

# Comparing China and the West: Remedies for Cultural Amnesia

By John G. Blair, *Prof. Emeritus, University of Geneva*  
Jerusha McCormack, *Emeritus University College Dublin*

**Abstract:** *Amnesia can affect cultures as well as individuals with a disease condition that involves loss of memory, a sense of where one belongs. Its effects on cultures are devastating, particularly at the present time when the climate crisis threatens to end conditions on earth favorable to human life. Only extensive cooperation between China and the West might save humanity as a whole. To promote this process, we want to show how China and the West can study each other in a spirit of mutual understanding and acceptance. Comparative civilization studies explore these two civilizations as they develop along their largely separate trajectories over three thousand years or more. Everyone starts out with an ethnocentric view of the world as centered on their kind. But an educated view understands that, despite many differences, each way of life seeks ways of helping its people flourish. When young people can see their role as building on the past achievements of their ancestors, they have a much better chance to contribute to a shared future, despite today's—and tomorrow's—difficult conditions.*

**Keywords:** *cultural amnesia; ethnocentrism; comparative culture studies; climate crisis*

Cultural amnesia prevails in both China and the West, though for different reasons in each case. Amnesia is a medical condition of forgetting, in which one's personal history and hence one's sense of a place in the world is lost, usually through some sort of trauma or by degeneration as under Alzheimer's Disease. Cultural amnesia takes place when present-day people lose track of their multiple connections with what came before them.

In cultural perspective, trauma is not at all necessary, as we can see by examining the evolution of Western cultures in recent years. The slow acid of modernity processes has eaten away at the foundations of cultural memory to the extent that many if not most young people in the Western world today no longer think it important to know much about where their way of life came from. They often resist studying the Western heritage either because they think that their personal variant of it subsumes all the rest or because they think the past is over and done with. They are wrong on both counts, as they will learn to their sorrow if they persist.

In China the situation is different, given the profound revolutions and radical shifts of policy that have impinged on growing up in China in the last decades. Some observers a decade ago thought they could discern five experiential generations in the PRC since 1949.<sup>1</sup> If so, they may now need to add a sixth or even seventh to make sense of the younger generations who are still in school or in their young adulthood. In the first phase of the PRC, everything traditional in Chinese

life was strenuously rejected a "feudal." In more recent time, elements of tradition have been reanimated but in a selective way that suited the purposes of those in power.

In the cases of both China and the West young people growing up today have little sense of the traditions behind them and many see no particular reason why they should acquire such knowledge. This is the condition we call *cultural amnesia*. Without appropriate remedies this disease condition threatens the survival of our world as we know it. The shortsightedness that goes with *cultural amnesia* invites people to think that the present and the immediate future are the only time frames that count. But in somber fact the very success of the human enterprise up to now threatens the possibility of our children and grandchildren to experience reasonable conditions for life on earth. The human race now amounts to 7,000,000 individuals and counting. Our collective industrial processes are poisoning the earth and destroying the conditions that our lives depend on. Recovering a sense of where we humans are coming from is one indispensable step toward motivating collaborative action to salvage our collective chances for a future.<sup>2</sup>

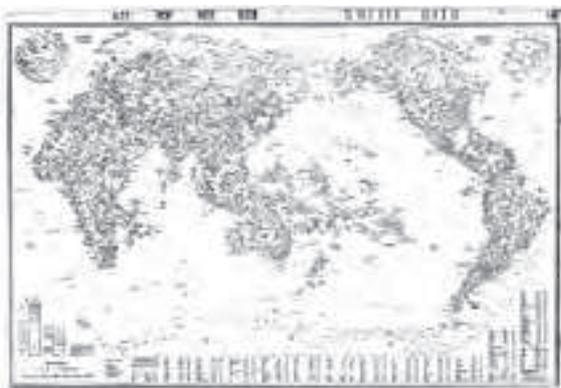
As a result, comparisons involving China and the West have a particular relevance now. No one in the West has escaped some awareness that China is now – and will continue to be – a major factor in the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition, the Chinese world is so different that not even the most benighted Westerner can pretend that Western notions suffice as a basis for

understanding what goes on there. On the other side, China has been studying the West attentively for some time now, learning how wealth can be created but not learning enough about how to avoid the major problems that all too often accompany Western-style modernity processes.<sup>3</sup>

A teacher's work against cultural amnesia may never end, but sometimes a fresh approach offers fresh hope. The strategy introduced here was developed in China for students with good English and a felt need to understand the Western world. It is now spreading slowly to Western countries where the motivation for studying China is growing noticeably.<sup>4</sup>

For students to begin to understand a distant world requires that they be able to compare it with what they already know by experience. That means learning to look at their own way of life as if from the outside – comparatively – and historically – to understand where it has come from. The first enemy of comparative study is *ethnocentrism*, the reflex that leads people everywhere to see themselves and their own kind as central.

