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Building Bridges and the Ties that Bind: Bringing Us Together but Respecting Our Differences

by Simon Mahony

1. Introduction

This paper covers the main themes of my keynote talk delivered at the Digital Humanities Congress 2024 held at the University of Sheffield. It draws on two decades of experience in Russell Group universities and builds on a decade of extensive networking with digital humanities (DH) centres and researchers in mainland China, including running student workshops there which focus on cultural aspects. In addition, I have recently completed a three-year teaching and research contract at a Chinese university which is part of Project 211, Project 985, and the Double First-Class Construction.

Firstly, a thank you to the organisers for the invitation; it was my honour and great pleasure to speak at what is an exceptional conference, particularly as I was unable to attend the previous one as I was based in China at that time and my travel was still restricted. And to my audience, thank you for still being there for the final session.

I'll unpack the title of my talk as the paper progresses, but it draws on my experiences over many years of digital humanities (DH) teaching and research in both the UK and China. The paper starts with some background to make my positionality clear, and my experience; my authority, if you like, for speaking to this topic. Positionality is important as it colours our perspective; it influences our thinking, and this needs to be clarified at the start. It is often overlooked (Colón-Aguirre and Bright, 2022) and acknowledged here to clarify my position regarding the context. My experience is limited to the UK and mainland China, and I acknowledge that this is a particular perspective with a mainly Western focus and one that comes from a privileged position in academia. This experience is limited to the mainland of China as DH has developed in different ways in Hong Kong and Taiwan, according to their material and the research interests of the scholars there. We live in a globalised society and now have a global DH field; there are similarities and differences between the East and the West as well as academic and cultural differences that must be taken into consideration. Much of my work over the last years have been to explore how we might come closer together. My research interests are fairly broad and listed at the end and so won't be repeated here.

What I like to call my basic training was in the Classics Department at King's College London and so I have a traditional humanities background. I keep my links to classics as a former Associate Fellow at the Institute of Classical Studies (2010 – 2024). My graduate studies were on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a collection of amazing stories told by a master storyteller.

> *In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas*
>
> *corpora; di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illa)*
>
> *adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi*
>
> *ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen! (Ovid, 2004. 1:1-4)*

> *I speak of bodies changed into new forms;*
>
> *Gods (from whom these things arose)*
>
> *Inspire my enterprise and lead my work*
>
> *In one continuous song from the first beginnings*
>
> *to our own times. (Trans. Mahony)*

This is the Proem – the first four lines that tell us, in the words of the poet himself, what the work is about. We read that it's about new things (*In nova*) and changes (*mutatas*) – Ovid's meter changes from elegiac couplets to epic hexameter; the poem as well as the protagonists change into new forms: Daphne transforming into a tree to escape the amorous advances of Apollo, Actaeon transformed into a stag to get ripped apart by his own hounds as punishment for accidentally seeing Diana bathing, and many others. It is about new things (*In nova*), and about changes (*mutatas*), and above all, through these changes, it prompts the reader to consider what it is that makes us human.

My other mentor was Plato's Socrates, challenging us to question ideas and our preconceptions, what we think we already know, the importance of asking questions rather than giving answers, and the difference between knowledge (that we give to our students) and wisdom (that we hope to teach them). Hence the intention here, and in all my talks, is to raise questions for discussion rather than attempting to give any definite answers; to help facilitate a dialogue to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presuppositions. Scholarship starts with questions and DH gives us ample opportunity to address old questions using more data, to allow multiple perspectives, to ask new and better questions, ones that were not possible before. And just as the speech of Socrates in Plato's *The Apology* this article will be in a conversational style, as my keynote was, rather than in the language of a formal research article.

During my graduate studies I was very fortunate to get work as a TA at the Centre for Computing in the Humanities (CCH) at King's, which later became the Department of Digital Humanities, and was then taken on as staff, learning my craft as I progressed. In January 2010 I took up a new post at UCL as part of the team for, the about to be launched, UCL Centre for Digital Humanities (UCLDH), working as Programme Director (2011-217) for our MA/MSc in DH and then as the Centre Director (2017-2020).

