

Teaching Media Communication and Beyond

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I. TEACHING AT DALI UNIVERSITY

Many people know of Dali because of its natural beauty with Cang Shan and Er Hai, its closeness to Lijiang, and its accessibility to Shangri-la. However, I selected Dali University as my host institution for the Teaching Fellowship from OYCF because of the university's need for new ideas, for an alternative thinking style, and for challenges from the outside.

Dali University is located in Dali, Yunnan. It is, in fact, still a college despite the fact that it offers masters and doctoral programs in many disciplines. Size-wise, Dali University is fairly large, with about 10,000 students enrolled. The reason it has not obtained its university status is that it does not have enough faculty members with post-graduate degrees. In fact, a large number of its faculty members hold only bachelor degrees. Its remote location in the western part of China has attracted a growing number of tourists in recent years. However, most people going there remain tourists or visitors; very few have stayed and even fewer have gone there to contribute to teaching at primary, secondary, or tertiary levels. During my stay at Dali University and especially during my teaching and the conversations I had with administrators, professors, and students, I could feel their thirst for knowledge, for opportunities, and for improvement. I am very glad to have selected Dali University as my host university, and I feel honored to have this opportunity to contribute to the development of western China. The lectures were all well received and they wanted me to go back again next year.

I taught at Dali University from May 29 to June 18, 2005. Originally, I was to teach one class, focusing on one group of students. However, the University wanted to maximize my stay there and asked me instead to give a series of lectures at different schools so that more students and faculty members could benefit from this project sponsored by OYCF. Dali University is quite remote from the coastal China and does not regularly get guest lecturers from overseas. After consulting with the OYCF, I agreed to give multiple lectures at different schools. In the end, I gave a total of nine lectures, each lasting for at least three hours. In addition, I also served as a consultant for Dali University on curriculum development issues for the mass communication program for School of Chinese Literature and for law and economic management program at School of Law and Economic Management.

Lecture topics varied from media issues to international relations, higher education in the U.S., communication skills, and public and media relations. The topics included "Mass Media: Issues and Challenges" for School of Chinese Literature, "Images of the World: Why We See What We See" for School of Foreign Languages, "How to Maintain a Healthy Working Relationship with the Media" for School of Medicine and the University Affiliated Hospital in Dali, "How to Communicate with Others Effectively" and "American Higher Education" for School of Law and Economic Management, "Teaching Chinese as a Second Language" for School of Chinese Literature, and "American Educational System: How Students Learn and Teachers Teach" for School of Education Science.

The lecture topics were either requested by the different schools or self-proposed, followed by a discussion with the respective host school. They were finalized in advance (before my departure for Dali), so I had plenty of time to prepare for each of the lectures.

II. COMMUNICATION, EDUCATION, AND MEDIA RELATIONS

While the lecture topics were varied, there were common themes among them. Communication was a major focus. We discussed different levels and types of communication, such as interpersonal communication, group communication, organizational communication, public communication, intercultural communication, gender communication, verbal and nonverbal communication, and mass media communication. Human beings cannot help but communicate. However, not everyone understands how to communicate successfully. Not surprisingly, misunderstanding occurs more often than necessary. Interpersonal mistrust, gender conflicts, organizational brawls, and intercultural clashes can find their roots in communication problems. An examination of the nature and different types of communication fascinated the students. Many were able to relate to the examples we used in class and gained new perspectives to look at ways of communication. Both students and faculty members agreed that communication plays a vital role in human relations and that world peace lies, in part, in the understanding of different peoples and their way of communication.

Another lecture topic was education. During several lectures, we examined the educational systems, curriculum requirements, teaching methodology, teacher qualifications, and teacher-student relations both in China and in the U.S. The lectures compared the different aspects of education in both countries, discussed advantages and disadvantages of each system, and examined the results of each approach. While students in China tended to devote more time to study and have more book knowledge, students in America seemed to enjoy more extracurricular activities and are more able to “do” things. American colleges and universities aim to train students to gain independent and critical thinking ability, leadership ability, hands-on ability, communication ability, and public speaking ability. Although not all students meet the requirement, the system is working towards such a direction. Students at Dali University are bright but timid. They know quite a lot about many issues, but they tend not to articulate them willingly. This may be the result of years of schooling in China, or it may be a combination of schooling and society upbringing.

During lectures on mass media issues and challenges, we discussed the characteristics of communication today, media’s role in society, international news systems, American perspectives on the issues, and lessons for Chinese journalists. While the world of communication is becoming more and more high-tech, digital divide is becoming more and more apparent. With technology, the world is becoming more and more connected; people are becoming disconnected at the same time. While there is more converging, there is also more diverging. We also discussed the problems the media pose in disseminating information, creating stereotypes, reframing reality in a nonrealistic way, shaping public opinion, and influencing society in both short- and long-term fashions. To facilitate understanding, the lectures introduced major theories in mass communication such as agenda-setting theory, cultivation theory, theories on globalization and international information flow. The information flow in the world today is characteristic of one direction (from developed countries to developing countries), negative content, dominance by a few Western countries, and cultural invasion or cultural imperialism. With McDonald’s, KFC, Coca-Cola, MTV, and Wal-Mart spreading to every civilization on earth, traditional cultures are threatened and family values are challenged.

