

## Assessment Report

CORC1110 Classical Cultures (China)

Offered for CUNY-Brooklyn College Study Abroad in China

May 29-June 24, 2011

With the approval of the Classics Department, we offered CORC 1110 Classical Cultures (China) the first time in the summer 2011 CUNY-BC study abroad in China program. 15 students (most from Brooklyn College, and some from Baruch and other colleges) were enrolled in the course. The instructor, the program director, and students in the course all felt the course was a successful experience.

Now that the program has concluded, we would like to provide an assessment of the course in the following, with sincere appreciation to colleagues in the Classics Department for their support of our efforts to make this core course of Chinese Classical Culture available to the students as a meaningful part of the curriculum for the study abroad in China program.

### ***Instructor***

Professor Yonggang Huang was the instructor for the course. Prof. Huang is thoroughly familiar with the content of the course. In fact, he has been teaching this course over the last two years at Brooklyn College. And he has also been to all those historic and cultural sites (that are related to the readings and topics of the course) in Beijing, Xi'an, Nanjing, Yangzhou, Suzhou and other cities.

### ***Readings***

About one month before departure for the trip, students were given the course syllabus, the textbooks and the course packet. The pre-trip reading assignments were the earlier important texts that laid foundation for the later readings and helped prepare students intellectually for discussions upon arrival in China and later assignments.

We adopted two major textbooks for the course, and the students taking this course completed the same reading assignments during the China program as in a regular semester. To ensure students made the best use of the time in China, we required that, before departing for China, students complete reading the five most important classics and raise discussion questions on each of the classics (i.e., *Yi Jing* or The Book of Changes; The Classic of Odes; the Analects by Confucius; and *Dao De Jing* or the Book of the Way; and *Chuangtzu* for Daoism).

For each of the class meetings, we assigned a reasonable amount of readings, on which the students were also asked to work in groups (2-3 students) and give two presentations (one on a topic of philosophy and the other on a topic of literature).

### **Venue of the Program and Site Visits**

Though the actual days of our program were necessarily less than a full semester, this was more than compensated for by the many field trips to real sites of historical and cultural importance in the five cities, which we all found to be invaluable and irreproducible learning opportunities.

Out of the four weeks, we spent the first 4 days in the first two historical cities of Beijing and Xi'an where students visited many important cultural sites (e.g., the Forbidden City, Imperial Palace, the Great Wall, Summer Palace, the Tiananmen Square, the Terra Cotta Army Museum, Wild Good Pagoda, Xuanzang Buddhist Statue, Ancient City Wall, etc), which had significance and relevance to understanding the texts and topics of the course. These sites, along with those in Nanjing (e.g., the Confucius Temple and Ming Emperor's tomb), helped shed light on the Chinese cosmology (formed before Xia & Shang eras several millennia ago), and a multitude of singular China's concepts such as time, space (especially, heaven and earth), history, China's centrality and its world roles, and the mandate of heaven, and allowed the students to understand the Confucius's classic Analects (especially in terms of the role of the emperor and philosophy of human relationships).

*Yi Jing* (the Book of Changes) and *Dao De Jing* (the Book of the Way) are the two most important Chinese classics. Our visits to those temples in Nanjing played significant roles in helping students understand the profound and

complex meanings of the two difficult texts. This became especially important in our discussion of the role of the *Yi Jing* in divination, feng shui, and other aspects of Chinese cosmology. So were the architecture and religious iconography in the temples that the students visited, which helped the students to see the role of the *Dao De Jing* as a canonical sacred text of Daoism.

After Beijing and Xian, the program stayed in Nanjing for about 3 weeks. Nanjing was an imperial capital under the Ming and earlier dynasties, also with many historical sites for students to visit and build connections with assigned readings. The sites included the Confucius Temple, Buddhist temples, the Daoist temple, Nanjing Museum and the tomb of the first Ming emperor (whose successors later moved the Ming capital to Beijing). Those additional sites in Nanjing added much leverage to the course content. It proved to be a wonderful learning resource to be able to visit a Confucian temple, an imperial tomb or a royal palace (all three of which are easily accessed in Nanjing) where Confucian ritual and teachings were actually practiced.

In addition to various group visits to historical and cultural sites such as the Jiming Temple of Buddhism, Museum of Jiangsu Province and other sites in Nanjing, several group site visits were specially organized to strengthen the students' understanding of some topics of study. One trip was to the tomb and exhibition hall of Guo Pu, a leading scholar on *Yi Jing* (i.e., Book of Changes) and one of the most influential poets of the Wei Jin Period (220-581 A.D.). Another trip was to the Xuan Garden which was the cultural center of the nation (420-589 A.D.) where the first anthology of Chinese literature was compiled as *Zhao Ming Wen Xuan* (or The Zhao Ming Anthology) around 531 A.D. The Zhao Ming Anthology was evidence of the first systematic and national effort to put together all the published poems and essays since the Pre-Qin period of 3000 years ago up to the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. The trip to the famous Buddhist Jiming Temple deepened students' understanding of key notions of Buddhism and the role of Buddhism in China during the period from the third to the sixth century.

