

## Teaching China's Cultural Revolution

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The littlest student responded to the propaganda poster by shouting over the others, “Chairman Mao is Good!” A Hong Kong primary school student from the Shek Kip Mei housing estate, he had no trouble identifying the takeaway of “Moving into a New House” (Huadong renmin chubanshe, 1953), an idyllic portrayal of a family in New China. Young adult students—from cultural China and around the world—bring considerably more baggage to the study of the Mao era. American college students may have learned almost nothing about China or Asia in their high school; or they know about the Cultural Revolution as part of a larger curriculum: East Asian Studies, the Cold War, or a unit on Stalin/Hitler/Mao in the first year of World History. Students with parents or grandparents who experienced the Cultural Revolution may similarly have heard little, depending in part on where they grew up. Growing up under a regime of “patriotic education,” students from China may hold both strong nationalist views and deep curiosity, yet be concerned about the discussion of politically sensitive topics. Sometimes, students with all of these backgrounds—and more—share the same classroom.

How are we to teach China's Cultural Revolution? This essay begins with the premise that we must understand where our students are coming from. We have them between their high school years and their adult lives, so our teaching bridges the gap between their beginnings as learners to their futures as citizens of the world. On the one hand our students' high school years seem distant from the college campus; secondary education is notoriously test-driven, its teachers are pressured to cover vast swathes of time and space, and classrooms are far from homogenous in background and ability. Yet in working with high school teachers, we find many similar concerns. How can we cover controversial topics in a few days' time, and give more than just a textbook overview? How do we grapple with cultural stereotypes and present a period that seems altogether alien? How do we incorporate legacy and memory while also taking our historical subjects seriously?

This essay presents three topics in teaching the Cultural Revolution. I begin with a spectrum of affective and cognitive learning. While good teaching incorporates both, it is difficult to integrate the two. Students and high school teachers focus on deeply moving memoirs and films or questions of morality; in an upper-division college course the instructor may offer the latest social science research that is both technical and theoretical. The next section of this essay suggests a problem that both secondary and tertiary instructors deal with: how to go beyond standard narratives while also making something of a history that is complex and fragmented. Finally, in the spirit of future conversation, the third part proposes that curriculums may frame their “teaching objectives” as an opportunity to learn how we know what we know. Pursuing a “theory of knowledge” offers students of the Cultural Revolution a view of historical scholarship that is participatory.

### *Affective and Cognitive Learning*

The power of affective learning was clear by the end of the day. At a 2018 workshop for local junior high and high school teachers with the goal of incorporating the Cultural Revolution into Chinese, East Asian studies, history, and International Baccalaureate curriculum, attendees had been given three assignments: to examine Chinese propaganda posters on a website, to read selected short stories of Chen Ruoxi, and to watch nine oral histories on the University of Pittsburgh's “Chinese Cultural Revolution in Memories.” But the most memorable lesson was the introduction to the CR/10 Project by Dr. Haihui Zhang, who shared her personal and family story as an entree to why she launched the oral history project. By the time she was finished the audience was in tears. Earlier, one urban high school teacher had remarked, “Affective learning, that is what I focus on.”

Indeed, personal stories and their ability to move are what bring many students to the history major, whether they say they are in your class “for the stories,” whether they are longtime devotees to the History Channel, or whether it was their families' stories (or lack thereof) that brought them to Chinese history. By extension, the discussion sections that draw out even the most shy or unprepared student are debates over ethics, “Would I have joined the Red Guards?” “Would I have drawn a line between myself and my parents?” Jung Chang's memoir *Wild Swans* is not the among the first books that appear in an Amazon search of “Cultural Revolution” in the category “Chinese history,” but the book is #3 in biographies and memoirs of China and #18 in history books about China. It was assigned in two out of the three lecture courses I taught for as a graduate student.

I vowed never to assign *Wild Swans*. It was oversimplified; its characters lacked agency; sections didn't manage to go beyond comments like, “that was the saddest book I ever read.” As I finished graduate school and read across disciplines in the study of the Cultural Revolution, I was eager to incorporate the latest in cultural studies, history, and sociology, packing my lectures with case studies and telling my students what I had learned at the last Association of Asian Studies meeting. Yet in this way I went too far. I focused on cognitive learning to a degree that lost sight of individual experience, realizing this only at the end of the semester at the University of Kentucky, when students told me the short PBS clip I assigned was their first glimpse of “what China looks like.”

But I remain pulled between affective and cognitive teaching and learning. I've attempted to bridge the gap by showing more clips of documentaries, contemporary and recent. Oral histories in source readers, excerpts from Sang Ye's *China Candid: The People on the People's Republic*, and short stories work to provide affective ballast to a vessel of Cultural Revolution scholarship. Being transparent about what I choose to assign and why also helps students realize that I am thoughtful—if not always successful—at my teaching

objectives. A tension, however, remains. What are students to make of individual stories?

#### *A History in Fragments*

The young woman from the local university's department of tourism sighed when asked about her impression of the Jianchuan Museum Cluster, known in the West as one of the few and certainly the largest museum in China to exhibit the Cultural Revolution. On a study group with her teachers and classmates in summer 2014, she remarked, "I had very high hopes of this museum before I came here. But now that I see it, it does not reflect what my grandmother has told me. No, it doesn't represent my grandmother's stories at all." A related tension to affective and cognitive learning, then, is one between an overarching narrative and the fragments of grassroots experience and individual memory. The standard narrative of the Cultural Revolution has remained quite constant: Mao feared a bureaucratic hardening and slide into revisionism, Red Guards seized the opportunity to prove their revolutionary credentials by engaging in violence and political struggle, and individuals joined factions based on protecting their interests. In some ways students need to learn the received tradition before they can understand recent research that challenges it; they need a context before grappling with fragments.

The challenge of drawing together fragments is particularly acute when college students are asked to do independent research, whether in the form of a final paper or a thesis. Standard pedagogy suggests that instructors "scaffold" assignments, building upon them week-by-week: find an interesting primary source, build a bibliography of secondary sources, propose an argument, and write an introduction. Locating a primary source proves to be difficult, and is compounded by two factors: students are exposed to countless forms of digital media but do not have experience filtering, and most students do not have Chinese reading knowledge, making their choices far more limited. (Another situation is the learner of Chinese as a foreign language or as a heritage language, who is often frustrated by the limits of his or her language ability).

One way to address the problem of fragments is not to further pre-scaffold, but rather to model the ways in which scholars of the Cultural Revolution build their own scaffolds. Taking apart monographs and presenting them in tandem with the primary sources on which they were built goes toward "decoding the discipline." This is especially useful if one can present one's own article along with two or three primary sources in translation, explaining which sources were key, at what point they were discovered, and how they were used to build the argument. Otherwise, monographs that make use of significant political texts or visual and material culture can be accessed in the same way. Finally, an alternate assignment can pair two articles on the same topic, one which uses one kind of source, and another that uses a second kind, to explore what each genre adds to scholarship.

A second way to model the incorporation of fragments is to encourage students to view them as such, but also to draw links among fragments and to view them as representative of larger systems. Hence in the aforementioned workshop for local teachers, the various fragments from visual culture,

literature, and memoir were chosen because they shared topics and themes; students can be encouraged to put "documents in dialogue" with each other. Taking the CR/10 Project as an example, simply looking at the catalogue records (titles, keywords, search terms) provide an exercise in determining how one oral history is exceptional or representative. An increasing number of such resources, from classics like [chinese posters.net](http://chinese posters.net) and [morningsun.org](http://morningsun.org) to the CR/10 Project make such assignments—and longer papers—possible. Throughout, it is an important practice to be transparent about fragments as fragments, as both windows into knowledge and evidence for the limitation of our knowledge.

#### *Knowing What We Know*

Two junior high students from Kentucky sat in my office. One of their moms sat next to them. Behind them, they had unfurled a display board they prepared for their school's History Day competition. Their project display board exhibited photos and text about China's recent past, and they told me what they had learned. As gently as possible, I asked, "How do you know that?" They looked at each other—they had no idea.

History instructors, no matter what their field or historical time period, struggle to help their students evaluate evidence. When I first started teaching as an assistant professor, I taught the gateway seminar to the history major. In the first week's discussion, the most common response to the definition of a primary source was—as if it has previously been drilled—a resounding chorus of "BIAS!" More than one student cited their favorite history book as *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Teacher Got Wrong*. Yet it is a difficult road from "BIAS!" to knowing what kind of bias, why that bias, and what other kinds of biases there are.

