains of IP enhance students' ability to relate to and understand works of Chinese literature?
- 3) Will IP enhance Learning Outcomes?
- 4) Will the incorporation of IP affect students' enthusiasm for the literature?

Description of the Project, Rationale, and Ignatian Domains

Five groups of students each gave a class presentation on one of the five short stories. (Only four stories will be covered in this paper.) Learning Outcomes established for this activity include students' ability to:

- 1) Determine the author's intentions for his/her story
- 2) Understand the historical and social background of the story
- 3) Discuss and evaluate the author's portrayal of characters in the story

Though these presentations have been a standard feature of this course over the last couple years, they (and the class discussions afterwards) have typically focused on historical and social realities as reflected in the stories and techniques of characterization. This semester, however, I shifted the focus onto the main characters themselves, viewed in light of the domains of Ignatian Pedagogy. Basic to this new focus, I concluded, would be the **context** in which the characters exist and how their **context** compels them to feel and act in certain ways. In other words, historical and social realities continued to be addressed, but now as the **context** of the characters. Students, drawing on their own **context** and **experience**, were encouraged to relate to or “**experience**” the **context** and the characters, **reflect**, and, finally, decide if they felt a call

to **action** of some kind in today's world as a result of the experience. Of course, **evaluation** of our development based on all this concluded the activity.

To steer the presentations and discussions in the desired direction, I provided prompts to each group. In addition to recording observations and comments during the presentations and discussions, I also included, for additional feedback, questions related to the exercise on the final quiz.

Stories Included

"Dog," by Ba Jin (published in 1931)

"Winter Nights," by Bai Xianyong (published in 1970)

"A Woman Like Me," by Xi Xi (published in 1984)

"Iron Child," by Mo Yan (published in 1993), **not covered in this paper**

"Born at the Wrong Time," by Chun Sue (published in 2004)

Prompts Provided to Each Group

1. What is the author trying to portray or communicate through the story?
2. Based on your own experience or knowledge, can you relate to the historical or social context of the story?
3. Can you relate to, and therefore understand (at least to some extent) the situation, feelings, and actions of the characters?
4. Reflecting on the story, how do you feel about it?
5. Does the story inspire you to any kind of action in our world today?

Synopsis of Stories and Student Observations and Comments



Ba Jin: *Dog*

A destitute and homeless boy in a large city in China (Shanghai, most likely) during the 1920s, doesn't know who he is or where



he comes from. He decides to make a dilapidated temple his home and its partially broken statue of a god his surrogate father.

Starving and enduring constant verbal and physical abuse from “higher class” Chinese and foreigners on the streets, he concludes that, given this treatment, he isn’t a human being at all and must be a dog instead. He begins trying to live and act like a dog. Real human beings, he also concludes, come in three kinds:

- 1) Those with the same physical characteristics he has
- 2) Those with “fair skin, blond hair, green eyes, big noses, and tall, strong bodies”
- 3) Those with white caps and white uniforms with blue trim and hairy chests,” who would beat up pedestrians and caress women—the most honorable ones, who speak a language he does not understand; so as not to defile them, he keeps his distance from them

In the end, the boy, still thinking he is a dog, finds himself in what seems to be a jail cell after attacking a foreigner’s dog; he desperately wants to return to his home, the dilapidated temple.

Issues that emerge are:

- 1) The plight of the destitute in China
- 2) Foreign presence in parts of China and the treatment of the Chinese as second-class citizens in their own country
- 3) How people end up on either or both sides of oppression (as the oppressor and/or the oppressed)

Selected student responses to the IP-inspired prompts:

- “This reminds me of the way the citizens of India were treated when the British had invaded India The racism that was evident in India was also evident in this story.”
- “When I was a child, I always wanted to be a dog. . . . People who own dogs usually love and take good care of them so to see this is what the main character wanted is very understandable to me.”
- “I feel bad that I generally don’t respond to poor people on the streets.”
- “I don’t make eye contact with poor or homeless people near the Granville Station.”
- “The homeless are looked down upon by some and are told that they need to go find jobs. However, it is not that easy. Various factors impede them from being able to improve their conditions. Racism is also relevant. It is based on the idea of one race being better than another. It is a very prevalent issue in this country and can affect people by making them feel worthless.”
- “I believe we have all experienced some type of social injustice.”
- “Most of us, at least, have been on both sides of oppression.”
- “This story has me reflecting on my own actions towards less privileged strangers. Not that I actively mistreat them like the westerners kicked the boy, but I literally give more attention to a dog on the street than a person experiencing homelessness.”