Site visits and on-the-spot discussions helped students achieve a more vivid and deeper impression of the philosophical thinking and literary significance of the times covered in the course, which is difficult if not impossible to replicate or achieve in a regular classroom setting. For example, in our visit to the tomb of Guo Pu, a great master of the *Yi Jing*, images of the wooden structure of the 64 hexagrams there demonstrated very clearly the general principles and relationships in the various combinations of the 64 hexagrams. The *Yi Jing* is the earliest and the most important philosophical work during the formative period of Chinese civilization and has been regarded as the cornerstone of the Chinese cosmic view. Yet, the *Yi Jing* is a very difficult book to read for its unique perspective of the world, with allusions far into the very beginning of the Chinese civilization. It is just not an easy task to help students grasp the general ideas of the *Yi Jing* through those seemingly alien combinations of solid and broken lines we find in the book. The wooden structure of 64 hexagrams of the *Yi Jing* at the exhibition hall, however, rendered our students a rare opportunity to operate those varying combinations of yin and yang (or broken and solid) lines with their own hands; on the site, students made possible combinations of 64 hexagrams with the basic building blocks of 8 trigrams. Through this unique exercise, students achieved a rudimentary understanding and sensible experience of the essential ideas of the *Yi Jing*, thus paving the way to study the philosophical work of this important classic work.

The visit to the exhibition hall of the Xuan Garden served as a rare opportunity for the students to learn about the development of literature as well as fine arts of the Six Dynasties. The trip was directly related to the topic of "The Wei-Jin Period" in the course syllabus. The Wei-Jin Period has occupied a pivotal place in the history of Chinese literature, philosophy and art. It was a period when cultural self-consciousness was developed in Chinese history. In terms of philosophy, Chinese intellectuals of the time were backing off from Confucianism and embracing Daoism at a time of cruel political reality. In literature, Chinese scholars became more aware of the tonal nature of the Chinese language and division of literary works from history and philosophy works under the impact of newly-established Buddhism in China. And in art, the familiar style of landscape painting began to take shape. Therefore, experiencing the brief history of the Wei-Jin Period at the very historical site of the cultural center of that time and viewing the sculpture, the original prints and paintings, students were able to understand better the significance of the literary movement and the way of life for the intellectuals, and, therefore, works of this literary tradition. Some students used the term "adolescence" to describe the general cultural atmosphere of the time. The usage of the word showed their grasp of the essence of the topic. They also used the term "hippies" to describe the odd behaviors of some leading intellectuals of the time, which again revealed their insights into the inner world of

those Chinese during the Wei-Jin Period. It should be pointed out that no Chinese scholarship so far has drawn the parallel of “hippies”, a Western phenomenon during the sixties as a protest movement to the establishments, while a Chinese protestant movement of intellectuals occurred about 1500 years ago. This comparison shows that some students of the class gained insightful understanding of the Chinese tradition. Of course, this brought much satisfaction to the instructor.

The trip to the Jiming Temple also showed the value of “in the field” study. After listening to the explanation of the pivotal Buddhist concept of “*kong*” (emptiness or nothingness) by a Buddhist monk, who served as a guide to our study group, students started a discussion on the Buddhist ideas of “*kong*” and the Daoist notion of “*wu*” (emptiness and nothingness). Some students cited the quotation from Dao De Jing, “Clay is molded to make a pot, but it is in the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the clay pot lies . . . . . Therefore, benefit may be derived from something, but it is in nothing that we find usefulness”, and raised the point that even though both Buddhism and Daoism used the similar concepts of “nothingness”, yet there are fundamental differences between the two schools of philosophy. Laozi’s idea focuses more on the potentiality of things and he wants to bring people’s attention to the “unrealized usefulness” of things, hence, there is a pragmatic tendency in Daoism while in Buddhism the notion of “nothingness” is the fundamental perspective, which looks at the real world as changing phenomena, where time and space matters little. This understanding, or epiphany, achieved from the site visits, helped illuminate otherwise elusive messages in the works by those poets with Buddhist and Daoist leanings.

