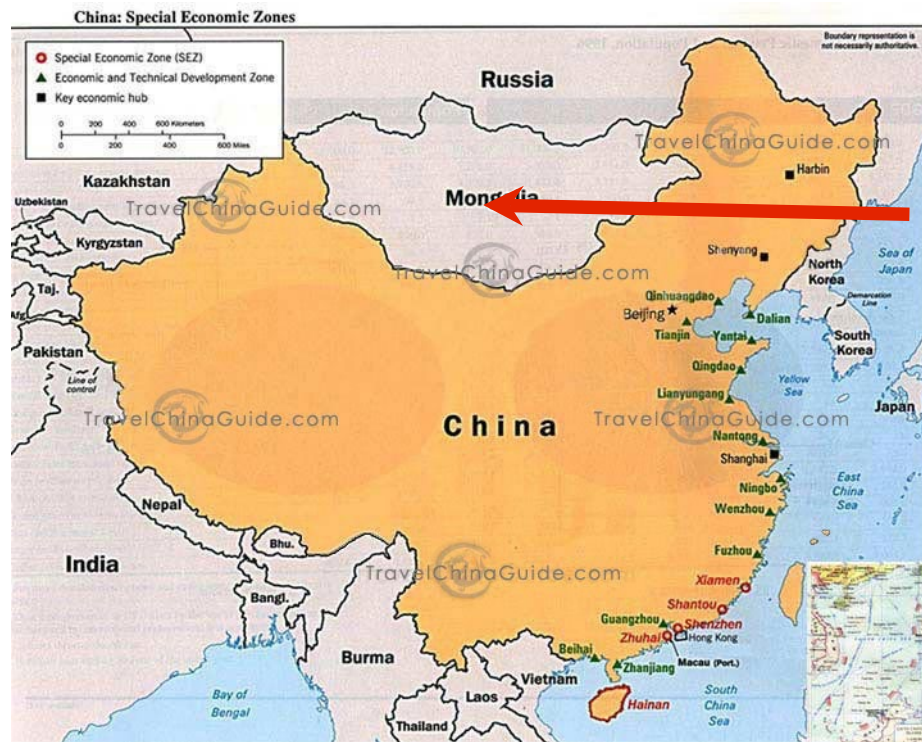




Joining the Global Conversation:

Cross-Cultural Exchange in China

In the academic years 2012-14, I was part of an experiment in the liberal arts; bringing the St. John's style of teaching to China



Here!

Bei Da Fu Zhong—the Affiliated High School of Peking University

Students at the Monday Morning assembly on the
basketball courts outside our windows.





China in Ferment

- While still firmly Communist in name, there is little that seems Communist in practice
- China is seeking to define itself and make decisions about its future—a little like high school and college students everywhere

The First Annual Conference on the Liberal Arts in China— Held in Xi'an, 2012

- The Needham question—Why did the Scientific Revolution happen in the West, not the East?
- Are the liberal arts the secret to creativity?
- Is a liberal arts education intrinsically Western?
- How dangerous are the liberal arts?
- How did Mao feel about them?



A Seminar on Change

- Invented our experiment
- SJC style—great books and conversation
- Began with Homer's Iliad and talked about Achilles, who became a permanent part of the discussions



Here is the most obvious cultural contrast—Guan Yu, China's Greatest Warrior

- A paragon of loyalty and righteousness
- Worshipped as a god even today



Here is another possible comparison:



- The Journey to the West
- The mind monkey
- The rebel
- Great power of change
- Learning maturity




What is the best life?

- The classic philosophical question on which Achilles meditates in his anger and retreat from the Trojan war
- When I asked my Chinese students this question, they answered: “Being rich.” What would Marx say?
- And yet, when pressed, they understood perfectly the problem of whether to compete for the world’s prizes of wealth and honor, or whether to pursue their private lives or interests in music or fine arts.
- As only children, they did not feel they had the option to indulge themselves—they had families to support.

Adding Questions

- Society's interest in Justice—Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Amazingly, they were evenly divided on the issue, just like the jury in the play.
- How to deal with Empire? (a great Chinese question)—Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the Forbidden City.



An aerial photograph of the Shanghai skyline at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, pink, and purple. The city is densely packed with skyscrapers. The Oriental Pearl Tower is prominent in the center, with its three spheres. The Bund is visible in the foreground, with several tall buildings. A circular white overlay is on the left side of the image, containing text.