My first trip to China was in 2014 to represent UCL at the China Scholarship Council's (CSC) International Graduate Scholarship Fair (IGSF) in Beijing. This was the time that corresponded to the significant increases in the number of Chinese students entering UCL. I represented UCL at four consecutive Graduate Fairs and during those years began networking, building connections, giving guest talks, and running workshops there. A major focus of my visits, talks, and lectures was making connections and bringing East and West DH a little closer together.[1] I discovered the wealth of amazing DH research and projects being developed in mainland China with very little (if any) attention from the West, as well as their strong culture of hospitality. I was very fortunate to also receive funding from UCL Global Engagement which enabled more networking trips to China. In those years I was privileged to be able to attend many events in China, to forge networking connections and develop friendships there.

Following my retirement from UCL in September 2020, I took up a post as Executive Director of a new research centre at Beijing Normal University at Zhuhai (BNUZH). In my first year (9 months) at

the Zhuhai campus, I needed to learn afresh how to navigate and negotiate the complexities of university institutional procedures. In China they are very different. I had no formal introduction, induction, or training. I did, however, have a great deal of help from my hard-working assistant. My assistant had to manage my expectations and advise me on the delicate issues around the correct interpretation of things that were said (and forms of non-verbal communication), and any cultural issues that I might not be aware of. A student trained fortunately in intercultural communication.

Zhuhai is a coastal city in Guangdong in what has become known as the Greater Bay Area (GBA) and just across from Hong Kong. It is also the mainland end of the longest bridge in the world and showcase of Chinese engineering, the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge. This has prompted the use of the bridge as a metaphor in many of my talks. Much of my work over the last decade has been to act as a bridge between China and the UK as well as facilitating connections within China herself. The bridge joins people and communities together but, importantly, the end points are firmly rooted in their points of origin. Here Hong Kong island is now linked directly with the mainland but firmly rooted at both ends.

2. Discussion

Applying this concept more widely, we live, work and communicate in an ever-shrinking globalised world but does that, in fact, bring us closer together? Our ubiquitous connections facilitated by

modern technology, particularly social media applications, blur the boundaries between work and home, between family, friends, and colleagues. This became more apparent following the changes in working practice brought about by the pandemic with lockdowns and the move to more working at home. Our private and public spheres overlap as we are constantly connected by our smartphone. Nevertheless, this is often an illusion of connectivity with a focus on the technology rather than the communication (Turkle, 2011). Do we have genuine global connections? Despite the affordances of the Internet our multicultural and multilingual world still imposes barriers with a tendency to separate us culturally, linguistically, and regionally, according to language and location, or more precisely by language and time zone. In person connections usually occur through conferences and other events but otherwise communication is mediated by our online presence, what we see and read online, who we meet and speak to online.

The development of DH as an academic field has followed similar pathways in both the Western Anglophone sphere and in mainland China. Both have grown out of the large-scale digitisation of manuscripts to create full-text databases, although different projects have created different models for doing this. Regarding China, this development is well documented in (Chen and Tsui, 2022) and so not repeated here. Moreover, both have moved away from purely text-based studies and even where text is the source data we both work in different ways such as modelling and visualising data, network analysis, Linked Open Data, and so on. Both use mixed methods, quantitative and qualitative methodologies although these are necessarily varied by culture, language and location. Working with Chinese texts brings with it the problems of the sheer number of characters and

subtle differences in scripts when compared to Latin based language systems. It is also necessary to acknowledge the preponderance (or hegemony) of the English language with regards to journal publications and the pressure to publish in the English language, which is also true in East Asia, and distorts the metrics (Mahony, 2018).

There are significant pertinent similarities between China and the West; we both study ancient sources with our canonical collection of texts. We make use of manuscripts and other cultural artefacts to help us to understand how our culture has developed and how that relates to us now. Both East and West appreciate the importance of their classical texts in understanding our heritage, how we link the past with the present and, hopefully, point the way to our future.

