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Peter J. Vernezze

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SOCRATES IN SICHUAN

*Chinese Students Search for
Truth, Justice, and the (Chinese) Way*

PETER J. VERNEZZE



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Peter J. Vernezze : Socrates in Sichuan: Chinese Students Search for Truth, Justice, and the (Chinese) Way before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Socrates in Sichuan: Chinese Students Search for Truth, Justice, and the (Chinese) Way:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Questioning China, Questioning Ourselves By John Richard Schrock- "Socrates in Sichuan: Chinese Students Search for Truth, Justice, and the (Chinese) Way" by Peter J. Vernezze; hardcover, 199 pages, copy; 2011. This is a short memoir of a university philosophy professor's experience teaching for two years (in the Peace Corps) at Sichuan Normal University in China. The storyline that holds the book together is his account of regular off-campus meetings where he invites all Chinese students to come engage in discussions of

various philosophical questions, in part, to expose students to the strategy of questioning and in part to himself learn the current attitudes and beliefs of China's next generation. In truth, this book is about 30-40 percent about Western philosophy insofar as Vernezze prefaces many chapters by setting the proposed question in a Western context or comparing the students viewpoints with various Western philosophers across the last 2400 years. This is not bad since most Western readers are deficient in our Western philosophical heritage. Vernezze is well-versed in Western philosophy but is no scholar in Chinese history. His reading of the basic Chinese classics by Confucius, the Tao Te Ching, and a few other works allows only the most superficial of comparisons. His strength is definitely on communication to the Western reader, not depth in Chinese philosophy or current worldview. Perhaps the best take-away lesson from this book is some sense of how tied to rote memorization the Chinese educational system has been since the Song Dynasty. It has won them first place in the international PISA exam, but no Nobel Prizes. His fight to get Chinese students to question is perhaps one of the best accessible published examples of China's current educational dilemma. The range of session topics that Vernezze provides his gatherings is impressive and gutsy: What is the good life, the impact of technology, a good marriage, the meaning of life, a hero, sanity, a good education, and human nature? He modifies sessions to address what they bring up after becoming frustrated with their observation that there are always two sides to every coin. He has them discuss the value of the past, what is funny, the limits of privacy, what is truth, and is prostitution wrong. He makes regular use of Richard Nisbett's "The Geography of Thought," a more scholarly book summarizing the very real differences between Asians and Westerners tested in various psychological studies. Vernezze's application of these studies to elucidate what he is encountering is correct but simplified from Nisbett's book. This may however be the only way to expose non-academic readers to the content of Nisbett's academic overview. Vernezze also provides a superficial introduction, only a hint, of the Monkey King, ying yang, and other mainstays in the background of students growing up Chinese. It becomes evident in these discussion sessions that "the self-determination that is so much a part of the Western psyche is simply not a trait of the Chinese mind." Books that are stories are easy to read and Vernezze provides a storyline that should hold the casual non-scholar reader. There are a few places where his storyline rises to admirable heights. In discussing fate, he recites "The Handbook of Epictetus" directive to act out the role that has been assigned to you, a thought-filled and elegant statement that strikes home with his Chinese student. Again and again, the concept of guanxi pops up and he provides example after example of how this quid-pro-quo relationship permeates all aspects of Chinese society. And in another discussion of love, one of his female students admitted that "...she believed in love, but did not think that she would find it. She was crying." This is good writing. Interlaced and not at all hidden in his text are occasional unexpected statements. He correctly observes that among the many Westerners who go to China, many may be good folks as are his Peace Corps volunteer colleagues, but some "...freelancers are not doing perceptions of the United States in China any favors." As a Westerner who has spent three years teaching in Hong Kong and accumulated several more years in 15 visits to China since, I also have seen a proportion of "ugly Americans" who reside in Asia in order to bask in their uniqueness and the polite hospitality of the East. I credit Vernezze for having the guts to point this out in print. On the other hand, he also throws his political comments into his commentary. While I can heartily agree with him in nearly all cases, these will cause readers on the political right to close the book and chuck it. If Asian cultures teach anything, it is to suppress such negative snide remarks and Vernezze is just too Western to do that. Some of the China-bashers who could most benefit from reading of his experiences will turn off. Unfortunately, Vernezze lacks the background to understand some of the events he witnesses. When an inspection team comes to accredit his university, the university requires students to attend morning exercises. He is unaware that this used to be the practice every morning at every university before the mid-1990s university reforms (along with Friday afternoon self-criticism sessions). I give Vernezze credit for admitting "...I am not a competent enough historian to judge whether Buddhism posed the existential threat to Confucianism..." In this glancing discussion he is referring to, indeed the Confucianists had a serious and centuries-long conflict with the Buddhists who operated to a great extent to deny forward-looking intellectual pursuits. There is some awareness of limitations, as you would expect of a philosophy professor. His ability to lead questioning sessions is definitely Vernezze's strength, and school teachers everywhere could gain inspiration in the Socratic method by reading these chapters. Unfortunately, Vernezze in one of his cheap shots alludes to China having no religious freedom and uses a one phrase allusion to the Falun Gong. Here he should have applied his own questioning to this allegation. Far from being a benign "combination of Buddhism and Taoism," this group conducted an immolation on Tiananmen Square that cost the life of a young adherent. There is also the fear that many members of this group will forsake care of their child to follow the doctrines of self. Where was America's religious freedom in the cases of David Koresh's group outside Waco, TX or the Jonestown mass suicide? America obviously draws the line at such cults. And can he use a broad paint brush to accuse China of religious oppression when Chinese Christians and other religious minorities go about their daily lives unbothered (violent groups exempted)? Here, our Socrates fails to be Socrates. A few other minor inconsistencies occur in the book. They may have blown their horns in Chengdu on the one-week anniversary of the Wenchuan earthquake, but they stopped Beijing for a moment of silence-- I was there. And NPR reported that the people of Chengdu used text messaging during the earthquake since voice phones would have gridlocked, contrary to Vernezze's description. And he is unaware that indeed, China did accept