As the pillar of China’s social and political system for over two thousand years, Confucianism is rightfully the main topic of the course. In our several visits to the Confucius Temple in Nanjing, students gained much understanding of this important tradition of China. The temple used to be the grand institute of higher education during the period of the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368 – 1911A.D.), and also was the largest civil service examination site during these two dynasties in southern China, which held annual provincial-level examinations with about 25,000 scholars taking tests at the same time (each in a separate room). Through historical exhibits at the original site, our students learned vividly how Confucianism as the official ideology to rule the nation, namely, how many young men, most of them from rural regions, through diligent and hard study of Confucian classics for many years, passed three examinations at three different levels (i.e., the county, the province, and finally, the court), so as to qualify to be appointed by the emperor as government officials. It was a process of how the elite class of gentry-scholar-official was formed to become part of the huge bureaucracy of governance. This unique social, political and educational system of China had profoundly influenced the mind and heart of the Chinese as well as other nations of East Asia. Being absent from that important real setting, it would be very difficult for students of a foreign culture to comprehend that complex tradition.

As our experience in China proved, it was really beneficial to bring students into the actual atmosphere to achieve understanding of, and insights into, an unfamiliar culture. Being physically there sometimes is better than reading many pages or books about the culture. Visiting historical sites personally proves to be an enhancing learning experience to students, especially in studying a culture which is very different from that of their own, as our experience of this study abroad program in China shows.

### Class Meetings

While in Nanjing, most class meetings took place in the hotel conference room which was like a regular smart classroom, with WiFi and multi-media equipment, and some class meetings were also held at the actual sites directly related to the teaching materials and the topics under discussion. The class met in the morning, and in the afternoon the students and the professor had reading sessions, group discussions, or made visits to historical sites that helped deepen understanding of the readings.

In addition to class meetings, group study and site visits, there was a specially designated hour each day for question answering to the group or individual students.

The 15 students were divided into 7 groups for presentations --each consisted of 2 or 3 students, each group was responsible for two class presentations; one on philosophy and the other on literature. Topics of each group were as follows:

- Group 1. The Yi Jing (Book of Changes) and The Shi Jing (Book of Poetry)
- 2. Analects of Confucius and the Han Poems
  - 3. Mencius and three poems from the Han period
  - 4. Dao De Jing and Tang Poems
  - 5. Dao De Jing and Song poems
  - 6. Zhuang Zi and Prose of the Qing Dynasty
  - 7. Philosophical and literary developments of the Wei Jin Period (220 – 587 A.D.)

Throughout the program, the instructor stayed in the same hotels with the students and also arranged office hours in the lobby of the hotel each day to answer questions or provide assistance with the assignments. Actually, since both the instructor and students stayed in the same hotel building and travelled together, the instructor's sole responsibility was teaching and helping the students; therefore, the students had more access to the instructor, which proved to be a great benefit to the students who were able to engage in intellectual conversation with the instructor, in the hotel lobby, at the sites, and on the bus or the train. Compared with the limited time to be with the instructor and work with themselves on a regular campus, students of Study Abroad Program in China had much more time to conduct intellectual discourse with the instructor and among themselves, in spite of the relatively shorter length of the program.

We found these arrangements allowed the students during our China program to have more time to read their texts, build connections between the texts and the historic sites, consult with the instructor, work in small groups with their peers, and complete the assignments.

### ***Assignments & Outcomes***

As in our regular semester, students in the China program were also given two essay assignments, which required students to construct arguments based on textual details. Essay #1 makes arguments on a significant philosophical idea in the texts; and Essay #2 identifies and describes a meaningful literary theme that appears in texts belonging to different literary traditions and/or historical periods. Please see attached some essays that students completed.

In the final exam, nine excerpts from the original texts of classics were picked to ask students to interpret or analyze. The students did a very good job on the exam.

Students of the Study Abroad in China Program also visited the campus of Nanjing University of Finance & Economics on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June, 2011, where activities including intellectual quiz contest were organized to promote mutual understanding of each country's history and culture between American and Chinese college students. The knowledge and understanding of fundamental literary notions of the Book of Poetry by students from our Core 1110 class deeply impressed the hosts and students of the university. Our students also felt very much rewarded when their performance received warm applause from the Chinese audience.

### ***Student Feedback***

Students spoke positively about the way the class was organized and conducted. The consensus was that the topics of the course are designed properly to help them understand the general picture of the classical Chinese philosophy and literature. They appreciated the arrangement of studying the Yi Jing (Book of Changes) at the beginning of the course, as the knowledge of this very important book helped them achieve a good understanding of the fundamental worldview and basic cultural assumptions of the ancient Chinese, which are distinctively different from what they are familiar with in the West. A few students expressed the hope of spending more time studying the Yi Jing, thus paving the way for their future studies of the Chinese culture.