Research-led pedagogy is a phrase that we often hear but what does it mean? It should be where we take what we learn from our research and feed that back into our teaching. What we gather from developing research projects being passed back into our teaching in various ways – techniques, ways of thinking, methodology, and class examples. My main job over my years in academia has been teaching with all the other things being 'outside of my contracted hours' – a phrase I learnt in my first year at UCL. These are the activities that can be interesting, productive, and at the same time allow collaboration and contact with other academics but that are not part of our formal job description; the personal research and projects that we develop beyond the specific terms of our contract. Here we need to consider what it is that we are teaching in DH. We need to give our students knowledge but, going back to Socrates, what we wish to teach them is wisdom. Rather

than just teaching skills we need to teach our students how to learn, to be critical of and to question everything. We teach (or should teach) principles, methodology, and critical thinking as well as the appropriate use of tools and software (Mahony and Pierazzo, 2013). We feed all these things into the class examples we use to engage our students.

There is a cultural implication here and particularly concerning the different learning styles and methods of instruction; Socratic versus Confucianism; collectivism versus individualism. This is an extensive topic and is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, undergraduate students, wherever they are from, always have the same concerns and questions: will this be in the exam? what do I need to do to achieve a good grade? What is relevant with regards to the title of this article, however, are the expectations. In mainland China the marking system is like that of the USA rather than the UK with 90% equalling an A grade rather than the 70% of the UK system. All my marking had to be adjusted from the UK standard to meet their assessment criteria. As well as including summative assessment (in my case an unseen closed book written exam), credit is given (or withheld) for participation, attendance as well as a mid-term exam/test.

During my stint at BNUZH my undergraduate teaching was very different from what I was used to in the UK. My classes were consistently scheduled for 18:00 to 19:40 – two 45-minute slots with a ten-minute break in between. It was not possible to survey the entire student body, but teaching slots were evidenced in the campus timetable from an 08:00 start until 21:30 finish every day except for Sunday, with a two-hour lunch break (presumably to allow a sleep). The academic year was

separated into two formal semesters with an additional short summer term for modules when additional credit was needed. A full module was 18 weeks teaching plus a mid-term break and exam week, making 20 weeks in total for each. Surveying my Teaching Assistants (TAs), they each had 15 classes per week. I asked them for these details so that I would not give them tasks on busy days. In my second year one of them started their week at 08:00 on Monday with their final class being 19:50 to 21:30 on Saturday. Sundays were generally kept clear for when sessions had to be rescheduled. In addition to this all undergraduates had two weeks of military training annually – usually in the summer – making a total of 42 weeks (without taking any additional modules in the summer term).

My DH module was an optional elective and so I had full flexibility about content and assessment – for example, I didn't insist on a midterm exam. However, the university system is very conservative in nature and university education is largely arranged by disciplinary categories and DH falls outside those. Put simply, (at the time of my contract 2020 – 2023) it did not have an institutional home. Since then, DH seems to have been assimilated into Chinese Language and Literature, probably because of the early focus on textual scholarship.

3. Development of Digital Humanities

For the material referred to in my keynote see (Mahony and Fu, 2023) and (Mahony and Gao, 2019). However, for an insider view it is always best to listen to the insiders; see (Tsui, Zhu, and Chen,

2023) 'Finding Flexibility to Teach the "Next Big Thing"' in *What We Teach When We Teach DH: Digital Humanities in the Classroom*.

There is no definitive history of DH in the West or in China. We can, however, track its development by looking at digital projects using humanities material, the establishment of DH research centres, DH events, and DH teaching.