*Ethnocentrism* is the universal human tendency to see one's own kind at the center of things. In order for comparative studies to begin, we need to move beyond it. Our approach starts by comparing maps of the world from different parts of the world. In each case, the nation involved places itself in the center of things. School children then grow up internalizing the world map they see on the classroom walls. They soon forget that maps are maps, i.e., cultural artifacts. They come to believe that the world looks like *their* map. Example: it is hard to get Americans to believe that Mexico is notably larger than Alaska because their traditional Mercator projection maps disproportionately exaggerate all land areas closer to the poles.



Standard Chinese map of the world



Traditional US map of the world

Note the major differences in the two maps given above. They illustrate how American and Chinese children literally do grow up with different worldviews in their minds. No two-dimensional map can capture the global fact that there is no center on earth, but the traditional US map is particularly flagrant in the distortions it introduces: two-thirds of the map area is given over to the Northern Hemisphere and Greenland, here depicted as larger than South America is in fact one-eighth its size. Happily the more recent map used in most US schools, following the so-called Gall-Peters Projection, is less skewed.<sup>5</sup>

Since all humans believe themselves to be at the center of the world, the only viable premise for encouraging dialogue across the distances is to formulate a kind of cultural Golden Rule. We ask others to take our culture seriously by offering to take theirs with equal seriousness. That opens the way to what at least initially must be non-judgmental studies of very different ways of life.

Occasionally observers express reservations about exposing students to a pluralistic view of the world precisely because it acknowledges there to be more than one legitimate way for a civilization to be organized. They ask: at the end of such an exposure will students become disaffected with their own roots? John Blair's childhood experience suggests otherwise. When he first went to school many years ago in the USA, he met in kindergarten other five-year-olds who drank Coca-Cola. That seemed remarkable to him because that beverage was forbidden in his house. He hastened to report these new facts to his mother. She, a doctor's daughter and a conscientious parent (as she remained till her death in 2010 at age 102), remained inflexibly convinced that Coca-Cola was not good for children. So he was still not allowed Coca-Cola. What he had earlier thought to be a rule of the world turned out to be a rule of his house. It was Blair's first encounter with what we now call

*comparative culture studies*. The rules of home remained unchanged, but they were for the first time recognizable as such: no longer universal principles but home rules – *our* family’s way of living.

Similarly, in comparative culture studies, recognizing the legitimacy of others does not change who one is or where one comes from. With rare exceptions, humans continue all their lives to see the world through the lenses they acquired in the process of growing up in their home culture. But awareness of cultural difference opens the door to respecting the fact that others look at the world differently. The enemy is not ethnocentrism, a human universal, but the *unthinking ethnocentrism* that would deny legitimacy to any other way of life.

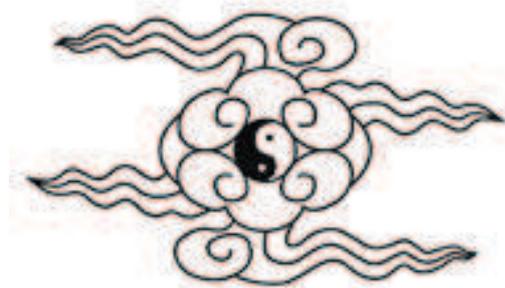
Some may seek to escape ethnocentrism by adopting a “cosmopolitan” view of the world, one that seems to be anchored in no particular culture. This goal may seem plausible within Western presumptions that would like to see in “rationality” a timeless and placeless tool for discovering universal truths. On critical inspection, however, this orientation turns out to be only a more sophisticated form of Western ethnocentrism. We believe it makes better sense to acknowledge cultural differences as primary. Difference can then become a basis for dialogue and accommodation once both sides give up claims to universality.

The proposed assault on *cultural amnesia*, by means of a comparative culture course, combines elements from Western Civilization studies and Chinese studies. Its fundamental intellectual approach is drawn from anthropology. It also draws inspiration from World History as practiced in the Western world,<sup>6</sup> though it focuses not on the world as a whole but on two major civilizations. In our experience, it is actually easier to study two civilizations rather than just one, because attention automatically goes to those elements that help compare and contrast these two. Although one can never cover all aspects of either term of the comparison, it helps to acknowledge also that no culture study can ever be complete. Civilizations are always more complex than anything we can ever say about them. This comparative course at least allows us to call attention to significant aspects of both China and the West in a way that illuminates both of them.

The sourcebook we have prepared for this use is entitled *WCwCC: Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons*, now in its third edition from Fudan University Press. The course materials consist of short excerpts, mostly from major thinkers from the last 3000 years or so, arranged not chronologically but thematically according to cultural domains (such as health, family, governance, worldview). In this way, the

primary perceptions focus on cultural differences in kind. Changes over time are acknowledged by dividing each domain into “traditional” and “modern” segments. In order to avoid imposing ethnocentrically Western ideas about “modernity,” it is identified not by specific dates but as the process of seriously calling traditional beliefs into question. That definition situates Western modernity as gaining momentum as of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but in China the parallel process begins only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In each case the core traditions that began to be challenged were radically different to begin with. Small wonder that “modernity” turns out to imply quite different characteristics in these two culture worlds.

Thus approaching two major and long-lived civilizations encourages a focus on their most basic and enduring orientations, different as they may be. Though it is hazardous to focus on a single image to epitomize a whole civilization, here are two images that call attention to some characteristics that play a large part in Western and Chinese Civilizations, both traditional and modern.



Ming Dynasty Symbol



Two Greek Wrestlers in *Agon*

One’s first impression may well be that these two images are not comparable because they are so radically different. Indeed that is part of the point. These two

culture worlds have always functioned very differently in the ways they organize life for their people. Each has followed its own trajectory.

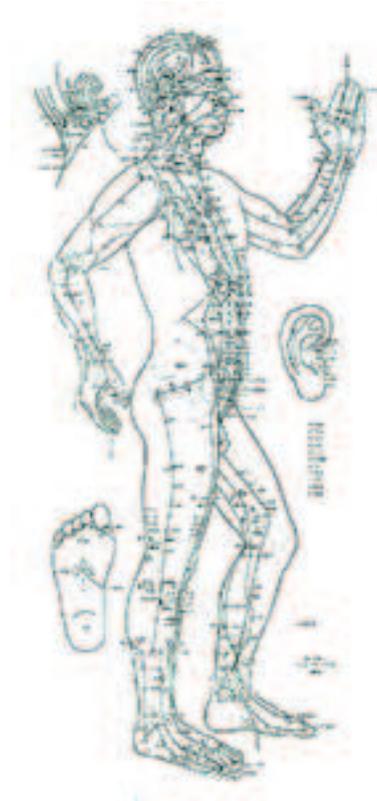
The Western image calls attention to two individuals in confrontation. Westerners tend to identify themselves as distinct from the others around them, as individuals who achieve selfhood by distinguishing themselves from others. As a result, when individuals interact, some form of contest often results. The Greek word was *agon* [contest], a competition between individuals formally defined as equals. The winner is recognized as the “best” – until the next contest. As such, *agon* constitutes a *modus operandi* actively underpinning many Western practices, then and now: not just sports, but also intellectual debate, politics, law, and market economies. “Competition,” after all, is simply a modern word for *agon*.

On the Chinese side, by way of contrast, this Ming Dynasty textile image implies symmetry and balance, implying overall stability and harmony. This harmony depends on the subordination of individuals to the group; conflict is actively avoided. The main emphasis is on symmetry and good order. What is represented in this image, formally speaking, is a cloud, one imaged in a way that asserts its harmonious internal proportions. As a symbolic image of a world-order, it is cultural, not religious, because the Chinese world does not involve transcendence in any Western sense. At the center of this Chinese image is a *taiji* symbol that represents a dynamic alternating dominance between two principles, *yin* (dark) and *yang* (light). These are complementary opposites central to a vast totalizing system of correspondences that has served, for more than 2000 years, to situate everything likely to occur in the Chinese world. As the alternation of *yin* and *yang* might suggest, “reality” – to Chinese minds – is always changing, quite the opposite of the Western emphasis, which seeks to affirm permanence (and to win arguments).

As this all too brief sketch suggests, our comparative approach uses each civilization to highlight the central presumptions of the other, implicitly acknowledging each one’s legitimacy. Calling inherited ethnocentrism into question, however, remains difficult for anyone who grows up with only a single cultural surround. It is especially difficult for Westerners because this civilization has claimed for so long that its postulates are universal. In the West, this presumption lies behind both science and religion. The Bible’s *God* is explicitly the creator of all that is, the *One God*. Similarly, the “Laws of Nature” as pursued by scientists are understood to be “laws” precisely because they are deemed to apply universally, not just within the domain of Western Civilization. As one science student asked: “In China, water is still H<sub>2</sub>O, isn’t it?” Answer is yes, but

only if a person brings to the question a mentality that has been sufficiently conditioned by modern Western science to think in terms of atoms and molecules. To the Chinese tradition, water is first of all a primary metaphor for the way things are constantly changing. Left to itself, water never stands still but keeps on moving, always seeking a lower level. Yet it has the power to wear away stone, thereby illustrating how *yin*, which initially yields to *yang*, tends, paradoxically, be stronger in the long run.

To go one step further into a Chinese view of the world, one needs an additional concept, *qi*. *Qi* is vital energy that *animates* everything that exists, even mountains and oceans that Westerners typically see as *inanimate*.<sup>7</sup> Yin and yang are the two modes of expression of *qi*. Human health, to the Chinese consists in the free-flowing movement of *qi* through all parts of the human body along invisible channels known as *meridians*. Thus, each civilization views human bodies very differently.



Modern Acupuncture Man



Vesalius' Man, 1543

In traditional Chinese medicine, blockage in the flow of *qi* as vital energy constitutes disease. The body image that fits with this concept has no muscles, no implicit means of self-assertion. Instead the body is the site of transit for larger forces that seek to flow on. The Western body image emphasis on muscles focuses attention on the individual as an agent that undertakes actions. Setting this representative man in the framework of Roman ruins prolongs the Western emphasis on musculature that dates back to classical Greek statues. But also the background hints at how Vesalius' precise observation and dissections promise to improve on Galen and his Roman civilization, which, by the 16th century, survived only in ruins. These illustrations suggest why these two medical traditions remain radically disjoint, despite recent efforts to combine them.

In comparative perspective, neither the Western nor the Chinese view of the body – or of water – is right or wrong. Indeed it would seem silly to suggest that a way of life that has proved viable for thousands of years for millions of humans could possibly be dismissed as merely *right* or *wrong*. Nor is it certain that one or the other of these approaches is inherently superior.<sup>8</sup> It is

the differences – contextualized in their different worlds – that we find worth pondering. The West, for instance, has long based its approach to life on asserting “universal” truths regardless of others' preferences. The Chinese worldview, on the other hand, has long placed great emphasis on survival and continuity. As a result, China has been recognizably itself for longer than any other civilization on earth today. On the basis of past experience, one must predict that will still be the case in a century or two. As far as the West is concerned, the jury on its long-term viability is still out.

The space limits applying to this article do not allow us to give a wider range of comparative examples, so we have selected these few that exemplify the broader tendencies we find. Nonetheless readers may well feel the need to see in brief how traditional Chinese concepts fare today. Because Chinese culture functions in its own distinctive ways, the New and the Old may appear strangely mixed up to Western eyes because “reality” is perceived so differently.

China's newest orientation is also its oldest. Under Deng Xiaoping's reforms, underway for a quarter of a century now, China has returned to its longest-standing criterion for measuring good government – prosperity. All the great thinkers in the Chinese tradition, though they differed on how to achieve prosperity, have agreed on this criterion. Our earliest textual example comes from Guan Zhong in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE,<sup>9</sup> even before Confucius. Deng Xiaoping, as of the late 1970s, justified his reforms on the grounds that nothing could be accomplished if China remained poor, as it had under Mao Zedong's leadership. Among other misjudgments, Mao encouraged population growth to “make China strong.” The population doubled between 1949 and 1979, seriously diluting most of the gains made possible by strenuous revolutionary effort.<sup>10</sup>

But “prosperity” is a thoroughly pragmatic value. It has no specific content but implies responding successfully to whatever present conditions exist. In long-term perspective China's present involvement with market economics represents not a conversion to a Western model but a Chinese-style adaptation to the conditions of now. This is one reason why we ourselves do not foresee a Western-style “democratic” future for China. When was the last time China had an elected government? Answer: never! For thousands of years it operated very successfully with a centralized model of governance – one which once again is paying off in terms of prosperity. Recent economic historians have shown that only as of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century did China fail to keep up with its standing as the most successful economy in the world. From this perspective, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is beginning to look like a return to what Chinese nationalists perceive as “normal.”

Paying attention to the continuities in Chinese civilization throws into perspective our own, Western, expectations of how civilizations develop. Once Western students venture far enough afield to take on a comparative study of China, some reassessment of their home ways might reasonably emerge. They are likely to discover that – from a Chinese distance – science and religion seem much less at odds than is commonly believed. Both presume a scenario with a beginning and an end, which a traditional Chinese narrative typically does not. The Christian story begins with *Genesis* and ends with *Apocalypse*. The science narrative differs primarily in the outer limits it identifies: the *Big Bang* and the *Heat Death of the Universe*. By contrast, the dominant Chinese worldview makes no claim to understand distant events either before us or after us.<sup>11</sup> The focus is on the present and how best to cope with its difficulties, a pragmatic and strategic concern that may override the claims of legalities or abstract principles.

The core of Chinese values remains much closer to home, to families and to the larger socio-political hierarchies that family relations reenact on a small scale. The name of the central value is *xiao* 孝, traditionally translated as *filial piety*. A better translation might be *familial loyalty*, because the central notion turns on the duty of subordination to elders and superiors, within the family and beyond.

Imagine a mother who calls a neighbor and friend to say that she needs help moving some heavy furniture; she asks if the friend's teenage son might be available to help. An American mother would be likely to respond: "I'll ask him"; a Chinese mother: "I'll send him over." In this tiny contrastive episode are embedded a host of cultural assumptions about parents and children, about neighbors and the interactions among all of the above. To remedy *cultural* amnesia, our job as comparatists is to identify such culturally resonant instances and then to unpack them as fully as we can.

In this hypothetical situation, the Western mother automatically respects her son's right to an independent response, but in China the son would typically not even be consulted. Lurking here are contentious issues concerning "human rights." Anyone who wants to take such issues seriously would be well advised to reread the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is composed of some 30 articles. The first two-thirds concentrate on Western-style human rights with a political and legal orientation, derived from Enlightenment concerns. The last third emphasize social and economic rights (food, employment, education). In international discussions, whenever human rights come up, China consistently focuses attention on the latter, proclaiming how much they have improved "human rights [socio-economic]" for Chinese people. Meanwhile Westerners

decry how the Peoples' Republic persists in denying the "human rights [political-civic]" of its citizens. As far as public discourse is concerned, a dialogue of the deaf has prevailed for many years.

This stalemate might not be necessary if people took the time to read the actual document, to understand how it has been received differently in China and the West, and, finally, to define their terms with care. Only then can one analyze dispassionately the functioning of the different political systems, and the pressures felt by leaders on both sides.

What does Western Civilization look like to Chinese students who have followed this approach? Most say this comparative course helps them understand that behind the flotsam and jetsam of Western popular culture that washes across Chinese life today, the West does have some values that were invisible to them earlier. They admire and respect the Western skill of critical thinking, for instance. Perhaps more important, many of these students have said they now see a reason to take their own heritage more seriously.

One student engaged us in the following dialogue:

*"It seems that you in the West have many political parties."*

*"Yes, At least two and in some countries more."*

*"We here only have one Party."*

*"Yes, we know."*

*"But you have only one god, whereas we have many."*

*"True."*

*"It looks like everybody lives with ones and twos. But somehow they got applied differently."*

So if both civilizations seem to involve Ones and Twos, they remain free to differ about what they see as most basic. This students had caught the non-judgmental spirit of this comparative process, acknowledging that, while each civilization has its sacred principles, neither is necessarily sacrosanct. Studying comparatively thus allows students to distance themselves from their own civilization in such a way as to repossess it – as a valuable resource in its own right. For both Western and Chinese students, it is exactly this distancing that highlights the richness of their own inheritance – and that, by this means, counters the universal tendency toward cultural amnesia induced by what we call "modernity."

