

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE: SOCIAL STUDIES CAN LEAD TO UNDERSTANDING

By  
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*"...After our huge effort, people from other countries just started trying to understand our culture. That is their culture; we should respect them instead of criticizing them. If we don't like the ways we are being treated, we don't treat others in that way." What a wise comment! Yes, "Don't criticize something we don't understand!" It is the heart of social studies.*

What are the purposes of social studies? To serve political purposes was the primary aim of social studies in Hong Kong. Social studies emerged as a school subject at the junior secondary level in 1975. The introduction of social studies in Hong Kong was part of the government's reaction to changing socioeconomic conditions. Social studies were to be at the center of efforts to reduce the potential for social conflict. Its introduction underlined the government's response to a range of emerging social issues, including the state's need to preserve itself. Social studies is a large selection of topics from the mainstream social science disciplines. Students were provided with a description of how the government of Hong Kong worked and their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Social studies was radically revised in 1989 in order to focus more on the local context and on the sociopolitical situation in China.

Nowadays, the concept of united globalization adds more meanings and expands the value of social studies. Social studies is no longer just a focus on one's own society; moreover, it goes beyond the political function and has become an approach to understanding the world. This understanding is required to be a well-rounded person in this rapidly changing 21<sup>st</sup> century. The world becomes smaller and smaller in terms of the amazingly increasing amount of interactions among peoples from all around the world. Now, we call the world a "global village." The global village consists of different countries, different peoples, different cultures, and so on. The more a person understands the world, the more she or he can benefit from that knowledge. In other words, social studies is a process of providing opportunities for students to learn to be open-minded and thoughtful, and to respect different cultures, peoples, and belief systems.

As an international student, coming from a very different part of the world, I realized how important social studies was in helping me adjust to the culture shock in my experiences. I am proud to say that my culture shock was minimal when I first came to the United States, because I studied it before I came here! In my opinion, social studies can occur anywhere or anytime, not necessarily only when taught in schools. However, schools are the places where we acquire our knowledge of analyzing social phenomena through multiple aspects. Once we obtain the skills, we can explore whatever topics we find interesting; we can learn in more settings and through many different sources, for example, watching TV, reading newspapers, having conversations with others, and so forth. Nowadays, the qualities of being open-minded, respectful, and thoughtful are some of the essential characteristics of a well-rounded person. I personally believe that social studies can help us develop the qualities that modern society needs. I have traveled in several countries; my social studies knowledge guided me through the cultural adjustments quickly.

I read an online article about Middle Eastern women's dressing rules and some other strict customs. They are required to cover their whole body from head to toe, except their faces and hands; they are not allowed to go aboard without written permission from a male family member, and so on. It is obvious that the customs are extreme, compared to most western cultures. Muslim rules do not make sense to most of the readers of the forum, especially those Western readers. I am not going to make comments on the customs or the discussions here, but would like to share a posting from the BBS forum made by a Chinese fellow: "Please don't criticize something we don't understand. We Chinese were in the same situation not long time ago. People didn't understand our cultures but criticized a lot. After our huge effort, people from other countries just started trying to understand our culture. That is their culture; we should respect them instead of criticizing them. If we don't like the ways being treated, we don't treat others in that way." What a wise comment! Yes, "Don't criticize something we don't understand!" It is the heart of social studies.

However, it is not uncommon to see people insisting that something is not truth, such as the Tibet issue. From the conversations I have had with my international friends, most of them thought that Tibet was invaded by Chinese in 1951 after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Is it true? No, absolutely no. A lot of western sources show that Tibet was part of China before 1951, such as maps, American stamps, and more. There was a booklet called "Pocket Guide to China" published in 1942 by the War and Navy Departments in Washington, D.C., issued to all American troops that were to fight on the Pacific after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor; this

booklet taught American troops what China looks like. Tibet is included as part of China. It was published in 1942, long before the so-called “Chinese invasion of Tibet” in 1951 after the founding of the PRC in 1949. Actually, Tibet officially became part of China around 1288, the year when Chinese government set up the Ministry of Xuan Zheng to rule over Tibet and be in charge of the Buddhist issues in entire China, including Tibet. From then on, Tibet was under Chinese rule for three imperial dynasties, Yuan, Ming and Qing, and two republics, Republic of China and People’s Republic of China.

In 1951, the last warlord on mainland China, the current Dalai Lama, sent a telegram to Beijing, admitting the leadership of the central government over Tibet, and swore to “protect the unification and sovereign of our motherland” ... “under the leadership of ... Central People’s government.” (in the original words of the current 14th Dalai Lama). To sum up, Americans before 1951 also thought it was part of China. Why Westerns think Tibet was invaded by Chinese? Why so many Westerns support “free Tibet” without studying the fact? I do not need them to believe everything I say, please do your own research. But please keep in mind – be neutral, be open-minded, be respectful, and be thoughtful.

As educators, we need to bear in mind that we are models for students. Teaching students to analyze social phenomena without carrying bias is our goal; so we should try our best to be neutral when making comments about social issues. I observed a bad example of making a comment without careful study and consideration of another country. Jack Cafferty, who is a CNN commentator, insulted the Chinese people by racist words “Well, I don’t know if China is any different, but our relationship with China is certainly different...I think they’re basically the same bunch of goons and thugs they’ve been for the last 50 years” in his program on April 10, 2008. Who deserves being called “goon and thug”? I don’t think any nation in the world deserve the words. If you admit that you “don’t know”, then please don’t criticize something you don’t understand!

I understand that because sometimes we do not like someone that does not necessarily mean he or she is bad in nature. But generally, saying something bad about others does not help a person to be successful; only taking appropriate actions after studying others’ strengths and weaknesses lead you to achieve your goal. Social studies can serve these purposes.

Once I heard that most Americans think Chinese still live like 200 years ago. I soon realized that this may be caused by lack of information. There is no foot-binding in China any more, no male Chinese men have long braids any more, and not every Muslim is a terrorist!

As a member of the global village, I realize that everybody in the world has a responsibility to contribute accurate information for others to study. We also have the responsibility of understanding the world, not for somebody else, but for ourselves – to be all-rounded persons. Let's start in the schools, with social studies!

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