There is a long history of digital projects in China going back to the 1980s and the mass digitisation of the classics of Chinese Literature. The application of computational techniques and methodologies to humanities material in mainland China arguably goes back even further, through the 1970s (the Chinese version of the standard for machine reading of library catalogues, MARC – CNMARC) and the 1980s (Chinese Character Codes for Information Exchange – GB2312-80); this was followed in the 1990s with Digital Dunhuang, and in the 2000s with CBDB (China Bibliographic Database) (Mahony and Gao, 2019; Tsui, 2020; Chen and Tsui, 2022). The term DH first appeared in a Chinese context in 2009 with a presentation at the ADHO conference of that year, hosted at the University of Maryland, USA, titled, *Co-word Analysis of Research Topics in Digital Humanities*, with presenters from the Universities of Wuhan and Ritsumeikan. This coincided with the publication of a journal article in the same year, *Analyzing structures and evolution of digital humanities based on correspondence analysis and co-word analysis* (Wang and Inaba, 2009), developed from that presentation

The first DH centre in mainland China was established at the University of Wuhan in 2011, followed by Nanjing 2017, Peking University in 2019, Shanghai Normal University in 2020, with many more following in the subsequent years. In addition, there are well established DH research centres in many other institutions such as Shanghai Library, Renmin, Shanghai, and Zhejiang Universities. DH is a developing field with much interest. With this interest and the development of DH, formal events followed. The first Digital Humanities PKU (Peking University) Forum was held in 2016 and every year until the global pandemic restricted travel and gatherings. I had the pleasure and honour of being an invited speaker in 2018 and 2019. The First China National Digital Humanities Conference was held at Dunhuang in 2019 followed by the establishment of the Digital Humanities Special Committee (Organisation Alliance) at the second national conference held at Shanghai Library in 2020. There are many other DH events such as DHEA – East Asian Ancient Books Digital Humanities. Looking at China beyond the mainland there is also a Taiwanese Association for Digital Humanities that has been affiliated with ADHO since 2018. There is also the newly formed Hong Kong Association for Digital Humanities that was established and held its first conference at the University of Hong Kong in 2025. DH is very strong in both Hong Kong and Taiwan, but these have developed separately and are linked to the materials and interests of the scholars there. My experience is mostly limited to mainland China and hence this talk is too.

There are many similarities but also differences with the West. As above, there has been a long history of digital projects, but the early work was not framed as DH (Tsui, 2020), with the term only being widely used there after 2011. DH in both regions began with mass-digitisation and the

development of large-scale databases. But in China this was usually by Library Science and Information Studies rather than DH (Chen and Tsui, 2022; Mahony and Fu, 2023). There is a clear connection with DH research in China being first developed in the libraries (Xia and Bao, 2020), with the main participants being those at Peking University Library and Shanghai Library (Wang *et al.*, 2020). The first DH Forum held at PKU in 2016 and those in the following years were hosted by the university library. The International Library and Digital Humanities (2017) conference 'to explore the role that libraries played in the development of DH in China and beyond' was hosted at the University Town Library of Shenzhen. The 9th Shanghai International Library Forum (SILF 2018) held at Shanghai Library, which had a well-established DH research group, included a DH keynote and DH session track (Mahony and Gao, 2019).

There is, nevertheless, a similar connection between research and teaching. The difficulty in mainland China is finding a home for the teaching of DH as, because of its interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary nature, it does not fit neatly into any of the established disciplinary hierarchies and lacks supporting institutional structures (Tsui *et al.*, 2023). University teaching is organised there in a rigid hierarchy of first-order disciplines, with second-order sub-disciplines nested within them and all need approval from the relevant ministerial authorities. This impacts on the funding and allocation of resources which in turn leads to a lack of incentive to organise new courses, particularly if they do not fit within one of the top-level disciplines. Hence there is a tension with interdisciplinary working and the rigid disciplinary structures, which also has an impact on academic advancement for staff. Consequently, just as in the West, it is less problematic for established senior staff to get involved in innovative working when compared to junior staff and

early career researchers. The result has been the informal teaching of DH. My course at Zhuhai (Introduction to DH in a Global Context), for example, was an optional elective within the School of Education for the Future. Nevertheless, new developments are starting to be seen as the first full undergraduate DH programme was launched at the Inner Mongolia Normal University in 2023, with DH listed in the government ministry documents under Chinese Language and Literature. In the same year, my DH module at the Zhuhai campus found a new home in the Department of Language and Literature. The University of Renmin has a full master's programme, an undergraduate minor, as well as a PhD programme (Tsui *et al.*, 2023).

