

East-West Passengers and Passages for Translingual and Transcultural Journeying

Cathy Bao Bean

Dongdong Chen
Seton Hall University

Passing into, out of, and between different modes of thinking, talking, and living can teach learners to be more proficient in their second language *and* culture while better understanding their first. To achieve this goal of foreign language education in terms of raising translingual *and* transcultural competence, we have taken seriously what Edward Hall wrote in *The Silent Language*—“*Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participant.*” By portraying “familiar” events—like traveling, birthdays—through “foreign” lenses tinted with good humor, both CFL and EFL learners can appreciate both the target and native culture. By using drawings like  as a metaphor for experiencing life as a Chinese-American, our cultural and linguistic doubling is a matter of switching from “duck” to “rabbit.” By “figuring out” the shapes produced by institutions of different cultures, we can clarify how our concept of self varies as a result.

Introduction

Passing into, out of, and between different modes of thinking, talking, and living can teach learners of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to be more proficient in their second language *and* culture while better understanding their first. According to Pratt et al. (2008), “Advanced language learning is often assessed against an implicit norm: the competence of an educated native speaker, a goal that post-adolescent learners rarely

fulfill. The idea of translingual and transcultural competence, in contrast, places value on the multilingual ability to *operate between languages*. Students are educated to function as informed and capable interlocutors with educated native speakers in the target language. They also learn to reflect on the world *and themselves* through another language and culture.” (p. 289)

This paper will present our itinerary to reach this goal of raising translingual *and* transcultural competence by alerting passengers (1) to the “baggage” they are already carrying from their respective language(s) and culture(s), (2) to a new model for organizing what they have and will acquire, and (3) to the sights which are worth looking at, as well as the innovative exercises for achieving and maintaining optimal conditioning while crisscrossing the familiar and foreign. This kind of “Touring the World for Possibilities and Techniques to Understand Cultural Diversity” constitutes the preliminary steps in our book, *The Chopsticks-Fork Principle x 2* (Bao Bean & Chen, 2008) to “Shaping a Life with the Possibilities and Techniques.” That is, most travelers start their journey with some awareness of their individual characteristics and expectations but not all, probably very few, have carefully examined these in terms of understanding to what extent they are determined by the character of their first language and the expectations embedded into their home culture. Good travelers not only seek advice about how best to organize what they bring to the journey so they are neither burdened nor caught short by what they carry, but also anticipate what deaccessions and acquisitions will occur during the trip. Intellectually curious travelers are continuously enhanced, often surprised, by what they experience. Yet, being smart about choosing what is affordable in terms

of time, distance, cost, etc. from among the available themes, methods, sites, and so on of learning also makes sense. Savvy travelers do not just encounter the new – they take the time to absorb it through exercises that will integrate the present with the past in order to maximize its mental, physical, as well as emotional effect. To the extent these exercises are themselves interesting, to that extent, the absorption process is also integrated.

In what follows, we provide all the good, curious, and savvy East-West passengers with the switching and figuring, organizing and modeling, sightseeing and exercising passages that will carry them toward the many destinations that constitute a journey toward competence in translingual and transcultural education.

“Switching” and “Figuring” our Linguistic and Cultural Baggage

When we talk about translingual and transcultural awareness and education, we must take seriously what Edward Hall writes in *The Silent Language*, “Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants” (Hall, 1959, p. 39). In order to make unhidden what passengers have intellectually, emotionally, and physically inherited, it helps to realize that, for every set of circumstances, there are many human situations to be revealed, and for each human situation, there are different multicultural interpretations. This realization is necessary preparation for arriving at a more meaningful and functional level of appreciating both our linguistic and cultural starting point(s) and destination(s). The more profound and far-reaching this realization, the more developed is the passenger’s ability to

function effectively in both the local and global spheres.