help from outside during the earthquake relief, including water distillation units from Franklin Graham intended for Burma--but rejected there--very relevant to his discussion of China supposedly refusing disaster aid. His characterization of the 2009 influenza as "a relatively harmless virus" and "a minor inconvenience" is literally dead wrong, with this flu strain still causing many deaths to unvaccinated persons in the U.S. in 2014. He likewise is unaware of the Chinese government's attempt to expand celebrations of other holidays besides Spring Festival in an attempt to take travel pressure off of the trains, planes and roads during this one major holiday which has become the greatest human migration in the world. Vernezze misses the mark on sex education in China as well. The "plumbing" is clearly taught in the Chinese equivalent of our middle schools and is well illustrated in biology textbooks. It is simply matter-of-fact in China, but a Western preoccupation. Very few people can translate richly and accurately from one culture to another. Vernezze mentions Lin YuTang who was an early writer who carried his youthful understanding of China to the West and whose command of English was good, but whose command of English philosophy, culture and semantics was limited. Even in his earlier era, his statement that "thinking is but the tumbling about of words in the mind" reflects his limited Western depth. The best translators of Chinese culture to the West are those who grew up with a childhood in both. When Chinese-Americans read Pearl Buck, they exclaimed that this was truly a person who understood them. And American readers without a China experience could come a little closer to understanding China, limited however by their own lack of experience. Derk Bodde likewise had a foot in both cultures and languages as a child. His deep scholarly background, especially as a translator of the main text on Chinese philosophy by Yulan Fung, can provide a richer, deeper understanding to a Westerner who will nevertheless be limited by a Western reader's lack of experience in China. For all the negatives mentioned above, this is definitely a valuable book to read for insight into a culture that seeks the "middle way" and does not intervene in others' affairs. It provides some insight into a society that values education and responsibility. Through his eyes, we can understand more about who the Chinese are, and in so doing, understand ourselves better.

John Richard Schrock³ of 4 people found the following review helpful. In the tradition of Peter Hessler

By Peking Duck

This is a charming book. Peter Vernezze is another Peace Corps volunteer who, in the Peter Hessler tradition, chronicles his experience teaching college students in Sichuan. (The other great book on China by a former Peace Corps volunteer is Michael Meyers' superb *The Last Days of Old Beijing*.) Vernezze, who had taught philosophy in the US for 15 years, was an English teacher at Sichuan Normal University, and for two years he held a weekly discussion group on philosophy that grew increasingly popular. Being neither a "China expert" nor a philosophy expert (one semester in college), I found this book offered both a valuable primer on the influence of Confucius and the Tao, which is going strong to this day, as well as an intriguing glimpse into the mindset on contemporary young Chinese people. The author starts by describing the typical university classroom: rows of desks bolted to the floor, all facing the front-center of the room from which the professor will lecture them. The room is designed to discourage peer-to-peer discourse, and as Vernezze later explains, peer-to-peer discourse is something the Chinese student absolutely does not desire. They see themselves, he writes, as vessels into which the professor is expected to deliver his knowledge. They aren't interested in what their fellow students have to say. Anything of value will come from the teacher. So it makes perfect sense that he holds his philosophy discussion group in local coffee shops where students can sit facing one another. There, he challenges them with questions such as What is Truth? What is Sanity? Is life a matter of fate or free will? How Vernezze draws his students out, and the stumbling blocks that challenge him, makes for excellent reading. The one trend that permeates nearly every chapter (and one that you're probably all at least somewhat familiar with) is the almost reflexive need for his Chinese students to find a "middle way," an answer to his questions that take into account all sides, so the answer they give won't hurt anyone or cause them to lose face, including the teacher. This is the very opposite of the approach of US students, who form strong opinions and argue them with passion. The principle that "there are two sides to every coin" applies to nearly every answer the students offer throughout the book. Life is about finding a middle way, and Vernezze does a masterful job of linking contemporary Chinese attitudes with the teaching of Confucius and the Tao. He is also very funny. He relates, for example, a discussion on elections he had with his academic superior at Sichuan Normal, who believes, in Vernezze's words, that "the antithesis of harmony is not chaos but rather America." "I do not understand," he said smiling. "why you Americans put yourselves through this every four years. It seems crazy to us Chinese. Why go through all this fighting and rancor? We had our period of chaos during the Cultural Revolution. No one here wants to go back to that." "I wasn't sure how many people died in the American electoral process in the past two hundred years, but I was pretty certain it was significantly fewer than the three million some historians estimate perished during the Cultural Revolution Which is not to say that he did not have a point. No one doubts the American political system is broken...." This wry humor finds its way onto nearly every page. And every exchange he relates takes us deeper into the minds of his students, whether they're discussing the government's suppression of the 2008 riots in Tibet, the attack on the World Trade Center, the Sichuan earthquake or even homosexuality (he is amazed at how tolerant his students are on this issue). A simple phenomenon, like the Chinese people's attitude toward credit cards, is a source of precious insight. Vernezze notes that in China, your credit card is backed up by cash you pay the bank in advance, so you are never actually borrowing money that isn't yours: "The very notion of credit cards -- that you would spend money one didn't have -- horrified most of the students. This