<sup>1</sup> See John G. Blair and Jerusha H. McCormack, *Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons*, third edition (Shanghai: Fudan University

Press, 2010), 178-182. In later references, this text is referred to as *WCwCC*. In Chinese, one of the words for “generation” is *shi* (世), which signifies 30, implying thirty years between each generation. To identify five generations in half a century or so, then, becomes a measure of extremely rapid social and cultural change. Now that “generations” are experientially so much shorter, misunderstandings disruptive to family harmony may easily result.

<sup>2</sup> The best science in the world foresees a “tipping point” beyond which no human effort can reverse the decline in human livability on earth. No one knows quite when this point will be reached – if we do nothing but continue in our present practices – but most probably sometime before 2030

<sup>3</sup> From a Chinese point of view, Western cultures often tend to produce ill-disciplined children, destructively individualistic mindsets, chaotic political and economic management, enabled by short-sighted self-seeking factions at every level of decision making.

<sup>4</sup> So far in the West we have offered courses of this type in the USA and Ireland. The prospects have improved with the publication in 2013 of an American edition of our sourcebook entitled *Comparing Civilizations: China and the West* (New York: Global Scholarly Publications), 604 pages plus 1680 pages in PDF on CD-ROM.

<sup>5</sup> The new type of world map, using a “Robinson Projection,” has been promoted by the National Geographic Society and by now is the map on the wall in most American schools when children begin to become aware of a wider world.

<sup>6</sup> In China, traditionally, “world history” means non-Chinese history, not at all what is intended here.

<sup>7</sup> In fact the Chinese tradition never distinguished between *animate* and *inanimate*, whereas from the Greeks on such differentiation has seemed basic to Western minds.

<sup>8</sup> It is true that in recent years the majority of medical treatments delivered in China have been inspired by Western-style training, but traditional Chinese medicine remains superior for helping humans live with chronic conditions which cannot be cured but must be lived with.

<sup>9</sup> See *WCwCC*, Guan Zhong, “Seeking Profit Is Human Nature,” 296.

<sup>10</sup> In world perspective, China does not get as much credit as it deserves. The one-child policy, for example, has contributed greatly to holding down the rise in the world population. Without this policy there would likely be nearly half a billion more human beings than the 7 billion there are now.

<sup>11</sup> In the words of Zhuangzi: 吾观之本，其往无穷；吾求之末，其来无止。无穷无止，言之无也。 [When we try to find out the source of the world, we trace back into infinity; when we try to find out the end, we look into infinity. Infinity into the past and into the future implies that it is beyond description.] *Zhuangzi*, Library of Chinese Classics, Hunan People’s Publishing House, vol. 2, 1999, chapter 25, edited and translated by Wang Rongpei.

### About the authors:

John G. Blair is currently the IACSCW co-president for the West. He comes to comparative culture studies from thirty years of university teaching in European English Departments where he published several books and numerous scholarly articles in his original fields of 19th/20th century American and Anglo-Irish literature and culture.

He got his Ph.D of English & American Literature in Brown University before transferring his life and career to Europe.

Immigrants learn to attend to cultures and comparisons. There are many invisible rules one is liable to violate unknowingly. His current work in comparative culture studies is rooted in this life experience. John Blair has lectured widely in Europe, the USA, and China, with occasional appearances in Africa. He began focusing comparative attention on China after his first teaching assignment there in 1988. His recent publications (jointly with Professor Jerusha McCormack) include *Comparing Civilizations: China & the West* (2012) and *Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons* (2010).

Jerusha Hull McCormack, IACSCW secretary and treasurer, was born in the USA where she attended Wellesley College. There she concentrated her studies on philosophy, art history and English literature. After receiving her MA and PhD at Brandeis University in 1973, she taught English, American and Anglo-Irish literature at University College, Dublin for 30 years. Later, influenced by John G. Blair, she turned her attention to China. While teaching at Beijing Foreign Studies University of China, Professor McCormack helped develop an entirely new course for advanced students of English entitled “Western Civilization with Chinese Comparisons” in collaboration with Professor John Blair. Teaching the course together helped them to enhance its content, now published by the Fudan University Press under the same title (*WCwCC*): third edition, 2010.