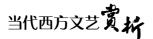# Unit One

Three Key Terms for Western Literature & Art

When it comes to western literature and art, what are the most impressive artworks in your opinion? And which is your favorite piece? Please first share with the class a particular piece of artwork you like. Here are some art forms for you to choose from:

- novel;
- poem;
- drama;
- TV series;
- film;
- documentary;
- painting;
- music;
- architecture;
- etc.

Why do you like this artwork? What does it tell us? To further glimpse into contemporary western literature and art, three terms are crucial, i.e. "culture" "western" and "contemporary". Together, they create an underlying conceptual framework for deeper understandings of western art and literature.

Please try to come up with a short definition of no more than 50 words for each of the terms "contemporary" "western" and "culture", and search online for inspirations if necessary.

Culture

Task One

Refining Your Definition: Culture

To get a grip of a complex concept as "culture" is by no means easy. The following are some definitions of it. Compare them with your own definition.

- Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviors acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their **embodiment** in **artifacts**; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other, as conditional elements of future action.

- Culture refers to the **cumulative deposit** of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.

- Culture is a way of life of a group of people—the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

- Culture refers to learned and shared human patterns or models for living or day-to-day living patterns. These patterns and models **pervade** all aspects of human social interaction.

What are the essential elements to include in the definition of culture? Work in groups to decide on a more refined definition for this term. You can either refer to the definitions above or search online for further inspiration.

Being one of the most complicated concepts in the humanities, the term "culture" has ever been defined in hundreds of ways, which can be confusing and **bedazzling**. To get a grip, one might start by looking back to learn how this word came into being. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), its **etymology** can be traced back to a Latin origin. The root word "cult" stems from *colere* which means to cultivate and worship. In the 2nd century A.D., the word "culture" in classical Latin meant "cultivation, **tillage**, piece of cultivated land, care **bestowed** on plants, mode of growing plants, training or improvement of the faculties, observance of religious rites". By the 5th century, its meaning was extended to include "training of the body". The word "culture" entered French first before being assimilated into modern English. The following is a **trajectory** of its meaning development since then:

- 12th century: action of cultivating land, plants, etc., **husbandry**;

- 12th century: (piece of) cultivated land;

- 13th century: formation, training;

- 14th century: worship or cult of someone or something;

- 1549: cultivation, development (of language, literature, etc.);

- 1691: mental development through education;

- 1796: intellectual and artistic conditions of a society or the (perceived) state of development of those conditions, also the ideas, customs, etc. of a society or group.

In tracing this etymology, a metaphor becomes evident—human beings might be treated and tended in the same way that one cultivates a piece of land. Culture is thus a process of human growth that requires the constant investment of effort.

Task Two

Research and Report: *Wenhua*

It is generally believed that the Chinese **equivalent** to the term "culture"—*wenhua*（文化）dates back to *The Book of Changes*:

"文化" —— "人文化成"："刚柔交错，天文也。文明以止，人文也。观乎天文，以察时变。观乎人文，以化成天下。"

——《易经》

Try to understand the meaning of the lines above first, and then prepare a brief report regarding the Chinese etymology of the concept of "culture".

To gain a clearer understanding of the concept of culture, the following influential (yet by no means **orthodox**) definition by anthropologist Edward Tylor (1832–1917) can serve as a starting point for investigating the various dimensions of its **embedded** meanings:

> Culture… is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by (a human) as a member of society.

In this definition, there are four notable key terms.

"Complex Whole"

By pointing out that culture is a "complex whole" of "capabilities and habits", Tylor defined it as an integrated system containing various interacting factors. Instead of a clear definition of essence, Tylor's formulation is proposed in the form of a list. It is possible that this list could go on and on to include, for instance, architecture, music, paintings, novels, and computer games, as well as concepts, emotions, philosophy, and religion. In other words, the fact that Tylor defined culture by using **enumeration** shows that it may be a descriptive rather than evaluative concept.

A closer look at Tylor's list of examples reveals that they include knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, and custom, to name just a few. In these entries, there are observable artifacts and unobservable values and beliefs, visible **physicality** and invisible meanings, the material and the immaterial, products of behaviors and abstractions from behaviors. It should be noted that the relationship between these two layers is somewhat **two-fold**, since behaviors are abstracted into immaterial concepts, beliefs, and values on the one hand while, on the other, they are manifested through material existence such as artworks.