4. How Do We Know What We Know About Each Other?

DH teaching and research is evident in China and the West, but how do we know what we know about each other given that we are separated by language, location, and time zone? Put simply, it is by reading each other's work and/or speaking to each other; what we see and read online; who we meet and who we speak to in person; publications, attendance at conferences and other events, talks and meetings, collaborative working and collaborative publishing. Much of this is facilitated by travel and by developing an effective online presence.

Going back to the metaphor of the bridge representing the ties that bind us, we are (in the voice of the Remainers) stronger and better together. Working together is the most effective way to advance towards a shared and prosperous future for humanity as a whole. To achieve this, we need to

develop a common understanding, to reach out beyond our own limited cultural spheres and learn about others. Hence, we need to build bridges to share knowledge and learning, to overcome cultural barriers and other obstacles, to achieve harmony between our civilisations as when learning about others we learn about ourselves. It is the differences along with the commonalities that help us to do so and these need to be respected.

There are, however, significant challenges and our differences need to be understood as well as acknowledged. Language is an obvious one, but it is not the only barrier as our academic systems are very different. Localisation is not simply translation. We need to find common ground, make connections, and build on them once made. Moreover, it is important to be aware of cultural diversity, to allow greater inclusion and to be empathetic of others. We need to find common interests and common ground that we can build on. There are significant issues around access to materials and information online as well as publication venues. For example, for collaborative work we need to have agreements on publications; how and where should we publish to ensure that all contributors get appropriate credit? How should we order the names on joint publications; should we publish Open Access and if so, who has funds for the APC (Article Publication Charge)? Transferring funds between departments in the same institution is problematic enough but moving funds across institutions and across international borders is even more so.

Moreover, the ability to make connections, establish relationships, and create networks is dependent to a large extent on institutional and financial constraints. Without communication

there can be no exchange of the ideas that might lead to collaboration, which is the essential constituent in digital humanities research and practice, and for the seeding of future projects. This relies heavily on the availability of travel budgets and funds to host visiting scholars and researchers, as well as conference attendance. It is also dependent on our willingness to travel and to step outside of our familiar comfort zones to reach out to new audiences and engage beyond our limited echo-chamber. Without doing so, we are destined to meet, greet, and discuss our topics of interest and research only with those people that we already know. Institutional support, particularly in the form of funding, is needed for cooperation and collaboration across borders.

With regard to the name order on publications, in the West, there are established disciplinary conventions such as first and last (with the lead author first and supervisor/professor last), alternatively the lead author first and the rest in alphabetical order. This is not the case in academic institutions in mainland China. There, only the first author and corresponding author receive academic credit; there is an assumption that the corresponding author has more involvement in the article, rather than being the member of the team keeping track of the publishing process and circulating the proofs. Also, multiple authors are listed according to their relative contribution to the article. Consider, as I often argued in response, (Walsh *et al.*, 2021) where we have 13 contributing authors with the lead author followed by the rest in alphabetical order.

Place of publication is also another conflicting issue. Academic discourse is through the long-established peer-reviewed publication model with UK universities requiring research output to be

published Open Access to be included in the REF (Research Excellence Framework) as do major funders for research that they support with moves now to make the data on which that research is based also available openly (Mahony, 2022). In this way more people will read your work, download and citation metrics will increase. In the UK this is also needed for staff promotion.

