

To Dominate or to Engage: Developing the Right Relationship with a Non-Asianist Colleague

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About the trips and my colleague

Since the mid-2000s, the Carthage College curriculum has included an interdisciplinary requirement called the “Carthage Symposium,” which students fulfill through a team-taught class. Some of these classes have been trips to Asia in which an Asian specialist has traveled and taught with a non-Asianist colleague. In my case, I have teamed up with a biologist and offered a trip course that examines the geography and biology of China as a Carthage Symposium; at the same time this course is also counted towards the “Global Heritage” requirement because of its area concentration. The course has been designed to carry the main theme of regional variation in human-environment interaction, as reflected through climate, topography, food preferences, landscape, and cultural and economic activities. So far the course has been offered twice with different itineraries: In January 2008, we traveled with 14 students to Beijing, Harbin, Yunnan (Kunming, Dali, and Lijiang), and the Shanghai region (Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Wuzhen), primarily with a focus on North-South contrast. In January 2009, we visited with 18 students Beijing, Guangxi (Guilin, Yangshuo), Hainan (Sanya), and the Shanghai region (Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Suzhou), adding the East-West divide. A summer 2011 trip following a northern route along the Chinese silk road (Beijing-Xi’an-Dunhuang-Urumqi) and a January 2012 trip following a southern route looking at contemporary China and its open door policy (Shanghai-

Shenzhen-Hongkong-Zhuhai-Macao) are already in the planning phase.

The colleague with whom I have been collaborating on this trip course is a versatile, internationally minded, and well-travelled scientist. These properties have prepared him well for the trips although he is not an “Asianist” by training and the 2008 trip was his first to mainland China. My colleague even made efforts to take Chinese classes before the trips as a cultural orientation, which I appreciated very much as the Asian person on the team. Admittedly, choosing the right non-area-specialist colleague to work with can be challenging. Choosing someone you know well and you can get along with is vital for the success of the trip. Both of our trips have turned out to be successful, and I attribute much of this to effectively engaging rather than dominating my non-Asianist colleague. Specifically, there are two lines along which I have tried to engage my colleague, and the first one is:

Actively involve non-Asianist colleagues in the decision-making process of culturally related arrangements

Shared decision-making ensures shared responsibilities and ownership of the trip between my partner and me. Today it is as easy to arrange a Western-style study trip in China as an “authentic” Chinese one, with numerous options available in food, accommodation, sites, and activities. The non-Asianist partner in a team can be easily left out simply because he/she is not the area specialist and/or does not speak the local language. Should we the Asianists try to avoid or at least minimize this exclusion? And if so, how?

The first step in preparing my colleague for participation in the decision-making process is to share essential background knowledge. It is crucial to foster and cultivate cross-cultural communication in this process itself because a lot of things that are common in China would not automatically or necessarily make sense to even a well-educated American. Interestingly, I find that one of the learning goals of our Global Heritage designation can be used to best summarize the objective of this

preparation: “Accept the culture at an intellectual level, and strive to understand the culture based on its own frame of reference,” which in our case would be a third zone in between the Chinese and the American way of thinking.

Basically, for each decision, I tried to provide multiple options and give thorough explanations, so that it is possible for my colleague to take part in informed joint decision-making. The most significant part of trip planning is the detailed itinerary, i.e., which sites to visit and which activities to arrange. In this “multiple-variable problem,” we would have to reach a solution that balances regional coverage, budget, landmarks, educational facilities, and cultural experiences. The Great Wall in Beijing is a no-brainer, but the Tea Museum in Hangzhou and a biking tour of the karst landscape in Yangshuo would require some nontrivial research and arrangement. Visits to educational institutions like the China Agricultural University, the Hangzhou Tea Research Institute, and Shanghai Institute of Plant Physiology and Ecology effectively supplemented the biology portion of this interdisciplinary course. My colleague had a contact at one of them, and his expertise plus my language and communication skills helped us to reach the other two successfully.

Eating is a critical part of Chinese culture and both of us strongly feel the students should be exposed to Chinese cuisine in its original form as much as possible. However, in order to be more “friendly” to international tourists, a lot of star-rated hotels in China are offering Western-style instead of traditional Chinese breakfast. And more ironically, Tourism Bureau–approved restaurants in Beijing, which are defaults if a meal is arranged by travel agencies because of higher certified hygienic standards, all serve somewhat Westernized Chinese food and put knives and forks on the table unless chopsticks are requested. With this essential background information collected and communicated to my colleague, the mutual decision of staying in hotels providing traditional Chinese breakfast and arranging our own meals can be reached easily. To allow our students to experience the greatest variety of regional Chinese cuisine

without having to travel to every single province, I explained to my colleague the availability of restaurants right in Beijing that are affiliated with provincial liaison offices and offer what is believed to be “the most authentic regional cuisine outside of a region”; he immediately liked the idea, and we therefore solved our problem with meals at those government-approved restaurants.