"Acquired"

The fact that culture must be "acquired" requires the process of learning. One is not born with a culture. It must derive from one's social environment, not from one's genes. This places culture in opposition to human nature. Although exactly where the border lies between human nature and culture remains a topic of debate among social scientists, it is possible to use the computer as a point of **analogy**. Whereas human nature is the "operating system" that comes with the machine, what one establishes within the system is modified by culture.

Task Three

Eating: Nature and Nurture

The desire to avoid hunger is human nature, but how often we eat, how much we eat, how we eat, and with whom we eat are, at least in part, regulated by our culture.

Discuss examples of Chinese eating culture in pairs. If possible, make reference to western customs as well.

What should be learned in order to become cultured? Answering this question would easily involve **hierarchical** distinctions. For example, representing the evolutionist branch of **anthropology**, Tylor himself proposed a **continuum** of cultural development extending from "**savagery**" through "**barbarism**" to "civilization". Slightly prior to Tylor, cultural critic Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) defined culture as special intellectual or artistic endeavors/products. He also differentiated "high culture" from "popular culture" or "folkways". Opponents of this viewpoint, like anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942), dismissed the value judgments inherent in the evolutionists' conception of culture. For him, cultures simply differ from each other, and there should be no distinctions between either high and low cultures or civilized and savage ones.

Task Four

Research and Report: The Six Arts

How do we acquire culture? The Chinese Confucian culture traditionally believed that, in order for a man to become cultivated, he must train himself in the following six arts（ *liuyi* 六艺 ）：

礼（ *li*: rite ）   乐（ *yue*: music ）   射（ *she*: archery ）

御（ *yu*: chariot-riding ）   书（ *shu*: **calligraphy** ）   数（ *shu*: mathematics ）

Work in groups, select one of the six arts to research on, and then come up with a three-minute report. Ensure that you include the following information in your report:

- What is this art?

- How to cultivate it?

- Why is it important according to Confucian culture?

The term "civilization" derives from the Latin *civis*, which indicates "someone who resides in a town". The emphasis on citizenship and belonging is based on areas and then evolves into meanings related to finding better ways of living and satisfying the needs of the group. As a result, compared with culture, civilization places greater emphasis on the development stage of a society, with regard to elements such as its political, religious, and societal arrangements. Civilization, then, implies superiority and is more achievement-oriented, whereas culture is comparatively neutral and objective.

"Member of Society"

For an idea, thing, or behavior to be considered culture, it must be shared among a community of interacting human beings, so that an individual can identify with the group and gain security. Because of this social function, culture emphasizes collective similarity rather than individual differences.

Task Five

Cultural Stereotypes

We tend to attach stereotypes to cultures other than our own, assuming that everyone from the same culture should bear the same characteristics. This is of course reductionist, but on the other hand, it reflects an innate cognitive trait of the human mind, which helps it to quickly identify people from different cultures.

Work in pairs, and discuss with each other about your stereotypes related to the following cultures:

American: _____   German: _____

Arabian: _____   Italian: _____

Brazilian: _____   Japanese: _____

British: _____   Russian: _____

In the past, the criteria for identifying a society were largely based on shared geographical areas. Nowadays, it is possible to share a culture across geographical boundaries, based on mutual interests or religion.
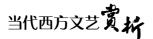
"Human"

A final note to Tylor's definition is the implied agent of culture—the human. Although radicals are pushing the boundary further by claiming that it is now time to talk about the collective cultures of animals, plants, natural environment (such as water), or man-made artificial intelligence, the **anthropocentric** standpoint remains overwhelming. We, as human beings, are still examining the world through the lens of human perspective firmly based on human interests. Therefore, there is no doubt that, at least for the present, the human factor will remain the underlying in the center of the conception of culture.

❋ **Vocabulary List**

embodiment *n.* 体现；化身   artifact *n.* 人工制品

cumulative *adj.* 累积的   deposit *n.* 沉淀物

pervade *v.* 遍及；弥漫   bedazzle *v.* 使困惑

etymology *n.* 词源   tillage *n.* 耕作，耕种

bestow *v.* 使用；授予   trajectory *n.* 轨迹

husbandry *n.* 务农   equivalent *adj.* 相等的

orthodox *adj.* 正统的   embed *v.* 嵌入

enumeration *n.* 列举   physicality *n.* 物质性

two-fold *adj.* 双重的   analogy *n.* 类比

hierarchical *adj.* 等级体系的   anthropology *n.* 人类学

continuum *n.* 连续体   savagery *n.* 野性；野蛮

barbarism *n.* 野蛮   calligraphy *n.* 书法

anthropocentric *adj.* 以人类为中心的

❋ **Notes**

Edward Tylor 爱德华·泰勒（英国人类学家）

II

Western

Whereas "culture" might already appear to be a most meaning-embedded term, the term "western" is no less tricky.

