

'Cross-cultural conversations at cross-purposes'

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Part of my argument in the recent [neoliberalism debate](#) was that,

evidence of discontent about any aspect, be it ever so narrow, of what have been identified as neoliberal transformations is taken, without further justification, as a rejection of *all* of the phenomena that have been so identified

My point was that just because lots of people in different countries are critics of, say, structural adjustment programmes, we cannot leap to the conclusion that they share the same conception of the state and civil society and all agree on the proper balance of power and resources between the two; their motivations and assumptions might be quite different in each case.

This is a formal problem of cross-cultural description or comparison: the conversation at cross-purposes. We recognize something familiar in other people's statements, and rush to fill in the rest from our own common-sense ideas, which may be quite different. My favourite example of this is one that operates in both directions — a reciprocal conversation at cross-purposes.

Self-Cultivation, Jesus Christ, and Christ Jesus

Christian missionaries, mainly Americans, operate in China in spite of a prohibition on missionary activity. Their message tends to be the **rules-based** version of modern Evangelism that has taken so much of the world by storm over the past 30 years: don't drink, don't smoke, don't gamble, and so on.

Christians I have met in villages in the north of China, or people who were *interested in Christianity* as they would invariably put it, were, it seemed to me, used to thinking about religious practice quite differently: as being aimed at a gradual process of **self-cultivation**. Like an impressive athletic feat — such as running a marathon — this is something that is easy for anyone to admire. But to participate — that takes a certain degree of commitment, free time and self-confidence. Again and again, when I asked people if they were Christian they would self-deprecatingly say that they knew little about it, that they were busy, but planned to start being a Christian in the future, perhaps when the harvest was in and there was less farm work to be done.

I was in China researching the revival of Buddhism in Mongolian areas, and Buddhists — or people who were interested in Buddhism — would often tell me similar things: Buddhism is a deep culture that is very powerful, but not many people are capable of putting it into practice, they were happy being relatively passive admirers.

When the village Christians do practise, they see the purpose of self-denial not as the fulfilment of an imperative duty, but rather as a technology through which they will gain good fortune through hard work. This means that the practices taught by missionaries, sometimes long ago, tend to drift into more extreme forms of asceticism. For instance, in one village I was told that a religion of Christ Jesus had emerged to challenge the established religion of Jesus Christ. The followers of Christ Jesus interpreted the injunction to pray often as an esoteric teaching involving sitting absolutely still for hours with a wet towel on one's head — a dangerous as well as an uncomfortable proposition in windy, icy Inner Mongolia.

Guilty Buddhists

The reciprocal part of this conversation at cross-purposes is the adoption of Buddhism in many non-Asian contexts in which religion, especially monotheisms, tends to be thought of as a revelation of moral duty — that is, as part of a system of **rule-based morality** — rather than a set of technologies for self-development. The corollary of duty is guilt. If what I have read is representative, Western Buddhist leaders seem to be occupied quite a lot of the time with advising their followers not to feel guilty if they miss out on a meditation session (just google ["don't feel guilty for not meditating"](#) to see what I mean), or if they cannot resist eating meat.

This conversation at cross-purposes is facilitated by near-enough 'religion' concepts — false friends that make communication easy, even intuitive. The confusion that arises is evident in the accusations of hypocrisy, or justifications of apparent hypocrisy, that arose in early anthropological studies of Buddhism.

The idea that a Buddhist who does not follow Buddhist precepts is hypocritical, among my Inner Mongolian Buddhist friends at least, would be as inappropriate as accusing a Manchester United fan of being hypocritical for failing to play in the Premier League. On the other side, to my Chinese and Mongolian informants, foreign religionists — mainly those missionaries — often seem arrogant because they imagine that they themselves are capable right now, without any preparation, let alone indefinite deferment, of participating in all the practices that are commanded of them by their God. (I'm not making a point about Chinese people getting Christianity wrong, or non-Asians getting Buddhism wrong — I don't have a horse in those races, I'm just interested in the formal problem.)

A request

For some time I have been toying with the idea of compiling a compendium of cross-cultural conversations at cross-purposes, or cross-cultural faux amis / [false friends](#). It would include those situations in which concepts on each side of the conversation are different enough to produce disagreements or confusion, but similar enough that it may be unclear where the disagreement originates. Please let me know in the comments or by email if you know of any good examples for my collection.