

Creating Constructive Communication-the Socratic Seminar in China

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There is no doubt that China's peace has significant influence on the global peace. However, China is experiencing a difficult transition period now, and social hazards are increasingly emerging. Internationally, China has conflicts with neighboring countries, like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan. Domestically, the hazards are the unequal distribution of social resources, and the imbalance between the development of economics and protection of the environment.

These hazards are made worse by the poor communication of the people dealing with various conflicts. When China had conflict over the Diaoyu Island with Japan, many voices appeared on the Internet about beginning a war with Japan to solve the Diaoyu Island conflict. Also, many Chinese people in several cities went to the streets to demonstrate against Japan. Many people's Japanese brand cars and Japanese-style restaurants suffered breakage, and some Japanese in China were attacked. In 2012, in Shifang, Qidong and Nignbo, thousands of local people went to the streets to protest against the establishing of plants which have high pollution possibilities for local areas. In two of these protests, the physical conflicts between the police and common people were provoked because the local government and common people did not communicate with each other effectively.

China has a long history where speaking something different from the established opinions is dangerous. Now, with the development of the Internet, people have more opportunities to express their opinions. In *Weibo*, the Chinese version of Twitter, more and more people voice their ideas about various issues. However, the tone is confrontational. People use abusive words to attack each other, rather than discussing rationally, when they have different views. Moreover, the disagreement stretches from the Internet to the real world, and some people have even used duels to solve disagreements. From over-obedience to over-challenging, Chinese people seem to go from one extreme to another in communication. Fewer and fewer people really listen to each other. People simply argue a lot and try to get people's agreement.

We believe the lack of opportunity and training in expressing and listening to opinions in China's education system is the main cause of why people do not know how to communicate in conflicts. Moreover, we believe that Socratic seminars can really make people learn how to think, how to speak, how to listen, how to ask questions, and how to cooperate in communication.

The lecture dominates Chinese classes. Teachers play the role of authority and impart the knowledge to students. However, a Socratic seminar style of learning, which we have experienced at St. John's College(SJC), promotes equal opportunity for expression for all students and teachers. There are two tutors (professors) in SJC's seminars. The tutors are not authoritative and claim no knowledge of the truth, but help participants prevent the discussion from digressing. Expressing personal opinions, helping other people to develop their opinions, and considering other people's opinions are key elements in each seminar. In order to achieve this, people need to listen carefully and respond sincerely. Moreover, Socratic seminars value the pursuit of deep questions. There are always a series of "whys" following one question, which cultivates in the participants the habit of critical thinking. Finally, a Socratic-style seminar does not aim at reaching consensus, but at examining or pursuing truth together. People rarely get angry, even when they have different ideas or cannot find answers.

We plan to promote and teach the Socratic seminar in China, specifically in Nanjing, as a way of modeling a form of constructive communication. High school students are our target participants, because they are open to new ideas and are responsible for the future of the country. We will invite 20 students from the two best high schools in Nanjing to participate in our seminars, because they have a high possibility being influential in China. The selection of participants will be conducted through the local high school teachers. The criteria of selections are: the students already should be admitted by universities, which allows them to have time to participate in our project, and they must have good English to read and communicate. The reading material of the seminar will include the Great Books which are related to war and peace, like *Iliad*, and *The Peloponnesian War*, and news reports about current China conflict issues, which are not politically sensitive, like the Diaoyu Island conflict, and the city migrants' suffering of inequality in social welfare. These two kinds of reading material will be used alternatively to examine whether

participants can use the ability developed in seminars to communicate with each other about current Chinese conflicts. Each seminar will be two hours long, with two of our team members taking the role of tutors, and the third team member acting as participants to support them. Teachers and school leaders will be invited to visit the seminar at the end of this project. If we invite them in the beginning of the project, or to the whole project, their presence could constrain students' active participation. In the end of the project, we will give every student a report about their seminar performance.

Concrete Plan:

Preparation: (Present—May 18th 2013) Every weekend, team members will meet to prepare for the project. First, we will choose the reading materials and hold seminars about them with other classmates. Second, we will confirm local connections. Third, we will make a detailed schedule, and establish a blog to promote our project.

Execution: (May 19th 2013—July 19th 2013) Following the last day of the spring semester, we will fly to China. After using two days to adapt to local time and do preparatory works like meeting our participants, we will begin the first seminar on May 21st. One seminar will be held every three days, with 20 seminars total, in local high school. After seminar, we will provide food and conduct a short discussion to know participants' feelings. A questionnaire will also be distributed at the end of the project to receive formal feedback. The content of the discussions and the statistics from the questionnaire will help to produce the final report. Every night after seminar, the group members will hold a team meeting to summarize the performance of that day's seminar, and discuss how to improve it.

Summarization and Return: (July 20th 2013—July 22nd 2013) Team members will hold meetings to analyze the whole project, deal with the questionnaire's statistics, and write the final report. On July 22nd 2013, we will go back to America. When the 2013 fall semester begins, a final report will be submitted to Davis UWC Scholars Program Office, and a meeting will be held to report this project to the whole St. John's College community. Our blog also will be updated to show this project.

Feasibility:

Language and Culture: Three team members are native Chinese.

Local Connection: Nanjing is the city where Dongyu Cui lived for 10 years. He has many friends and classmates there. One of the two high schools from which we plan to invite the participants, is his high school. Dongyu Cui's intimate knowledge of Nanjing will help us in arranging local transportation, lodging, etc. The team members will also offer opportunities to practice English and study-abroad counseling for the students from these two high schools, in order to show appreciation for these schools' support for this project.

Seminar Skill: Each member of the team has experience with Socratic seminars from their time at St. John's College, as well as a deep interest in sharing the seminar with others.

Participation: The two best high schools in Nanjing are very open to new ideas. Every year, they have around four hundred students admitted in advance by universities. These students do not have much school work after admission, so they have time to participate in our project. It is an excellent opportunity for them to practice English, experience liberal arts education, and know about American college life.

Expectations and Sustainability:

For the student participants, first we expect them to learn how to think critically, how to listen, how to ask questions, how to speak, and how to cooperate, by practicing Socratic Seminar. Second, by reading and discussing the Great Books and articles about the current conflicts in China, they are expected to think extensively about peace and the challenges to peace that China is facing. The books used in the project will be given to them as gifts, which could allow them to organize the seminar in their own universities. For the school teachers and leaders who visit the seminar at the end of the project, we want to show them another teaching method, and hopefully they will allow students more opportunities to speak in class.