To know and believe that there is no “normal,” that every single set of circumstances can yield several different human situations, passengers must develop the habit of switching. That is, to regularly use background-foreground drawings as a metaphor for living on the hyphen as, e.g., a Chinese-American. Unlike the Melting Pot which necessitates the drastic transformation, if not destruction of traditional cultures, this metaphor takes into account the human brain’s ability to look at a single drawing (or set of circumstances) and see many things. To illustrate this point, let us take a look at the following drawing:

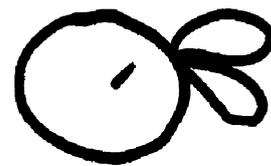


Figure 1: Duck-Rabbit ¹

Is it a duck, a rabbit, a plucked daisy, a turnip? This metaphor also takes into account that the human brain cannot see the duck and rabbit simultaneously just as circumstances are first perceived as a Chinese and *then* as an American, as a student and *then* as a son, as an employee and *then* as an ethical being, and back again. Like a good basketball player, someone starting out defensively can switch to an offensive mode, and thereby, change strategies. Too often, people with multicultural backgrounds think they should, somehow, execute two different plans at once. Like the times when there is not enough time in one day to accomplish all that is demanded and the only solution seems to mean being in two places at once. Knowing that this solution is impossible

does not prevent people from feeling inadequate for failing to do so. If we stress the ability to switch faster and more comfortably, the sense of failure is replaced by a feeling of confidence. For example, many Asian-Americans are in a double-bind when having to “toot their own horn.” The dilemma of how to do so when personal ambition, parental expectations, cultural propriety, peer pressure, and realistic parameters each seems to demand different strategies so that one is “torn apart” by the very elements which comprise one’s own personality as well as those which are projected on one by those who are variously important. The usual Melting Pot strategy is to toot as loud and long as possible, that is, to proclaim one’s good qualities to all who matter. Meanwhile, the Chinese or traditional norm is to be modest, even passive, trusting that “cream will rise to the top” and one’s abilities will be recognized in due time. The duck-rabbit strategy is to frame the boast with a humorous admission that the tooting is indeed a matter of “shameless self-promotion.” Another instance in our book is when Cathy, in her teenage years, decided to campaign for an office on the Student Council even though this meant giving a self-promoting speech. By focusing on alternative interpretations of the circumstance, it was possible to overcome the cultural disparity of exhibiting American self-confidence without violating Chinese decorum. In this case, as the only Asian in a Western school with little or no knowledge of the East, the humorous solution had the added benefit of bringing new passengers on board a new train of thought. As Cathy describes it, “By the time it was my turn to speak at the assembly, the audience was bored to tears. Since students in office had very little power to actually do anything, everybody had said the same thing about being

conscientious, hard-working, responsive, etc. My speech was no different – except that I delivered it in Chinese. At first people thought the problem was caused by their dozing off. Then, awake, it took another second to figure out why I still wasn’t making any sense to them. Then everyone laughed. We all knew that whatever language I used, I couldn’t say much more or less than the dozen previous speakers, but I could empathize with their need for a diversion. I won the election (Bao Bean and Chen, 2008).

Once comfortable with switching, a second step in making unhidden what passengers have inherited is to “figure” out in which cultural world to place those strategies in order to assess their relative value. In other words, for each human situation, there are different multicultural interpretations. For example, a typical (Western) conversation with young people begins: “What’s your favorite color” or “Who’s your best friend?” When asking questions like these, it is little wonder that children grow up in a pyramidal world as shown in the following where it is natural that there can only be room for one at the top, and that regardless of relevance, choosing *the* one is not only possible but expected, even desirable.

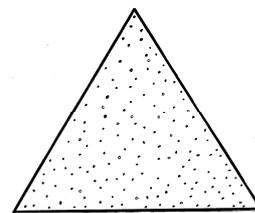


Figure 2: Modern or North American Universe

As a result, pollsters can ask political travelers about the most important issues even though so many are interrelated, while tour guides can ask “What part of China did you like best?” Even more perplexing is the

idea of advertisers showcasing celebrities with no expertise except in the world of entertainment to recommend the safest car.

The pyramidal is reinforced insofar as the major institutions of the modern North American world—theological, corporate, constitutional, educational—also construct a universe where power, knowledge, status, etc. is always “up” at the “top.” Nature trumps Nurture because the individuality of those who rise or fall is primarily determined by DNA and supported by the autonomy afforded by the Bill of Rights. Nouns dominate the vocabulary of children in this world of objective and specific information and criteria (Nisbett, 2003, pp. 148-150). In the extreme, everything is “personal.” For passengers who switch and travel extensively, this is problematic because, linguistically, they are enjoined to “be yourself,” “to thine own self be true,” and “develop self-esteem.” By talking about personal development in the singular and, thereby, warning against being “self-inconsistent,” “two-faced,” and “fork-tongued,” we presume that being of “one” mind in the “best” culture is the ultimate goal of human development—making it very hard to take multiculturalism seriously and very easy to doubt one’s personal integrity. The underlying assumption for many who live in the pyramidal universe is that this is “normal” and every other way is “different” or “foreign,” and by inference, less. The character and force of this assumption is what Bao Bean calls “whiteness” (Bao Bean, 2008, p. 204). As shown in the following drawing, the Asian world is shaped very differently by its views about the cyclical nature of history, the dynamics of balancing yin-yang and chaos-order, as well as the presence of about 150 gods (most of whom aren’t all that bright—see below), none being omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent.