Accommodation choices in China can be equally confusing by American standards without the necessary local knowledge. Home stays were first ruled out simply because of the size of our group. This left us to choose from no-star, three-star, and 4-star hotels. If we are traveling in a developed country like the United States, probably no-stars would suit college students the best, especially when the budget is a top priority. Yet the travel agents we work with (since we can get quite deep discounts if booked through them) all seem to believe that four-stars would be the default choice for Americans “because they are rich.” However, no-stars in China basically mean no guarantees whatsoever on the cleanliness of the rooms, and four-stars in most cases would be too luxurious for college students and an indication that this is a vacation rather than a study trip. After we discussed each of these choices carefully, we readily agreed upon three-stars.

As for transportation options, we would be able to afford inter-city flying and a chartered bus for intra-city travel; these provide the most convenience for us as chaperons and in most cases are time-efficient. But we did intentionally choose various forms of public transport including trains, subways, buses, and taxis; this was primarily for the value of experiential learning, but in some cases to save time, such as taking the subway in big cities during rush hours. Selecting which specific mode of transportation in which part of our trip is largely determined to demonstrate to our students how it is possible to move so many people around, within, and between places in China.

Last but not least, do we want to hire English- or Chinese-speaking guides? First of all, there is the cost concern. Then, since I am the only person in the group who speaks Chinese

fluently, hiring Chinese guides would mean that I will have to act as an interpreter on top of handling most of the logistics for the entire group, which is a mission impossible. After weighing the costs and benefits, we decided to hire English-speaking guides for most sites and activities. I did most of the translation during our visits to local universities and schools. And we “hired” university students for much cheaper costs (only lunch and transportation expenses) as guides and translators for small groups of students on the designated free days to explore what interests them the most. Both our students and the Chinese students loved this interactive experience with their peers and enjoyed the cultural exchange in a more intimate setting.

Through these study trips, we strive to create a non-stereotypical version of China within the limit of our budget and time, and a version that is “reachable” by American college students. To this end, my colleague can offer more insight about our target audience because he was once an American college student, whereas I attended college in China. One “exotic” thing which my colleague suggested our students should be able to handle is the Turkish-style toilet at almost all public restrooms in China and they did take this challenge pretty well, although some students still seemed thrilled, even toward the end of the trip, when they saw Western-style toilets at a public restroom. My colleague and I both believe that sometimes we need to challenge the students to accept and get used to “exotics” like this in order to stress cultural awareness and adaptation. On the other hand, extreme organ meat is probably off limits if we still want to keep our version of China “accessible.”

Obviously, I could have taken care of all of the above culturally related arrangements on my own to save time for everyone, but the trips would not be the same without my colleague’s valuable inputs. Furthermore, there would not be a balanced and cooperative dynamic between us as co-instructors of the course, which I think is key to the fruitful outcome of a Carthage Symposium. The other dimension of engaging involves:

Encourage our non-Asianist colleagues to bring their own disciplinary specialty and fresh perspectives into the cultural context of Asia.

Although we the Asianists may know more about the area in general and within our discipline, there must still be room for contribution from our partner in his/her discipline that enriches the students' learning experience and widens our own horizons. Geography can be easily fit into the itinerary, so our initial dilemma is how can we cover biology without traveling to nature reserves and agriculture without visiting rural areas?

Food and cuisine can serve as a natural link to agriculture, which fully utilizes my colleague's expertise and domain knowledge in biology. Specifically, we picked rice and tea to focus on for their ubiquity and significance in Chinese culture. We had rice at nearly every meal, so my colleague's pre-trip lectures focused on different varieties of rice, their biological properties and nutritional values, their geographical origin, and where each kind is grown now. During our trip students got to sample different rice dishes and products firsthand. In addition, visits to the China Agricultural University and Shanghai Institute of Plant Physiology and Ecology exposed students to the latest bioengineering projects that aim to develop new breeds of higher yield and stronger resistance to drought. Rice production is further linked to population growth and environmental degradation, which are key topics of the human geography portion of the course. Similarly, tea was served on almost every lunch and dinner table while we were in China, making it very easy to incorporate into our curriculum. Plus, tea is one of my colleague's major research interests. The students as well as I learned a lot from my colleague about the tea plant, its distribution, and processing techniques that produce different varieties of tea. We also took students to the Hangzhou Tea Research Institute for a talk given by the professors there and toured their research facility. Visits to tea plantations, the National Tea Museum and tea shops gave the students extra opportunities to see, taste, experience, and learn about tea and its ceremonial importance throughout Chinese history. The

students especially took pleasure in tea ceremonies as we traveled to different regions. We feel that through rice and tea, students are exposed to both the biological and cultural aspect of food in a harmonious way.

Although we did not have the time and budget to travel to nature reserves, my colleague did manage to make full use of urban zoos and parks as live biology textbooks. For instance, the Beijing Zoo houses a tremendous collection of notable Chinese animal species, among which are the famous Olympic pandas. At the Harbin Tiger Park students rode in caged vans while hundreds of tigers were wandering around us and chasing live prey. During the visit, we also learned the effects of environmental policies, like setting up the tiger park and banning tiger hunting, on the population of wild Siberian tigers in the northeast.

To sum up these two ideas of engagement, the secret ingredient for developing the right relationship with a non-Asianist colleague on an interdisciplinary study trip to Asia is “inclusion.” Inclusion and active engagement can help to prevent the inclination to dominate, which is bound to kill effective collaboration. Admittedly, this takes time and effort from both parties, but the outcomes of enriched students learning will be rewarding!