


2011

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Vernezze, Peter, "What China Can Teach Us about Tucson" (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 893.
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What China Can Teach Us about Tucson

February 1, 2011 in [Op-Ed](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Peter Vernezze

From 2006-2008, I served as a Peace Corps volunteer in China, teaching oral English at Sichuan Normal University in Chengdu. During this time, I drew on my previous life experience as a philosophy professor to hold a regular philosophical discussion group with Chinese undergraduates. Twice a month we met for ninety minutes to debate the status of truth, the meaning of life, and the reality of fate, among other topics. I believe their deliberations on timeless topics contain a very timely message for America today in the wake of January's tragedy in Tucson.

The subject for our inaugural meeting was "what is the good life?" At the center of the discussion was a single concept: family. Although career, worldly goods, travel and a variety of other elements came into play that evening, the conversation never strayed far from the notion that the good life must invariably include a healthy functioning family. That the centrality of family—the beating heart of which is the obligation between the parent and the child—was universally shared would come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the *Analects* of Confucius. "As for filial and fraternal responsibility (*xiao*) it is, I suspect the root of all authoritative conduct." That is, if you are not a good son or daughter, how can you be a good person?

Although Jeffrey Wasserstrom and Kate Merkel-Hess were certainly right to point out in [their recent article](#) in *Time* that Confucius is only one of numerous influences in Chinese thought, it is hard to deny that his writings provide China with the one thing that is crucial for a healthy, functioning society: a shared conception of the good, one that can be promulgated in the public sphere. During my time in China I viewed countless repetitions of what I dubbed the "xi jiao" or "foot washing" commercial, a televised public service spot explicitly advocating the child's obligation to the parent through a cycle of life idea involving washing the elder's feet. Strange as this might sound, it was incredibly effective. Indeed, I am aware of no parallel to this reverence for filial piety that we could currently find consensus on, much less agree to promulgate through media—an act which conservatives and liberals would both balk at as a giant overreach of government. Yet a society that cannot agree upon some simple, basic values to publicly support and encourage is a society that has lost a shared sense of the good.

In another session the discussion group took on the rather daunting topic "what is truth?" To make things even more interesting, the discussion occurred in the midst of the crackdown on Tibet that was taking place in the period leading up to the Olympic Games. Despite all the hot rhetoric that evening, the students still refused to declare that China had the one, true political system. "I think truth," one typical respondent declared "is like light from a distant star. It is something we can vaguely glimpse at but never fully attain." Although David Brooks has [recently argued](#) that it is a sense of sin and ignorance that provides the humility necessary for true civility, Chinese philosophy—lacking the notion of an absolute ideal like God that is the source of all truth, light and goodness—falls quite naturally into this state of epistemic uncertainty.

One of my favorite sessions revolved around an oft-repeated phrase that rubbed me the wrong way: there are two sides to every coin. What worried me about the slogan was its potential to lead to a lazy relativism, equating the perpetrator's side with that of the victim. In fact, our discussion on this point demonstrated that these students understood these words as implying nothing other than the recognition that any issue of substance there invariably exist two competing points of view. Our current strategy in this country, of course, is to demonize those who oppose us. This approach, as Richard Nisbett points out in [The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why](#), is decidedly un-Chinese. Since historically China developed as a series of agricultural, farming-based communities that required virtues such as cooperation and harmony, the default position in Chinese thought is to bring together these opposing views in what is famously known as the middle-way, finding a solution that allows for the continuation of true community.

In the wake of the tragedy in Tucson, politicians in America are struggling with the issue of how to infuse more civility and moderation into our discourse. The shared conception of the good, avoidance

of absolutism and search for consensus advocated by these Chinese students can serve as worthy ideals for those serious about going beyond gimmicks like the mixed Republican-Democrat seating arrangements at the State of the Union. Indeed, there are encouraging signs that these values are even now finding their way into our current political environment. When the words of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign speeches are replayed, as they have been recently, reminding us there is not a red America and a blue America but a United States of America, we are on our way to a shared conception of the good—at least a civic one. When politicians, as they have been prone to do as of late, insist that they can be opponents without being enemies, we step closer to the Chinese metaphysical worldview where lack of certainty results in a toning down of rhetoric. Finally, when the American people applaud such compromises as occurred in the tax debate we arrive at the position that there are indeed two sides to every coin—a Democrat and Republican one in this instance—and that like classical Chinese culture we must search for a middle way.

Peter Vernezze is author of [Socrates in Sichuan: Chinese Students Search for Truth, Justice, and the \(Chinese\) Way](#) (Potomac Books, forthcoming April 2011).