

**WAYS OF WORLD-MAKING:  
AN APPROACH TO CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING**

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“There is, I maintain, no such thing as the real world, no unique, ready made, absolute reality apart from and independent of all [other] versions and visions.”

—Nelson Goodman (1984)

One useful approach to understanding “other” cultures is to focus on what Nelson Goodman refers to as “ways of world-making,” or what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe as “the social construction of reality”—that is, the way groups of people (“cultures”) arrange things, ideas and activities into coherent systems of meaning. The fundamental assumption underlying this approach is that an understanding of another culture requires a genuine appreciation of how the people in that culture view the world—how they are socialized to accept a certain vision of the way things are, and the way things ought to be. The question then becomes: What sort of cultural logic determines whether something in a given society is perceived as “natural,” “right,” “beautiful” or “true”?

Clifford Geertz has written that one of the most remarkable features about human beings is the fact that we all have the biological capacity to live any number of different lives, yet each of us ends up living only one. How do we make our choices? Clearly they are conditioned by culture. To be sure, culture is neither static nor monolithic; it varies over time, across space, and according to factors such as age, social class, gender and ethnicity. Nonetheless, within any given social group—regardless of its size and geographical spread—there are certain broadly shared perceptions, values, and inclinations that provide its members with a collective identity. Significantly, this identity always implies some sort of “other” in opposition to it.

Of course most of us give little thought to the systems of meaning that shape our lives. How do they come into being and how do they evolve? How do we learn about them and internalize their messages? Do competing systems of meaning exist and, if so, how are conflicts and contradictions resolved? What does this sort of introspection reveal about our attitudes, priorities and anxieties? What do our ways of world-making suggest about the problems we face in trying to understand other cultures?

Here are some additional questions that we might ask of ourselves (or any other society), keeping in mind the variables noted above:

—How is knowledge organized? What are the primary categories of concern? How are things “named” and arranged, or renamed and rearranged? What realms of knowledge are especially prized?

—What is the relationship between language and thought? What are the dominant symbolic structures and forms of communication in the culture?

—How does geography influence culture? How do cultures organize space?

—How do the people of a given culture view and categorize “the other?”

—How is time conceived and measured?

—How do cultures view their own history? How is “history” distinguished from “myth” (or is it)? Who are the historical heroes and villains of any given society, and why are they viewed in this way?

—How is government organized? How is it justified? How is it viewed by society at large? What is the place and purpose of law?

—How is society organized? What legal, moral and cosmological assumptions inform the social order? What are the dominant moral values of the society? Where do they come from? How are they expressed and/or reinforced? Are they related? Do they ever come into conflict? What are the mechanisms of social control?

—What are the organizing principles and basic assumptions of religious life? What role(s) does religion play in the society?

—What are the major categories of art? What sort of a vocabulary exists for talking about aesthetics? What sorts of artworks are especially prized? Why?

—What are the major categories of literature? Which forms of literature are most prized? Why?

—What are the most important rituals of the society (both secular and sacred)? How do people enjoy themselves (amusements, games, etc.)? What are the major holidays or festivals? Why are they important?

Recently, I have been analyzing the content of topically organized “encyclopedias of daily use” (*riyong leishu*) as a way of exploring such questions in premodern China (the Ming and Qing dynasties). For an example of my approach, see the online powerpoint titled “The Cultural Role of Encyclopedias in Late Imperial China” at <http://www.slideshare.net/smithrj/encyclopedias-in-late-imperial-china-2014-36080622> or <http://history.rice.edu/content/chinese-encyclopedias>.

Here is another example of what might be done in class with something as seemingly trivial as street names. Below are the names of some streets in Taipei [Taipei in Pinyin transliteration], Taiwan, that reflect an extraordinary emphasis on Confucian values (I have included, as “Appendix A” some street names reflecting “modern” values, and, as “Appendix B,” lists of both the “traditional” and “modern” street names without the

transliteration of the sounds of the Chinese characters). The question to the students would be: What values do the street names in your neighborhood/town/city reflect? Why?

Four Basics Road (*Siwei lu*—referring to the four core Confucian values of ritual [*li*], righteousness [*yi*], integrity [*lian*] and a sense of shame [*chi*], as all Chinese know), Great Unity Street (*Datong jie*), Glorious Intelligence Road (*Guangming lu*), Great [Moral] Principle Street (*Dali jie*), Central Harmony Street (*Zhonghe jie*), Moderation Road (*Zhongyong lu*), Eight Virtue Road (*Bade lu*), Upright and Righteous Road (*Zhengyi lu*), Humane Love Road (*Ren'ai lu*) Humane People Road (*Renmin lu*), Esteem Humaneness Road (*Chongren lu*), [Moral] Accomplishment Road (*Chenggong lu*), [Moral] Self-strengthening Street (*Ziqiang jie*), People's Harmony Street (*Renhe jie*), Moral Action Road (*Dexing lu*), Morality and Kindness Street (*Dehui jie*), Establish Virtue Road (*Lide lu*), Esteem Virtue Street (*Chonde jie*), Esteem Humaneness Road (*Chongren lu*), Constant Virtue Street (*Changde jie*), Cherish Virtue Street (*Chongde jie*), Five Constant [Virtue] Street (*Wuchang jie*), Ultimate Good Road (*Zhishan lu*), Ultimate Sincerity Road (*Zhicheng lu*), Righteous Practice Road (*Xingyi lu*), Practicing the Good Road (*Xingshan lu*), Civil Virtue Road (*Wende lu*), Shared Virtue Street (*Tongde jie*), Shared Virtue Road (*Tongde lu*), Refined Intelligence Road (*Xiuming lu*), Loyalty and Filial Piety Road (*Zhongxiao lu*), Loyalty and Bravery Street (*Zhongyong jie*), Loyalty and Sincerity Road (*Zhongchang lu*), Loyalty and Righteousness Street (*Zhongyi jie*), Loyalty and Submissiveness Street (*Zhongshun jie*), Honoring Sagehood Street (*Zunxian jie*), Beautiful Virtue Street (*Meide jie*), Bright Virtue Road (*Mingde lu*), Inculcate Benevolence Road (*Yuren lu*), Faithfulness and Righteousness Road (*Xinyi lu*), Culture Road (*Wenhua lu*), Renew the People Street (*Xinmin jie*), Renew the People Road (*Xinmin lu*), Expansive Love Road (*Boai lu*), Moral Principle Street (*Yili jie*), Kindness to the People Street (*Huimin jie*), etc.

Street names reflecting more “modern” values:

Nationalism Road (*Minzu lu*), Nationalism Street (*Minzu jie*), Democracy Road (*Minquan lu*), People's Livelihood Road (*Minsheng lu*), Patriotism Road (*Aiguo lu*), Establish the Country Road (*Jianguo lu*), Victory Street (*Shengli jie*), Enrich the Country Road (*Fuguo lu*), Flourishing of the State Road (*Guoxing lu*), [Cultural] Renaissance Road (*Fuxing lu*), Glorious Recovery [of the Mainland] Road (*Guangfu lu*), National Revival Street (*Guoxing jie*), etc.

NB: In addition, Taipei street names also include the standard directions (in fact, some of the above-mentioned roads are divided into “north,” “south,” “east” or “west”), a great many place names from the Mainland (cities, provinces, mountains, etc.), a few people (Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, Roosevelt and a few philosophers; I don't recall seeing streets named after Confucius or any of his major disciples), etc. And, of course, there are lots of streets and roads names after auspicious themes: longevity, peace, happiness, good health, good fortune, and so forth.]

**Some related readings:**

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