- “I feel bad about someone thinking they are so worthless that they aren’t human, which is crazy and shouldn’t be a thing. We shouldn’t make fun of those we don’t know or are ‘lower’ in society but make it our duty to help them.”



Bai Xianyong: *Winter Nights*

Two old friends, Wu Zhuguo and Yu Qinlei, reunite in a tattered home on an alley of Taipei on a rainy, cold winter night and recall their involvement as young college students in the famous May 4, 1919 demonstration against the Treaty of Versailles, which concluded World War I.



Mr. Wu is now a professor of Chinese history in the U.S. and Mr. Yu is a professor of English literature in Taiwan, having both left Mainland China when the Communists took control in 1949. Each has regrets over his own life and is disappointed that life turned out to be somehow less than expected. Each envies the other: the professor in the U.S. feels he has abandoned his own country and plans to return to Taiwan after retirement and the professor in Taiwan wants to get a grant to teach in the U.S.

Issues that emerge are:

- 1) Looking back with regret or disappointment over the past and one’s past actions
- 2) “The grass is greener on the other side”
- 3) The attraction the U.S. has held for many abroad

Selected student responses to the IP-inspired prompts:

- “I can relate to these characters, as when my dad talks to me he wishes he could be young again enjoying life, while I wish nothing more than to be in his position, a doctor, and avoid the difficult tasks of getting there.”
- “My mother attended dental school in Syria, and now the country has been destroyed. My mother’s classmates who stayed have nothing now and my mom has everything. She often mentions how guilty she feels because of this.”

- “This story reminded me of my father who was in a somewhat similar position. He traveled to America from Palestine in the 1980s when he was only 18 years old and both his parents had passed away. He heard of all the great opportunities available and wanted to create a new life here. He, too, expresses similar feelings of sorrow and regret for leaving his homeland.”
- “I always was looking for opportunities to come to the USA like Professor Yu, but now when I am in the USA I always wonder if it was the right choice and always miss and want to go back to my hometown, like Professor Wu.”
- “We do all have regrets in our lives, but we should learn to move on and learn from our mistakes. The story should have ended on a note like this.”
- “I am inspired to reach out to old friends in times of hardships to express my opinions about a difficult subject and possibly gain a new idea.”
- “I feel eager to catch up with long-time friends and reunite with them to share thoughts and feelings about life.”



Xi Xi: A Woman Like Me

One Sunday morning, a young woman (the unnamed narrator of the story) is waiting in a coffee shop in Hong Kong for her boyfriend, who wants to visit her place of work for the first time. She has told her boyfriend that she is a cosmetician, and he assumes that she applies makeup to women before significant events, such as brides and bridesmaids preparing to be in weddings. She has not told him the truth, which is that she works at a mortuary and prepares the dead for viewing at their funerals. As she sits and waits, she is afraid that, once her boyfriend discovers the truth, he will leave her, just as all her friends have done when they found out about her occupation.

The story ends as the narrator sees her boyfriend crossing the street with a bouquet of flowers, obviously for her, on his way to the coffee shop. What happens after that the reader never knows, but the narrator is convinced that it will end badly. She says, “in our profession, flowers are a sign of eternal parting.”

Issues that emerge are:

- 1) The ways people view and handle death
- 2) Sexist views of certain occupations

3) Fatalism

Selected student responses to the IP-inspired prompts:

- “I feel I can relate to the feelings of the narrator in that I wish to be accepted for whom I am but realize that not everyone will accept me. When getting to know people, I do not fully display who I really am as a person because I want to be able to get along with them. I can get afraid that if I reveal everything, I might push them away.”
- “I can understand the situation of the main character through an experience my friend has told me about. His father was a taxi driver, and he kept this hidden at his school believing it would affect him in a negative way socially because the majority of students in that private middle school came from wealthy families.”
- “No one in my family is in the medical field. With my aspirations to become a doctor, I may not get the same backlash as the narrator, but I am still an outlier nonetheless. As a result, I have become slightly alienated in the sense that I have to pave my own path instead of gaining support from and working with members of my family.”
- “The narrator has avoidance personality disorder and is unable to challenge others.”
- “The narrator has a low opinion of her own status because of the status of her job.”
- “In the Indian culture it is inauspicious for a woman to deal with the dead. . . . When I was a teenager, my dad usually wouldn’t let me go to funerals as he was afraid the bad omens/spirits would be detrimental for my spiritual well-being . . . there is a taboo against women handling death-related activities.”
- “Men like sweet women who do jobs traditionally associated with women.”



