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Education and Cross Cultural Dialogue: A Century of Mutual Communication between Confucian China and the Christian West

This special issue results from a tribute conference to Ruth Hayhoe, held on May 6, 2011 in Toronto, which attracted close to 200 scholars and students from Canada, the United States, Singapore, Japan, and China. This one-day academic gathering was truly a celebration of Ruth Hayhoe's scholarship.

Ruth Hayhoe is by all measures an accomplished and prolific scholar. A 2004 survey of the most influential scholars in comparative education ranked her among the top 10 most cited comparativists (Cook, Hite, & Epstein, 2004). Her publication record is nothing short of breathtaking, including five full-length books (one being a recent co-authored volume), more than 80 journal articles, and 13 edited volumes, among them several special issues of journals. As a figure of outstanding influence in the field of comparative education, Ruth Hayhoe has over the years nurtured a unique scholarship.

First and foremost, Ruth Hayhoe adopts a distinctive historical culturalist approach to comparative education, which stresses “the integration of specific historical-cultural contextual details into the analysis” (Hayhoe, 1989, p. 174). As a culturalist, Ruth advocates recognition that there exist different knowledges and different ways of knowing this world: “Of the greatest importance is the readiness to listen to the narrative of the other, and to learn the lessons which can be discovered in distinctive threads of human cultural thought and experience” (Hayhoe & Pan, 2001, p. 20). Second, Ruth's work features a strong sense of self-reflexivity. She has been at the forefront of scholars advocating a deep philosophical reflection on the nature of knowledge, and how people know and learn in different cultural traditions. In sum, what Ruth envisions for our field is “interaction(s) ... as a true dialogue among ready listeners rather than a struggle

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among contending interests such as Huntington portrayed in his ‘clash of civilizations’” (Hayhoe & Pan, 2001, p. 21). By modeling inter-civilizational dialogue as a theoretical and practical approach to comparative education, Ruth has provided our field with an invaluable response to the center-periphery dynamic of knowledge, which comparativists often criticize but rarely act to reverse.

Ruth Hayhoe’s publications have influenced multiple generations of students and scholars in the field of comparative education in both the East and the West. Her scholarship is deeply treasured and diligently followed by many comparativists, among whom are the authors included in this special issue. Youguo Jiang’s paper, “Liberal Arts in China’s Modern Universities: Lessons from the Great Catholic Educator and Statesman, Ma Xiangbo,” provides an insightful account of how Ma Xiangbo spearheaded liberal arts education on Chinese soil. He argues that Ma was deeply influenced by the Jesuit emphasis on “all-round education,” and established his model of university education through combining Western humanism and science with classical Confucian humanism. For this reason, his ideas still have a referential value for contemporary Chinese higher education and society at large.

A similar historical culturalist approach is adopted explicitly by Mary Shepard Wong in her article “Gender, Identity, Missions, and Empire: Letters from Christian Teachers in China in the Early 20th and 21st Centuries.” She presents a study comparing the lives of three missionary educators in China in the early 20th century to the lives of three Christian English teachers in contemporary China. Arguably, it provides a context for, as well as remarkably local understandings of, the work of missionaries in the past and of Christian English teachers today. Furthermore, the author suggests that this Hayhoeian approach holds promise in addressing the following far-reaching question in a cross cultural context: “how can religious institutions preserve and extend into the next generation what makes their traditions unique without engendering chauvinism?” This is truly important in the era of globalization which has been depicted as ushering in the risks of “a clash of civilizations” as well as a revival of faith beliefs.

Last but by no means least is Ruth’s own piece, “A Bridge too Far? Comparative Reflections on St. Paul and Confucius.” Composed exclusively for the May 2011 conference, it compares the lives and careers of two great teacher-mentors in human history across the East and the West, Confucius and St. Paul. In this piece, Ruth unveils two important values common to both: a strong sense of humility and a commitment to social responsibility, values which in turn have had the most bearing and influence on her own career and scholarship. She asserts that a “profound understanding of one’s own emptiness and indebtedness to grace can ... be seen as a value that bridges the Christian West and the

Confucian East.”

In addition to the three papers included in the special issue section, the other authors publishing papers in this issue have been closely associated with Ruth Hayhoe and participated in the May 2011 Conference. Vilma Seeberg is a longtime friend and colleague, Stephen A. Bahry was her doctoral student, and Jun Li was her postdoctoral fellow some years ago. Craig K. Jacobsen, one of her earliest doctoral students, presented his paper “Reconstructing the Foreign Teacher: The Nativization of David Crook in Beijing,” at the conference. The other three papers, while taking on divergent topics (rural girls’ education, minority education, and teacher education in China respectively), also echo Ruth Hayhoe’s scholarship in the sense of paying particular attention to the historical and cultural context, as well as epistemological aspects, of their themes.

References

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