On the issue of cultural imperialism, American views are varied. Some believe there is no cultural imperialism because information flow is free, which supposedly benefits everyone even if it flows in a single direction. Another view on cultural imperialism is that cultural exchange has no effect because it is the active audience who decides what to read, listen to, watch, and enjoy. Media products are for entertainment only. On the other hand, one group of people recognizes the impact of pervasive invasion of cultural products from developed countries to

developing countries. But they argue that it is business rather than governmental or ideological propaganda. Yet, another argument states that there is cultural dominance, but it is not the United States that is dominating. Cultural products, especially soap operas, from Brazil and Mexico, are as popular, if not more, as in many Latin American countries. One view argues that it is technology that is driving the exchange and that the exchange of cultural products will eventually lead to democracy, which is good for mankind. Lastly, there is the hawkish view that agrees with the argument that there is cultural imperialism and cultural dominance, and that it is the U.S. that is dominant. Individuals who hold this view, including those in the Bush administration, are not apologetic. On the contrary, they are proud of this dominance and have no intention of changing it. They want to continue and expand this American dominance around the world.

For the lecture entitled “Images of the World: Why We See What We See,” we discussed the stereotypical images of different groups of people around the world, the formation of the images, the roles media play in creating, shaping, and reinforcing those images. The images we have are mostly based on the images presented by the media. The media world today is dominated by a few conglomerates that control over 75% of what most people consume. With media portrayals of Chinese as “industrious and hard-working,” Americans as “glamorous and independent,” and Muslims as “fanatic and extreme,” the world is reduced to mere labels. Understanding the media requires going beyond the façade the media present.

The School of Medicine and the two university-affiliated hospitals made special requests for lectures on the relationship with the media because recently the relationship between the hospitals and the media has been tense and sometimes even hostile due to complaints from patients for high costs and poor service and from doctors and hospitals for unreasonable patients, long working hours and low pay for doctors. The media were not being helpful in covering the two sides.

During lectures given to doctors, nurses, and hospital administrators, we discussed the nature of the media, the importance of keeping a healthy working relationship with the media, issues of crisis management, and differences between China and the U.S. in medical service. Sending news release to the media regularly, which was not done in China, was explained and emphasized to the audience, and many administrators believed that was indeed a crucial and useful way to keep a positive working relationship with the media. Misdiagnose, mistreatment, malpractice, death, and corruption are some of the problems that can happen in hospitals and very often they may amount to crises. To deal with crises, hospitals need to keep the communication channels open, provide the media with information as it comes available, be frank with the public as well as the media, and never say “No comment” to brush off reporters. During the lectures, we also discussed elements that may hamper crisis management and also included strategies on dealing with the media during crisis. There are many differences in medical service and media practice between China and the U.S. Crowded hospitals, lack of medical facilities, inadequate medical training, insufficient funding from the government, and long working hours and low salaries for medical professionals may all contribute to the problems hospitals face in China. The same problems may also make patients unhappy and fretful. The media, always looking for “juicy” stories, may complicate the issues by going public on details. While more fundamental policy and structure reform is needed to address the problems confronting health professionals as well as patients in China, utilizing the media constructively can at least ease the problems temporarily.

III. A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

After each lecture, there were extensive discussions. Questions and answers were a favorable part of the teaching since this is the time when real interaction occurs. Students at Dali University asked many questions regarding media in general and U.S.-China relations in

particular, including media's role in the relations between the two countries and my views on the media systems of the two countries. They also asked questions about the educational system in the U.S., challenged the Chinese way of teaching in the classroom, and reflected on their own studying behavior. Questions and answers sometimes turned into debates, and I was pleased to see students gradually opening up and sharing views more freely as time went on.

In addition to teaching, I also assisted the University with the curriculum development. The consulting part for curriculum development started about a year ago when the administrators and some faculty members expressed their interest in developing some mass communication programs within the School of Chinese Literature. They decided to propose two new majors for approval by the Chinese Ministry of Education-- journalism and public relations. I helped them design the curriculum, work out the details of courses to be offered and develop syllabi. After some extensive work, both of the two new majors have recently been approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education, making Dali University one of the only institutions to offer these majors. The two majors will receive their first class of incoming students this fall.

Teaching at Dali University is also a learning experience for me. Although I go back to China almost every year, I am still amazed by the great achievement China has made in recent years. At the same time, I find the western part of China is still in dire need of development. Economically, it is behind many provinces, especially the coastal ones in China. In comparison, the western part of China is unfairly disadvantaged: low literacy level, high mortality level; low employment level, and high poverty level. Schools and hospitals are unable to attract the best and brightest teachers and doctors to the area. Sometimes, if they are lucky to have some teachers and doctors, they are unable to retain them. And Yunnan is not even the least developed province of all in China; Qinghai and Gansu may be further down the line. Even in Yunnan, one finds how a little effort can go a long way. With the help of the Teaching Fellowship from OYCF, I was able to contribute my small part. I appreciate the opportunity greatly.

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