In mainland China of most importance is the place of publication. For example, my contract at BNUZH specified the number of publications required during my tenure and also that they needed to be in SSCI, A&HCI, SCI. On arrival I had no idea what these acronyms meant and needed to ask – after two decades in UK universities I had never come across them before: SSCI (Social Science Citation Index), A&HCI (Arts and Humanities Citation Index), SCI (Science Citation Index). These are the classification of journals according to the Clarivate Web of Science Master Journal List (as an alleged trusted and highly valued citation index). In many institutions, promotions (or indeed keeping your job) require publications in the Web of Science Master Journal list where the value of research is based on the Journal Impact Factors. Almost all of these are English language publications and hence the pressure to publish in English as mentioned above. Articles published in the Chinese equivalent, CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) database and marked as CSSCI, count for considerably less regarding academic advancement (promotion and tenure). The reality is that the Chinese universities need something that is countable, especially when considering staff promotion, and meeting their research targets for government funding, which is additionally complicated when the major journals only publish in English. Many UK universities including UCL and Sheffield are signatories to DORA (the San Francisco Declaration on Research

Assessment) which states that research should be judged on its merit rather than place of publication. The DORA website points to the known deficiencies of Journal Impact Factors as a tool for research assessment. Nevertheless, for those assessing research publications in a foreign language, impact factors and SSCI etc. are a countable metric.

It can also be argued that this Open Access approach can lead to bias in knowledge production, which is contrary to its ethos, particularly with current moves towards cOAlition S with the requirement for full and immediate publication (cOAlition S, 2019). Only those that have access to funding can pay open access APCs which tends to disadvantage early career researchers and junior staff as well as those in less well funded institutions or based in less developed countries. On the other hand, CNKI (CSSCI) journals also require an APC even though there is no open access option, which similarly disadvantages junior scholars. In reality, it is a private monopoly and there is much push back against CNKI with some institutions no longer subscribing due to their fees, and publication policies.[2]

As always DH should be inclusive and not exclusive (Mahony, 2018). We have international institutes and centres which need to bring people together to facilitate and foster cooperation and collaborations. It is important to widen our perspectives and move away from rigid academic boundaries so that we avoid creating closed academic silos by encouraging openness and the sharing of research output and data. We need to reach out to new audiences and engage beyond our echo-chamber otherwise we are destined to discuss topics of interest and research only with those

people we already know. Restricting cultural perspectives restricts our field and inclusion benefits us all.

Back again to building bridges and the ties that bind us together. Education and communication are key to this process. The starting point is our educational programmes as when we teach our students, we also teach ourselves and increase our own understanding. Mutual learning leads to a deeper understanding, not only about others but also about ourselves. Our students need to be guided to explore different cultures, philosophies, and histories. They need to become aware of their own positionality within a global context, to develop sensitivity about others and to be mindful of the differences. In doing so they need to understand cultural relativism and be aware that there is no single and universal standard for culture, but that each should be understood within its own context. We need to respect other cultures and other ways of doing things.

5. Conclusion

We should build bridges but at the same time be aware and respectful of the differences. Exchanges and mutual learning between different cultures require communication and understanding. These should be based on a common respect and the development of partnerships with a common understanding of the ways in which we can work together. What are the ties that bind us together? The ties of family, community, culture, language, traditions, religion, ideology and so on. It is arguably the common ideas and beliefs the tie people together; the things that we cannot escape

from and those that colour our perspective. The bridges bring us closer together, but we are firmly rooted, just as the end points of the bridges, in the culture that nurtured us during our developing years, building our values and belief systems as individuals and members of that society.

6. Coda

This article will finish with some direct observations concerning education during my time at BNUZH. This is not a systematic investigation of the curriculum, but it is empirical by observation and indicative of what is clearly considered to be an important part of an undergraduate education at a campus of a top-ranking institute of education in mainland China.

With my background in classics, I became very aware of the number of students that I came across studying books that were clearly from the Western canon of classical texts. This prompted my curiosity; why was this student reading Odysseus and the Cyclops (in English) and why did this other one had Cicero's *De Officiis* (in Chinese but with a clear picture of Cicero on the cover) on their desk? This started a conversation about these texts and whether they knew why they had been assigned. The former had been set passages from the *Odyssey* as part of their English language acquisition and practice course (they were on a programme training them to become a teacher of the English language) with a module option on Western classics and the latter (majoring in International Education of Chinese) for a general philosophy course.