Task Six

Refining Your Definition: Western

Work in pairs, and try to answer the following questions regarding the definition of the concept "west":

- Can Australia be counted as a member of the West? What about North America and South America?

- Does Russia belong to the western camp?

The questions above illustrate the impossibility of defining "western" in geographical terms, for this concept is by definition relative. In addition, socio-historical factors will always come into play. Therefore, ideology factors usually need to be considered when categorizing a place as western, as demonstrated in the following meaning entries for the word "west" in the *OED*:

- The more westerly of the two parts into which the Roman Empire was permanently divided in A.D. 395. Also, the Carolingian Empire (and later the Holy Roman Empire) was viewed as a successor of the Western Roman Empire. The Roman Empire had been divided into western and eastern parts by Diocletian in A.D. 285, a division which was made permanent upon the death of Theodosius I in A.D. 395. The Western Roman Empire was dissolved on the abdication of Romulus Augustus in A.D. 476.

- That part of the Christian Church whose traditions and practices originated in the predominantly Latin-speaking territories of the (former) Western Roman Empire, including the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the European

Reformation, as contrasted with the Greek and Russian Orthodox and other eastern churches.

- The western parts of Europe, especially as the theatre of conflict during World War I (1914–1918) and World War II (1939–1945).

- The western part of the world, especially Europe (later also North America) as distinguished from Asia, as well as the culture and civilization of these regions. From the later 20th century, sometimes it was used as the developed world distinguished from the Third World, regardless of geographical location.

While an exact definition of "west" is difficult to achieve, it is possible to define it historically through a constant process of charting the territory in contrast to its eastern neighbors. A related pair of concepts in this regard is "**Orient**" (East) and "**Occident**" (West). The former initially refers to the place where the sun rises, and the latter to the place where the sun sets, implicating the ancient western view of the East as a place to incline toward. The use of this pair of terms was relatively **prevalent** in the 19th-century Europe.
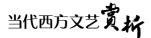
Task Seven

Mini-Research

Work in groups, and discuss about China's ancient conceptions of itself, as well as its neighboring areas to the east, west, south, and north.

Cultural-historically speaking, the tag "western" is nowadays attached to the descendants of the area that is under the double influence of ancient Greco-Roman culture as well as ancient **Hebrew** culture. Ancient Greece is considered as the birthplace of western culture with regard to democratic political system and major advances in the fields of philosophy, science, and mathematics. Following the fall of the Roman Empire, the ancient Greek spirit was not **revived** until the Renaissance starting from the 14th century, after which the idea of rationalism developed into a very important principle. This then gave rise to an emphasis on science, **empiricism**, reason, and individualism in the age of Enlightenment as well as the emergence of modern science in the 18th century.

Ancient Hebrew culture **constitutes** another foundational **pillar** for western culture thanks to the most important book within western culture—the Bible (Old Testament). Following the appearance of Jesus Christ in the first century, **Christianity** soon flourished and became widespread. The Middle Ages saw the height of Christian influence. For around a **millennium**, the intellectual resources were largely devoted to the teachings of the Catholic Church, and only members of the **clergy** class could read and write. Christianity's dominance

continued until the early 16th century, when German **theologian** Martin Luther proposed Protestantism to rival the power of the Church by empowering individuals with a religious initiative. In the modern era, Christianity remains an essential influence to the entire western culture.

❋ Vocabulary List

Orient *n.* 东方

prevalence *n.* 流行；普遍

revive *v.* 复兴

constitute *v.* 组成，构成

Christianity *n.* 基督教

clergy *n.* 神职人员

Occident *n.* 西方

Hebrew *adj.* 希伯来的

empiricism *n.* 实证主义

pillar *n.* 柱子

millennium *n.* 一千年

theologian *n.* 神学家

❋ Notes

Old Testament 基督教的《旧约全书》

Jesus Christ 耶稣基督

Catholic 天主教的

Protestantism 新教