Mathematics of Change

- Zeno says movement isn't logically possible
- Newton (and the world) does it anyway
- China is like that
- Shanghai singing



Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

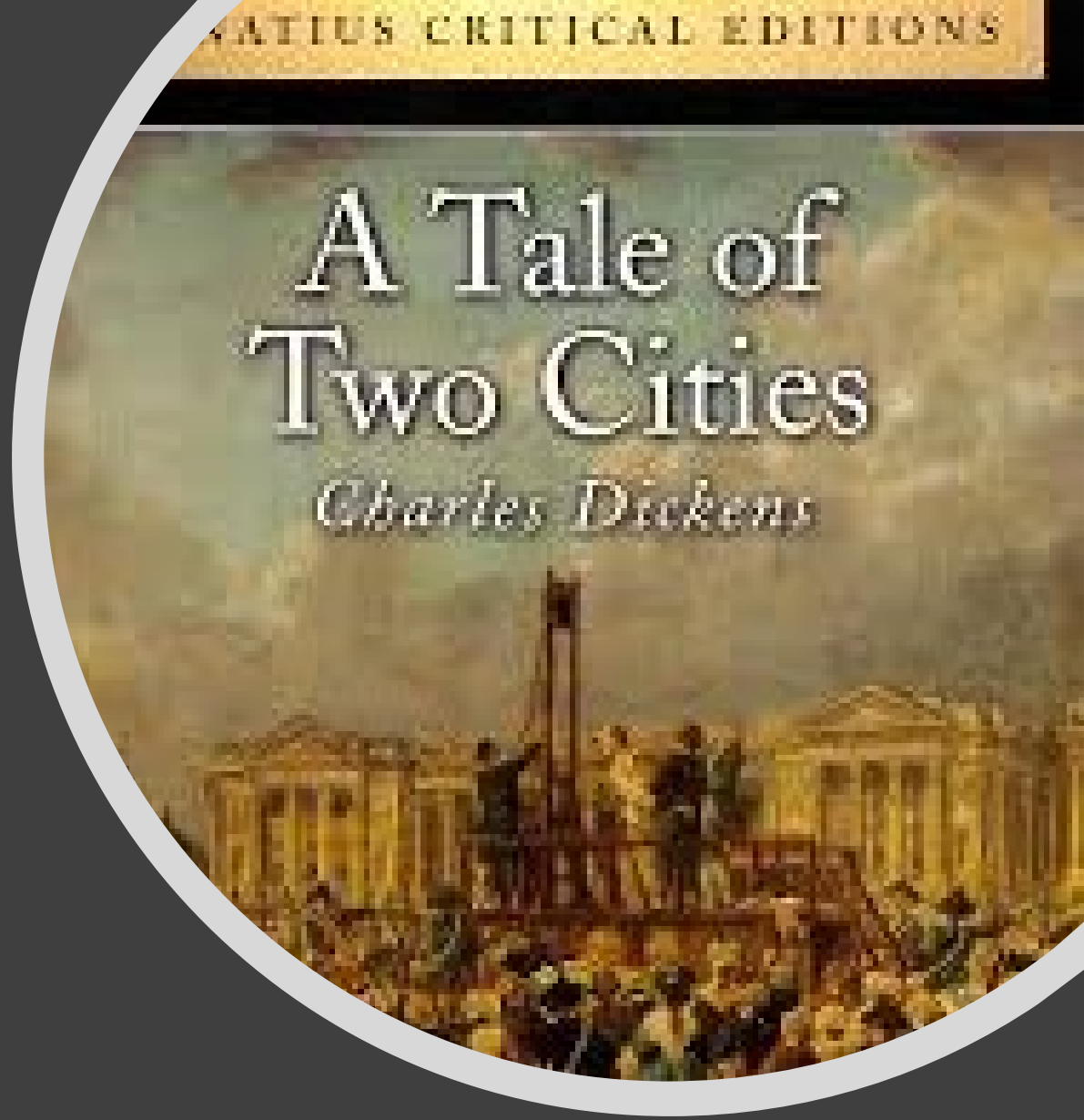


Real Conversations: Being Human

- “Is the monster human?” Alice asked. The question seemed to be the product of arguments outside the classroom.
- David looked at her in surprise and said, forgetting his English, “不是人 (Not human).”
- “Why not?” challenged Anne, prepared for David’s reaction and ready to take it on.

The Last Big Book on Change

- The French Revolution is important to Chinese thinking.
- Nixon and Zhou En Lai
- My student's mother





The Reign of Terror

- The imperatives of Reason brought to bear on society (or was it the imperatives of resentment?)



Cultural Revolution

- My students saw a parallel immediately

Value of the Liberal Arts to the Cross- Cultural Conversation

- “too many of us”
- I want liberal arts--and the kinds of conversations about books that we had--to convince them that it matters what they think, feel and believe.
- My experience with these highly creative and gifted students was that learning to speak to each other over these books sparked new ideas for all of us. The Chinese authorities may be right about the liberal arts.

Value of the Cross-Cultural Conversation to the Liberal Arts

- There is no avoiding the cultural exchange that is occurring already, so we should think about how to make it both responsible to the cultural settings of books and open to the creative possibilities of new readers.
- Readers sitting with Achilles in his tent or traveling with the Monkey King re-shaped the worlds in which the *Iliad* and the *Journey to the West* were created. Our own interconnected, environmentally fragile world badly needs such re-shaping.

My book about this Teaching Experience:

