

Module 2: Perceiving

The Terracotta Warriors and Horses: Re-Imaging Leadership in Ancient China

Cognitive Tool of Perceiving

The cognitive tool of perceiving requires one to use the senses to observe and imagine beyond the surface. Astute observation is a necessary component in which the senses are imaged into something more - more than looking, more than tasting, more than hearing. Through the tool of perceiving, the ordinary can be transformed into something new, and it is as if one sees for the first time.

Original Observation

One of the most iconic images of leadership in ancient China is the terracotta warriors and horses. Located near Xi'an, the ancient capital of China, these sculptures were created for the first Emperor of China, Emperor Qin, who unified China. Many questions remain about what kind of leader Qin was, and what his clay army represents. While I have visited the terracotta soldiers, I wanted to be sure that this initial observation was fresh, and not built on my memory of being in the museum. I chose to observe three small replicas that I purchased in China by lining them up much like the classic view of the soldiers. I also looked back at some of the photographs that I took, a few of which I have included here. During this initial observation, I found that the sense of sight led to a surface level view of these pieces of art. I could appreciate the detail in the warriors' armor and the fact that the artist took care in creating unique faces. I could sense the care with which they were created. After observing almost solely with the sense of sight, I began to attempt to use other senses to bring new meaning to these soldiers. I began to wonder, and my wonder led me to re-image seemingly simple artifacts that are thousands of years old. I wondered about those who created these soldiers. I wondered about those who have re-created these soldiers. I wondered about the leader for whom these warriors were built. My wonder led me to see, hear and feel more than meets the eye.

Re-Imagination

I found that my ability to re-image this artifact grew with intensity the longer I sat to observe. My mind began to move to how these soldiers would have been formed. The clay from which they were created would have been soft. It would have felt like anything was possible with this clean slate. What did the artist want to capture, and what did it mean to this person? I tried to imagine what it would have sounded like with so many people working to honor their emperor. Were they given strict orders with how to create these sculptures? Did they feel they were honoring Qin? Did they want to honor Qin? Many of these questions we may never know the answers to, and the faces of the warriors leave much to the imagination. I tried to hear what the soldiers would say to me. I looked deep into the frozen eyes, and listened for them to tell me a story. Is it possible that I am staring into the face of someone who lived thousands of years ago? What I

hear them saying leads me in different directions that allow me to make connections to the past and present, to how we study history, and to what it means to lead.

My mind drifted to the idea of a warrior. What is a warrior? A warrior is meant to protect. These soldiers were meant to protect their leader. They stand at attention, watching and waiting for battle. They were meant to be unbroken and unharmed, but they were destroyed. I imagine the sound of them breaking, and the stories that break with them. Are they forever forgotten?

I imagine what it must have been like to be another kind of worker - the farmer who uncovered these faces from the earth once again. These pieces of clay are leaders, too, if we allow them to come to life in our imagination.

What does it say of us that we go to the same painstaking lengths that the original creators went to in order to re-create these warriors? What does this say of our desire to know the past, and our desire to honor leaders perhaps long forgotten, but now remembered through the curiosity of thought, of wonder, of beauty, of the past?

How this new understanding impacts your topic

Connecting ancient and modern China can be difficult for students, and it can be particularly difficult to see beyond the surface of artifacts. The re-imagining step of this process allowed me to view leadership in many different ways that seem to transcend time and place.

How is leadership present in every step of this process? From Qin, the emperor who unified China, to the clay monuments that represent him, to the creators of this art, to those who re-create today, leadership is present in each.

On a deeper level though, the actual formation of these soldiers can be a representation of leadership. Leaders seek to build something from nothing, they seek to mold other people into a formation. This may or may not be firm and rigid like clay when it has been baked. Even if broken, other leaders can put together the pieces again. When looking at ancient and modern China, this is a powerful representation of and perception of what has happened under different leaders. Leaders create with the hope that what they build will be unbroken. They seek to bring order out of chaos, sometimes putting together the pieces of that which is broken.