What was prompted by casual observation was followed up with a survey of the students in my classes and the few others that I had contact with on our campus to see if this was simply random. I was also curious to know whether they knew why these texts had been assigned. As a Normal University (an institution of higher education that focuses mainly, but not exclusively, on teacher training), my understanding was that most of the students were being prepared to enter the workplace as school teachers, either teaching Chinese or English language.

From my survey, the texts set for reading, mostly in Chinese translation, were very wide ranging and set for a variety of reasons. Passages from Homer, both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, were common to many modules in language acquisition but also in literature classes with the Cyclops as an example of the uncivilised 'other' in contrast to Odysseus and his crew. Students were set several chapters to read and then asked to discuss what it meant to be civilised. The same tutor (from the UK and a scholar of modern literature) also set extracts from Sophocles' *Antigone* asking students to compare the two sisters' conceptions of the law and to see which one they sympathised with more. Another Sophoclean tragedy widely set was *Oedipus Rex*. The term 'tragedy' was unfamiliar to the students and the purpose of these readings was often unclear. It seemed that most students were familiar with the story of Troy, although probably from the movie and TV dramas as they spoke about the wooden horse, and with 'the rage of Achilles' being a repeated theme in their set readings. Many Western texts were included in general philosophy modules. Plato's *Republic* featured highly as an example of a utopian society. One particular course titled (in translation) 'Inheritance and Dissemination of Chinese Culture from a Global Perspective' also included, *Phaedo*, *Nicomachean*

Ethics, *Politics*, and *Meditations* alongside classics of Chinese philosophy from such as Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi. Other modules also included the *Bible* and the *Kuran*. When asked if they knew why these texts had been set, answers ranged from, 'To reflect on the evolution of Western culture and Western-centrism since modern times', 'To understand the 150 years of Chinese traditional culture in collision with Western culture', 'to study the essence of Chinese traditional culture for three thousand years', to 'think about the differences between China and the West in these stories of philosophy to broaden our horizon'.

Understanding cultural background is clearly of importance in the curriculum at BNUZH as well as appreciating the cultural and ideological characteristics of these works. It is apparent that the students were not always clear about why the specific readings were set, sometimes a brief explanation was given and sometimes none, but they often felt that the specific texts had been set because they were the ones that the module tutors were most familiar with and hence comfortable with. What was clear was that all the students at BNUZH had some degree of grounding in Western literature and Western philosophy, some to a greater extent than others, but as part of their undergraduate curriculum all of them had exposure to Western culture and how that differed historically and philosophically from Chinese. This was not limited to students of foreign languages and culture but at Zhuhai these texts are on the syllabus along with Marx and Mao Zedong, regardless of the programme.

Further, in conversation with my students, it came as a great surprise to them that Chinese philosophy and literature are not a standard part of a UK university education. It came as a greater

shock to learn that Western classical philosophy and literature are also not part of routine undergraduate teaching in the UK. As noted above, this was limited research conducted on the BNUZH campus and may or may not be indicative of other institutions. Similarly, there may be a stronger ethos of cultural understanding (including that of others) in a 'Normal' university such as BNUZH, with the spirit embedded in their motto 'Learn, so as to instruct others; Act, to serve as an example to all' and that seeks to be an institution 'that excels in education, culture, health, and technology'.[3] What is clear is that those educated to university level in China (certainly at BNUZH) have a far greater understanding of Western culture and the Western classical tradition of literature and philosophy than we in the West have of theirs.

7. References

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Footnotes

1. An example is an earlier talk at the Sheffield Congress in 2018. ↵
2. Jing Liu (2022) China's biggest academic database faces anti-monopoly probe. ↵
3. About BNUZH ↵