

The Development of Cross-Cultural Talent

Keynote Address

at the

Meritorious Foreign Teacher Award Ceremony

Beijing

April 27, 2014

Jeffrey S. Lehman

It is deeply moving for me to have been named one of the ten recipients of the Medal of Honor this morning. The teaching profession has evolved dramatically over the course of SAFEA's sixty years of existence, and I am grateful to have been able to play even a small part in that evolution. The past six years have given me the opportunity to teach some of China's most talented young people, and to strategize with some deeply thoughtful adults about how best to prepare these young people for life in the twenty-first century.

A twenty-first century education comprises a number of different elements. But the element that may be the most novel, the most different from what constituted an outstanding education in the past, is the need to help today's talents to become cross-cultural talents. I am delighted to be able to discuss that one element with you today.

When I was growing up in the United States, my world had strong boundaries. I knew there was a world beyond America. I knew that my ancestors had come from other countries. I read books written by people who had lived in other countries. From time to time I met people who had come from other countries.

But more than 99.9% of my interactions were with other Americans. My worldview was shaped by American television and American newspapers and American movies. All the people I spoke with every day were Americans. And all the people my parents spoke with every

day were Americans. My communications network was bounded. And I assumed that this would be true for my entire lifetime.

I was wrong. My children's world is totally different. The internet means that people are interacting with people all around the world every day. The WTO means that international trade has gone from 30% of total global production of goods and services to 60%. And cheaper transportation means that people are moving around.

This is, in my opinion, wonderful. The technologies of globalization have enabled us to live much more interesting lives. We are connected to all humanity, and that is thrilling for its own sake. And we have the opportunity to work in cooperation with people who have had very different experiences, so that we can all understand things more profoundly than would have been possible if we were limited to working with people just like ourselves.

At the same time, however, we have had to come face to face (literally) with two realities that we did not appreciate before. The first reality is that all humans are similar to one another, no matter where they were born. All humans value happiness and love and respect. All humans avoid pain. But the second reality is that people who were raised in different cultures understand those values in very different ways. And those differences can lead people to misunderstand one another very badly. They can lead a person to think another person was trying to insult them when in fact the other person was trying to show them respect. They can lead a person to think another person is stupid when in fact the other person is very wise indeed.

We do not have time today to discuss all of the wonderful writing that has been done during the past twenty years about the nature of cultural differences. Some of the most interesting writing has discussed the way that the differences seem to be largest between East and West, and may be the very largest between China and the United States. People who are biologically identical but who grow up in different societies learn to see the world in strikingly different ways.

I would, however, like to give you a small taste of this writing. I just finished reading a book called Tiger Writing, by Gish Jen.

Gish Jen's mother is from Shanghai, and her father is from Jiangsu Province. They each moved to America in the 1940's and met each other in New York. Their daughter Gish (a name she substituted for her given name, Lillian) grew up in the suburbs of New York and attended Harvard and Stanford and the University of Iowa. She married an Irish-American named David O'Connor.

Jen's career has been as a writer. She mostly writes fiction, and her fiction has won almost every literary prize that exists. In recent years she has been frequently described as the Great American Novelist.

Her book Tiger Writing is not a work of fiction. It is, rather, a collection of speeches she gave at Harvard last year about cultural differences and the way her Chinese identity and her American identity have each affected the way she writes.

In the first speech, she discusses her father's autobiography. She shows with great care how her father thought of his own life. He was not "the star of his own movie." Instead he was part of a long history. He was one generation in a family that went back thousands of years. He was one of the many people who passed through beautiful buildings that were intended to last many lifetimes.

In the second speech, Jen connects her father's autobiography with work by the psychologists Qi Wang and Richard Nisbett. These two researchers have drawn together a substantial amount of evidence demonstrating that people who grow up in America and people who grow up in China really are taught to see the world in different ways. Chinese are taught to study a scene; Americans are taught to study the primary objects in a scene. Chinese are taught to study relationships; Americans are taught to study key points. Chinese are taught to think of themselves as connected to their environment, as interdependent with other people; Americans are taught to think of themselves as independent actors.

In the third and final speech, Jen talks about how her own writing combines elements of the American identity with elements of her parents' Chinese identity. The characters in her writing are both independent and interdependent. She appreciates both ways of seeing, both ways

of thinking, and she enjoys trying to fuse them into a single new way of thinking about the world.

Gish Jen is clearly a cross-cultural talent. My question for today is how we can teach our students to be like Gish Jen.

In my opinion, a strong program of cross-cultural education should combine both reflection and action. We need to have our students both think and do. We need to create environments where are our students study this topic and where they also feel it in their hearts.

How can we get our students to study cross-cultural differences? I believe that a full curriculum should combine both direct and indirect approaches to the subject. A full curriculum would ensure that all students read the scholarship of people like Qi Wang and Richard Nisbett. It would push them to think carefully about their own cognitive styles, and about whether those styles can be linked to their cultural backgrounds or not. It would require students to think carefully about the key question of change: assuming that children finish high school imprinted with the ways of thinking favored by their own local culture, how much can they expand their ways of thinking to build more complex approaches, in the style of Gish Jen?

Those are all direct approaches to studying cross-cultural differences. I believe a full curriculum should also include meaningful indirect approaches. Such approaches should include – at a minimum – language learning and the reading of great literature.

Language and culture are deeply intertwined. A language develops in response to the needs of native speakers to describe the world their own culture asks them to see. And at the same time people who speak one language are also encouraged to think about the world in the ways that the language makes seem most natural.

In today's world, I believe that all students should be expected to learn both English and Chinese. This exercise will go a long way to facilitating cross-cultural understanding.

As for the reading of great literature – especially great fiction – I believe that the humanities provide the greatest vehicle for stretching young

people's imaginations. Fiction requires us to put ourselves into a world different from our own, and it requires us to see that world sympathetically. When we read fiction written by people who grew up in different cultures from our own, we are pressed to see the world through their eyes. In that way our capacity for empathy is strengthened.

So far I have been discussing study, the world of thought. Now I want to turn to action, the world of doing. If we want our students to become effective in multicultural settings, there is no substitute for practice. We need to put them into such settings and ask them to engage, to reflect, to understand, and to overcome conflicts.

To enable our students to practice, we need first to construct diverse student bodies. We need to bring to our campuses students from different cultural backgrounds, and we need to be thoughtful about how much diversity is required in order to give students the opportunity to practice.

But it is not enough to create a diverse student body. Interacting with people from different cultures is stressful. It is challenging. We need to give our students permission to spend part of each day with people like themselves, so that they can relax, but we also need to push them to spend another part of each day stretching – reaching out and interacting with others who see the world differently from the way they do.

I consider NYU Shanghai an early attempt to develop a school with these principles in mind. Half our students are Chinese, and half come from other countries. We assign every Chinese student an international roommate, and vice versa. We talk almost every day about how important it is that they stretch themselves every day.

In our curriculum we require all our students to become proficient in English and in Chinese. And we require them all to read great literature from different cultures.

I am hopeful that these measures will help our students to become cross-culture talents like Gish Jen. But honestly I believe we are just starting out. I believe that over time we will learn to be much, much more effective at doing this. We are eager to get advice and suggestions from anyone who thinks and cares about these issues. For one thing, we

have invited Gish Jen to be with us next year. But I also hope to have the opportunity to learn from all of you in the days and months and years to come.

Thank you.