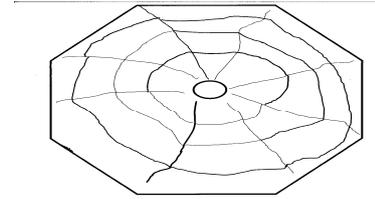


Figure 3: Traditional or Confucian Universe

Self-identity in the traditional/Confucian/pre-feminist is like the central space of a web so that there is no “I” except that which is formed by the strands or relationships to family, neighborhood, company, etc. Nurture trumps Nature so that disciplined behavior is within everyone’s power. What is of utmost importance is that each person does his or her (own, not someone else’s) relational duties (as son, teacher, parent, mayor) in order to contribute to the strength and well-being of all, not just himself or herself. Verbs dominate the vocabulary of children in this world of subjectivity and interactive criteria (Nisbett, 2003, pp. 148-150). Inherently conservative, no *one* person just says “no.” In the extreme, nothing is “personal.” For passengers who venture into, e.g., a capitalistic corporate culture, their impersonal, non-selfish approach is insufficiently dynamic.

Organizing the Linguistic and Cultural Experience with a New Model

After making unhidden the linguistic and cultural baggage of our heritage by switching and figuring, the next step is to reconfigure the possibilities in such a way as to reveal life on the hyphen more accurately. By truncating the pyramid as in the following drawing, there is room for more than one at the top although there is still prioritizing from further up to further down.

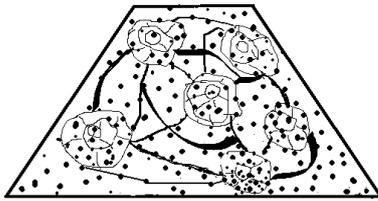


Figure 4: Universe Created by The Chopsticks-Fork Principle

Further, by having several webs of varying types, there is room for more than one self. By analyzing how webs are linked—with humor, threats, information, personality, and so on—there is room for more than one strategy. This model incorporates some of the qualities of the previous shapes in that there is still, on one hand, prioritizing and individuality while, on the other hand, relational and role identity. Yet, modification toward greater inclusion of both sets of possibilities allows passengers to assess which values are embedded in which relational webs as well as how and what connects the several selves we are when we switch from one to the other and bind them into a single life. With techniques and frameworks for profiling passengers to themselves and each other, their diversity becomes an asset and a means to meet the challenges of traveling together. This is not easy given that the number of learners of Chinese in the United States are increasing every year at colleges as well as K-12 schools (e.g., Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2007; McGinnis 2005), and the types of learners of Chinese are varying (e.g., Medwick 2008; Stewart & Wang, 2005)

In other words, by switching and figuring, the increasing numbers of potential passengers are able to moderate their single-mindedness with a more global perspective, and can proceed with fewer limitations on why, how, and whether they interact. Face-to-face contact can be

expanded by using new vehicles such as the internet and programs like www.italki.com, etc. where native speakers who wish to learn another language and culture can find people who wish to learn theirs thereby creating hypertext, voice, and video networks in addition to classroom experience.

Sightseeing and Exercising Innovatively through *The Chopsticks-Fork Principle x 2*

Equipped with the bifocal ability to switch between multiple webs and shapes, the sightseeing is of “familiar” events—like dining, traveling, the first day at school, and birthdays—through “foreign” lenses tinted with good humor. In this way both CFL and EFL learners can appreciate both their target and native cultures. To this end, stories taken from Bao Bean (2002), which portrays a Chinese-American life, are presented in English even as they are interpreted and *re-presented* in Chinese. By revealing the text and context in two languages and cultural settings, the impact of the “5 Cs” —Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities—are *at least* doubled (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006).