Chun Sue: *Born at the Wrong Time*

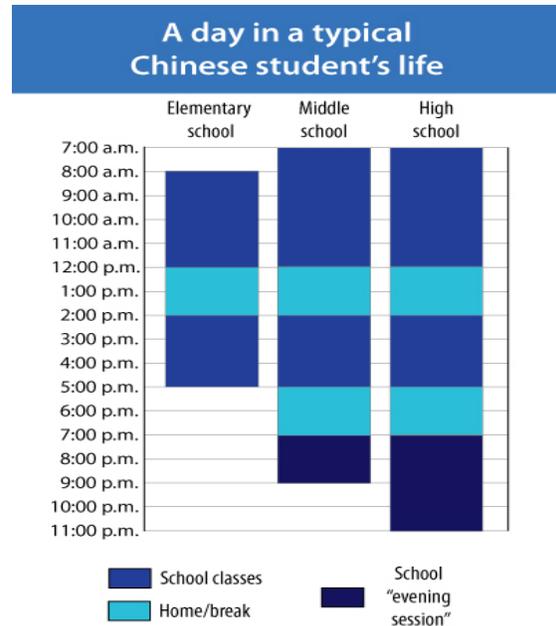


A student (Jiafu) at West X High in Beijing wants to leave school because of the strict regulations and demanding work load.

She starts cutting class and even discusses suicide with a friend. Her dream is to become a journalist who covers rock bands, but this is not exactly what the school or her parents envision for her. Jiafu’s mother, in fact, talks to a psychiatrist before she agrees to accompany her to another city to meet the band SpermOva. It becomes clear that her desire to write about the band is exceeded by her goal to get to know them personally. The members of the band are less interested in friendship than Jiafu is, the trip doesn’t go well, and she and her mother return to Beijing disappointed. Throughout the story, Jiafu comes across as frustrated with school and her life, pessimistic, and whiny.

Issues that emerge are:

- 1) China’s one-child-per-family policy and the pressure it places on individual youth
- 2) The all-powerful “gaokao,” the national college entrance examination, that determines not only the college a student goes to but also the course of a student’s life
- 3) Stifled creativity in academic situations
- 4) Coping mechanisms, including suicide



Source: Yao Zhang, co-founder of Minds Abroad

Selected student responses to the IP-inspired prompts:

- “I remember being a stressed teen who only wanted to spend time with friends but still do well in school. As a teen you want to rebel and I found myself being rebellious as the character was.”
- “I related to the narrator’s frustration with her school system, from a flipped perspective. I attended a high school that had such a strong focus on arts that I was frustrated that they didn’t give more focus to problem solving or hard sciences. This frustration helped me understand better why the narrator took time out of school to pursue her passion in journalism.”
- “Like the character Jiafu, I have been pessimistic about my education. The workloads I have experienced have been debilitating, and I may come to possess a negative attitude when my grade does not reflect the knowledge I have worked so hard to obtain.”
- “Reflecting on this story makes me sad. The reason I enjoy school so much is because I get to decide what I want to learn. Thinking about Chinese students and their education system and me being part of it really upset me.”
- “I am planning to take the MCAT and feel the pressures and toll it has taken on me in preparation. I have socially isolated myself and am so bent on studying that I have

become distant from many of my friends. It is a tremendous burden to carry and really does change you.”

- “I can relate to some of the main character’s actions, but I also feel that she’s a little egotistical in terms of thinking she knows best at this point of her life.”

Evaluation of the Project

In the past, interest in these stories has been fairly high and Learning Outcomes satisfactory. This semester, however, both interest and Learning Outcomes were amazingly enhanced when the stories were presented and discussed in IP perspective. The “Selected student responses to the IP-inspired prompts” illustrate the change in focus this semester and also the extent to which students actually utilized their own context and experience to understand the characters and situations in the stories. Class discussions were the best ever. Definitely I will use this same IP approach in the future, both for this and for other activities in LITR 245.