attitude seemed to me not merely the result of a culture of saving but indicative of a philosophical worldview that is profoundly different than the Western one. I would argue that the very idea of the credit card has a particularly American flavor to it, embodying an attitude of optimism. Since Americans are certain that the future will be better than the present, we feel comfortable spending money we don't have. By contrast, the Chinese idea, which finds its philosophical basis in Taoism, is that because reality is in a constant state of flux -- the young becomes old, hot becomes cold, what is hard is broken down into what is soft -- one should take no course of action that makes overly optimistic assumptions about the future. Say what you will about this attitude, but I can tell you this: no Chinese would have taken out a mortgage that he knew was going to balloon in a few years on the hope that he would be able to refinance at the time based on the value of the house."The beauty of the book is the interactions with the students themselves (they're too long for me to paraphrase in a way that does them justice). The final pages wrap it all up and help clear up an obvious question the book raises, which is whether the Chinese philosophy of self-interest and materialism leaves the door open for a society without fundamental ethics. He notes (surprisingly, for me) that this philosophy is not much different than the ancient Greeks', and yet there exist in both societies "real ethical standards that can direct human behavior." "...if the existence of laws in the physical and psychological realms does not require the presence of a spiritual reality, it should come as no surprise that for both the ancient Greeks and modern Chinese, the fact that there is only the natural world does not preclude the presence of a moral law. Indeed, in both traditions ethical laws for regulating human conduct have the same status as laws of physical and psychological health; they are relevant and sought out by the intelligent person wishing to have a good life."While I'm quoting a lot about the theory, the actual magic is in the characters who attend the discussion group, how they interact with the teacher and their peers, and how they grapple with logic, the very nature of which goes against how they were taught to learn (rote memorization vs. inquiry and discussion). Often the most fun part is when the students offer responses that are so not what the teacher expected to hear that his own belief systems are challenged, and he is forced to think in a whole new way.Finally, it's a great bird's eye view into teaching in rural China, many years after Hessler wrote *River Town*, the gold standard on the subject. Much has changed, while a lot has remained the same.Again, I'm no philosopher, so I may not be able to engage on the issues I've raised. For a marvelous discussion about it all, get the book.1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Chinese youth speak----we should listenBy femalewsdmThe book chronicles a two year philosophy discussion group the author held with Chinese undergraduate students while a Peace Corps volunteer in Chengdu, China in Sichuan Province. Given that the most important relationship going forward for the United States is going to be its relationship with China, it's probably a good idea to familiarize ourselves with the views of the up-and-coming generation of young Chinese.In addition to finding out what these young Chinese think about deep questions like the nature of the good life, the reality of fate or the purpose of romantic love we learn as well their views on a variety of contemporary events from the bombing of the World Trade Center to the riots of Tibet, which occurred while the author was present and were the subject of one of his sessions. We also learn a good deal about the landscape of contemporary Chinese culture, from the re-emergence of Confucius to the Edison Chen scandal to the prevalence of Christmas celebrations in China. We even discover there is a Chinese version of American Idol. I think the thing that really sets this book apart from a standard travelogue where the author provides his or her impressions of some foreign land is that in this case we get our ideas about China from the words of Chinese students themselves. In addition, the author does an especially good job of connecting the dots between these students views and classical Chinese thought, for example, linking their views on political truth to the metaphysics of Taoism and Confucianism. The volume is both a fascinating portrait of China today and a glimpse of where it is headed.

When Peter J. Vernezze took a leave of absence from his position as a philosophy professor to serve as a Peace Corps volunteer in China, he supplemented his main task—teaching English—with leading a weekly philosophical discussion group with Chinese undergraduate and graduate students at Sichuan Normal University in Chengdu. In each session the students debated topics as diverse as the status of truth, the meaning of life, the reality of fate, the definition of sanity, the necessity of religion, and the value of romantic love. Each of the twenty-five chapters focuses on the topic of one evening's discussion, which was always in the form of a question: How are ancient conceptions of virtue holding up in a society overrun by capitalism? Are traditionally conservative sexual values going the way of the rickshaw? Can an atheistic country even have a sense of morality?This unprecedented portrait of the Chinese mind allows the up-and-coming generation—known as the *ba ling hou*, or "post-1980s generation"—to express its unique perspective on China—and America. In addition, the book provides the reader with a crash course in Chinese culture, both ancient and modern, as students discuss everything from Confucius to the Edison Chen scandal (a Chinese pop star whose sexually explicit pictures found their way onto the Internet), from classical Chinese poetry to the Super Boy and Super Girl competitions (Chinese versions of American Idol).Throughout, the author provides the intellectual and historical context necessary to appreciate and understand today's China.

Peter Vernezze's witty and informative book is far more than a lively and often funny series of Socratic

dialogues with his deftly characterized Chinese students. It is a chance for us to eavesdrop as this American teacher grapples with students who challenge his own set notions. These debates have much to teach us about how young people in this ever-changing China think about politics, human relations, and even sex education. — Charles Hayford, visiting scholar, Department of History, Northwestern University, and author of *To the People: James Yen and Village China*