Some students particularly mentioned the value of visiting historical sites at the Xuanwu Lake of Nanjing, which was the cultural center of China in the period of Northern and Southern dynasties (420-589 A.D.). At those sites, students learned about the stylistic differences of architecture of Han-Tang dynasties (from 220 B.C to 907 A.D) and Ming-Qing dynasties (from 1368 to 1911 A.D.) when viewing the real architecture under the guidance of the instructor, as the architecture reflects philosophical thoughts and is related to poetical traditions of different times. Another example was this: seeing images of low relief on bricks of the Han Dynasty (206B.C - 221A.D.) unearthed from the sites, students learned, with deep impression, about the thinking and literary works of an important turning

point of Chinese civilization.

Here are additional comments from some students (emailed to the program director after their return to New York):

- Prior to embarking on taking this Classical Chinese course I felt much anxiety and apprehension. I was unsure of whether or not I would be able to fully grasp the material that was going to be presented. However, these feelings soon subsided and I was then able to enjoy the concepts very much. I gained much insight into the Chinese world view, literature, and poetry. One thing I found to be most beneficial about this course is the fact that it was held in China. This helped move the information I acquired from being mere words on a page, and head knowledge, to substantial real inspiring pieces of wisdom. China is filled with parks, gardens, architecture, and sculptures that pay homage to works by great philosophers like Confucius and Mencius. It was a true pleasure to walk the streets or visit parks that showcased this intellect in such a beautiful way. Another added benefit to taking this course is the way in which Professor Huang taught. He always supported the information he presented in English with the equivalent terms and characters in Chinese. I found this to be an added bonus because it added a unique richness to the material. I would highly recommend more students take this course but most importantly in China, because the course material studied allows visitors as well as natives to better understand the history and development of a very dynamic society of people.

-I think it was very beneficial to have small little trips out to Xuan Wu Lake with Professor Huang because there were ancient statues and carvings that commemorated the history of Chinese culture and the important figures in Chinese culture. Being in NYC, you wouldn't be able to see statues of the ancient Chinese poets and philosophers by a pretty garden or a lake. I also think it's a good experience to be able to walk around China knowing why something's important and why something was built. You actually see how Chinese people in China live their lives and compare it with China's history.

- Taking the Classical Chinese Culture was a rewarding experience for me. Although I was born in China, I did not really know about the classics of my native country. Through this summer study abroad program, I was able to learn about the classical culture of China while I get to travel around the historical sites such as the Xuan Wu Lake and Confucius Temple that connect to my course materials. This class introduces me to a China that I was not familiar with- the traditional China. Difficult readings such as Yi Jing and Dao De Jing were easier to understand because students get to make presentations on these course materials. In this way, we become our own teachers while Professor Huang was there to answer our questions regarding our lessons. My favorite reading is Dao De Jing by Laozi, who was one of the most influential and popular philosophers in the Chinese culture. Laozi believed that everything in this world is complementary. There is good because there is bad, and there is short because there is long. I found it so true because it applies to our daily lives for that how do we know an apple is sweet if we have no sour apple to start with. In conclusion, I think that my experience of this class would have been totally different if it were taught in a class with plain walls and desks, which would only make me more stressful.

-Studying classical Chinese culture in China is more beneficial than studying it in New York City (some 8,000 miles away from China). For, one must remember that the academic study of history is not just the cataloging of time periods or the systematic analysis of contemporary texts, but also, it is an intellectual effort to understand a people; that is, how they lived, what they thought and, what they value. In China, my peers and I did not just examine the Chinese people and their history at a distance, like we do in the classroom, we experienced it. And that is the point that I feel is most important to understanding why the study abroad program is invaluable: it allows students to *experience* classical Chinese culture in China.

-The Core Course 1110 in Nanjing definitely benefited my studying of Chinese classics, philosophy, and culture. This study abroad program brought us to China, so we, the students, got a first-handed experience of China that they (the students in the classroom in NYC) could never experience. For example, professor Huang actually brought us to the Xuanwu Park when talking the Yi Jing and few other poets. In the park, we saw how Yi Jing is still the foundation of many other Chinese philosophies. We also saw the sites that those poets had lived. Those sites gave inspiration to the poets. We were able to go to those sites that the poets had been to. Those students in NYC are not able to experience this. They can only see the photos of the sites. Studying in Nanjing and studying in the classroom in NYC are totally different. The course materials are similar; however, what we learned out of it is different.

Moreover, we actually saw the living style of the local Chinese people while we are in Nanjing and few other major cities in China. We tied what we saw in China to what we learned in class. For instance, we saw that the local Chinese people obey their parents. Immediately, we can see that this is an effect of Confucius teaching. Finally, even though the course had a time limit, we were still able to learn the most important Chinese classics and philosophies, starting with the Book of Changes (Yi Jing) to Zhou Dynasty to the Book of Songs to Laozi, Kongzi, Mengzi, Zhuangzi and Xunzi to Han to Tang and Song poetry, etc. It is worth it to study the Core Course 1110 in China. Therefore, I will like to thank Brooklyn College for this unique opportunity.