Known as the standards of foreign language education for the 21st century, first and foremost is Communication, the core of foreign language education, the objective of which is to develop proficiency in terms of the interpersonal, interpretative, and presentational modes. The next major component in teaching and learning a foreign language is Cultures, that is, gaining knowledge and understanding of the target culture. Third is Connection, that is, training students to associate the learning of the foreign language with other disciplines so that they can further reinforce their knowledge or understanding of those

disciplines through the language. Fourth is Comparisons, that is, encouraging new insights into the nature of language and culture through comparing the target language with the mother tongue, as well as developing new appreciation of the concept of culture through comparing the target culture with the native culture. Finally is Communities – teaching learners to participate in multilingual communities, thereby utilizing the language beyond the context of school in order to nurture a life-long commitment to being multicultural. By switching, figuring, modeling, and remodeling in bilingual and bicultural mode, these five components are promoting more integration than occur when using the first language to explain the second or when presenting cultural matters in terms of difference for side-by-side comparison.

According to the national standards, the term “culture” is generally understood to include the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and the products—both tangible and intangible of a society. For instance, traditional Chinese brides like to wear red at their weddings while western brides wear white. Chopsticks, Beijing operas, and Chinese foods are the products of the Chinese culture. The following diagram shows that practices and products are derived from the perspectives that form the world view of a cultural group.

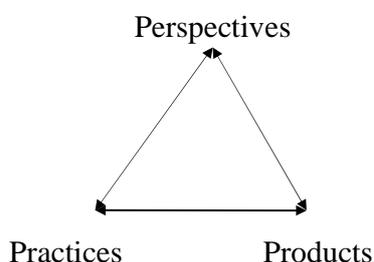


Figure 5: Cultural Perspectives, Practices and Products

In addition to the “3 P” formula of culture—Perspectives, Practices, and Products—we add a fourth: The Chopsticks-Fork Principle. That is, the bifocal ability to switch between multiple languages and cultures when viewing the ordinary events with an eye for understanding a culture through its humor as embedded in some of the basic Perspectives, Practices, and Products.

With this integration in mind and recognizing the fact that no text with cultural content can be understood simply by reading the words, we use textual devices in *The Chopsticks-Fork Principle x 2*. In terms of understanding humor—probably the best way to gauge how well you understand a culture—we punctuate with three exclamation marks [!!!] where you should smile in one or both languages. If the reader doesn’t get the joke, he or she should find someone who can explain. This is a great way to start a good conversation with a fellow passenger who might otherwise remain a stranger. With regard to emphasizing the connection between written and spoken communication, we use, in addition to regular quotation marks (“ ”), a second kind (“ ”) in the English text when the vocal intonation suggests a non-literal meaning and/or ironic tone. On the Chinese side, including “Four-Character Word” (FCW) is a practical help given that the structure of four-character words is unique and productive in Chinese. Unlike the English “four-letter words,” these FCWs are used by all members of Chinese society [!!!]. Thus contemporary story themes and textual helps provide the must-see sights of modern translingual and transcultural understanding.

As on most journeys, it is advised that passengers periodically exercise. By creating bilingual and bicultural exercises in our bilingual reader that encourage learners to run their ideas to new limits as

well as play with words, characters, and ideas, we hope they can then traverse the pathways between the local and global, particular and general, personal and universal with ease and comfort. For example, there are three variations of the “Food for Thought” exercises. The Personal asks the passenger to apply what is learned to his/her own experience as with “Decide what are the facts or milestones of your life, and then explain their significance to someone who is not like you (by ethnicity, gender, age, etc.),” or “Describe a ‘duck-rabbit’ incident in your life.” The General variation asks the passenger to develop linear and nonlinear modes of thinking to encourage contemplation of assumptions about what is real and true as exemplified by the deductive, “If A is bigger than B, and B is bigger than C, then A is bigger than C versus the paradoxical, ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’” The Cross-Cultural variation asks the passenger to discuss more Western ideas in Chinese and vice versa as when American autonomy requires requests to be preceded by “Please” whereas Asian dutifulness requires anticipating needs before a request. In the process, information about etiquette is conveyed.

The Deconstruction & Construction exercises encourage playing with words and characters by taking them apart (as with anagrams) and putting them back together as in “butter+fly=butterfly.” The Body Parts exercises sensitize learners to the metaphoric that pervades English. For example, “elbow” is used in idiomatic expressions like “up to one’s elbows,” “elbow room,” and “out at the elbows” to indicate having so much work that the piles are as high as the elbow, or having sufficient space as to be able to stick out one’s elbows without hitting the nearest neighbor, or being so bereft that one’s

clothing is worn at the elbows from overuse.