A college level instructor of the Cultural Revolution has an additional dilemma: many students will believe that materials from the Cultural Revolution, especially political documents or political propaganda, are inherently untrue. Instead, they may see everything as a Potemkin village and focus on seeking some kind of absolute truth behind the veil. In doing so, they omit the possibility of the truths in propaganda as well as the principle behind socialist realism—to portray a kind of higher truth. In our era of "fake news," the premise that "everything is propaganda" is not only misleading but dangerous.

One way to address this sense of absolute bias is to examine propaganda itself, and indeed propaganda posters are popular among high school and college instructors as a way to introduce the Cultural Revolution. Techniques include uncovering the creation of propaganda, which is now well covered in the secondary literature. Stefan Landsberger's book chapter, "Contextualizing (Propaganda) Posters," has proven useful to assign with the posters themselves. Students could watch Hu Jie and Ai Xiaoming's *Red Art* documentary, and for advanced students it could be paired with Elizabeth Perry's *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition*. Discussion might begin with the very definition of propaganda—and its neutrality in Chinese—and an examination of the students' own "propaganda culture."

Another way to think through what can be known is to think about what historical actors understood of the Cultural

Revolution at the time, which brings into sharp relief the question of knowledge: if it was so confusing to people who experienced the movement, how should we understand it in our times? How do participants understand it today? Many of the oral histories in the CR/10 Project, for example, relate what the interviewee thought—or at least, what he remembers that he thought. Because a recent project is less likely to capture people who were in middle or old age, many of the interviewees relate the bewilderment of children at that time. These memoirs are fruitfully paired with literary representations of children and youth during the Cultural Revolution. Finally, as with being transparent about the fragmentary nature of some sources, it is important to be upfront about what we know, what we don't know, and what we might know someday.

### *Conclusion*

The students on the summer study trip in 2013 sat around a conference table at the Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Centre, listening to its founder Yang Peiming tell the story of his collection. Not unlike the high school teachers listening to Zhang Haihui's personal story, his narrative had an air of authenticity that is difficult to reproduce. Yang and Zhang had an similar effect on their listeners for a second reason: both are engaged in the preservation of the history of the Cultural Revolution, in a time when such history remains elided, omitted, or taboo. In 2013, students from Hong Kong were particularly moved by Yang Peiming's efforts, feeling both a sense of Chinese cultural identity and the very near memory of the bitter struggle over "patriotic education" in Hong Kong's school curriculum. One Hong Kong student was so touched that she devoted her senior thesis the following year to the preservation of Cultural Revolution memory.

No classroom introduction to the Cultural Revolution is complete without some reference to its place in memory, or to its legacies. The instructor may begin by talking about both themes, especially in the wake of the Cultural Revolution's fiftieth anniversary. The students will read memoirs and watch oral histories, and those who read the news will have seen magazine covers comparing Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping, and even articles calling the era of Trump America's Cultural Revolution (*Washington Post*, January 1, 2018). There is a proliferation of scholarship on the Cultural Revolution's legacies, from the lives and afterlives of its cultural products, to the topic of the sent-down youth, to the economies of Cultural Revolution nostalgia. In some ways it is easier to study the representation of the Cultural Revolution than it is the Cultural Revolution itself.

But we cannot analyze representation without evaluating that which is being represented, and therefore classroom treatment of legacies must also treat them as such. Herein the difficulty lies in examining historical subjects on their own terms—if not always at their own words. Some colleagues have employed role play, whether it is inviting students to stage a Red Guard rally or to drag the instructor through a struggle session, "airplane position" and all. Those of us who grew up in the 1980s remember the after-school special *The Wave* (1981), which portrays a 1967 high school experiment to simulate the coming of fascism. Despite the power of such

embodiment, we've entered a moment when such pedagogy must be employed carefully, if at all.

Still, we can take our subjects seriously, and we do so by allowing our students to participate in the historical enterprise, which includes both teaching and learning. We should incorporate both affective and cognitive learning, acknowledging that the former brings students to history and that each illuminates each other. We endeavor to put historical fragments in dialogue with each other, modeling this work for our students. And we are transparent about what we can and cannot know, trusting that our students will one day know more than we do.