Conclusion

“Are We There Yet?” This often annoying question is what children ask when they have lost interest in the traveling and simply want to get “there.” However, when referring to traveling toward translingual and transcultural competence, “there” could be when the passenger first realizes she/he has not unpacked the baggage from his preschool trip into his first language spoken in his family’s universe. Or “there” is when passing a test. In the case of someone who can “speak like a native” but finds the natives more guarded about his or her ability to understand too much, then “there” is the place that was overshot with too much fluency. Or, when fluency is not a barrier to better switching, but “there” now includes mastering body language—those nonverbal forms of communication span modes of movement as diverse as that found in the Chinese opera, French mime, Noh drama, and American break dancing.

There are too many “theres” to mark a single point at which one is competent. For all these reasons, there is no conclusion or single destination that can be described given the letter and spirit of this paper. Nevertheless, we do think that it is possible to enjoy the trip and tripping !!! regardless how near or far one’s personal mark is set!

Notes

1. At the “On *In A Different Voice*” conference, State University of New York at Stony Brook, March 22-4, 1985, Carol Gilligan linked the background-foreground duck-rabbit drawing to the phenomenon of having different “voices” or basic outlooks.

References

- Bao Bean, C. (2002). *The Chopsticks-Fork Principle, a memoir and manual*. NJ: We Press.
- Bao Bean, C. (2008). "Figuring the cultural shape we're in," In V. Lea and E. J. Sims (Eds.), *Undoing whiteness in the classroom: Critical educultural teaching approaches for social justice activism*. New York, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Bao Bean, C., & Chen, D. (2008). *The Chopsticks-Fork Principle x 2*, NJ: Homa & Sekey.
- Furman, N., Goldberg, D., & Lusin, N. (2007). *Enrollments in languages other than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education*, Fall 2006. New York, NY: Modern Language Association.
- Hall, E. (1959) *The silent language*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett.
- Medwick, A. (2008). Developing and Enhancing College-Level Chinese Language and Teacher Training Programs. Panel presented at Chinese American Educational Research and Development Association 2008 International Conference, New York, March 23, 2008.
- National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (2006). *Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st Century*. Lawrence, KS: Allen Press.
- Nisbett, R. (2003) *The geography of thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently – and why*. New York, London, Sydney: The Free Press.
- Pratt, M. L., Geisler, M., Kramsch, C., McGinnis, S., Patrikis, P., Ryding, K., and Huang, S. (2008). Transforming College and University Foreign Language Departments, *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 92/2: pp. 287-292.
- Scott, M. (2005). Statistics on Chinese language enrollment. Chinese Language Teachers Association, from http://clta.osu.edu/flyers/enrollment_stats.htm
- Stewart, V. & Wang, S. (2005). *Expanding Chinese language capacity in the United States: What would it take to have 5 percent of high school students learning Chinese by 2015?* New York, NY: Asia Society.

AUTHORS

Cathy Bao Bean, author of *The Chopsticks-Fork Principle, A Memoir and Manual* and co-author with Dongdong Chen of *The Chopsticks-Fork Principle x 2, A Bilingual Reader*, is/was a board member of the Claremont Graduate University School of the Arts and Humanities, NJ Council for the Humanities, Society for Values in Higher Education, and Ridge & Valley Conservancy. Formerly a philosophy teacher at Montclair State College, she co-hosts "The Balancing Act for Women" on internet radio. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Cathy Bao Bean, 357 Main Street, Blairstown, NJ, 07825; cathy@cathybaobean.com

Dongdong Chen, Ph.D., co-author of *The Chopsticks-Fork Principle x 2, A Bilingual Reader* is Assistant Professor in the Asian Studies Department of Seton Hall University. She is Director of the Chinese Program, and was Director of the Graduate Program from Fall, 2006 to Spring, 2008. Her research interests include linguistics theory, second language acquisition, Chinese language teaching pedagogy, and computer-supported language teaching. She has published extensively on each of the above aspects. Dongdong also serves on the

board of the Chinese Language Teacher Association – Greater New York, and is Vice President of the New Jersey Chinese Cultural Studies Foundation. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Dongdong Chen, Ph.D., 16 Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079; chendong@shu.edu