

High Stakes: Teaching Tiananmen to Chinese Students in Canada

Jeremy Brown, Simon Fraser University

“Based on my experience growing up and going to school in China, Chinese girls aren’t interested in politics,” Daniel said during a discussion of Louisa Lim’s *The People’s Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited*. “In China, only boys care about politics,” Daniel, a student from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) taking my seminar about the Tiananmen Square protests, declared. Nine of the twenty-one students taking the class at Simon Fraser University in spring 2018 were from the PRC. The five PRC-born women in the seminar frowned at Daniel’s remarks and leaned forward. Chelsea responded first. “That’s a terrible generalization,” she said. “When I was in high school in Beijing I did Model UN. The fact that I’m taking this class means that I care about politics.”

Greg jumped in to defend Daniel. “Well, that’s because you grew up in Beijing,” he mansplained to Chelsea. “People are wealthier in the capital so they have more time and inclination to pay attention to politics. The farther you get from Beijing, the less girls care about politics. What Daniel said is true where I’m from in southern China.” I turned back to Chelsea with my eyebrows raised. Chelsea said, “I come from a middle-class family, and most of my classmates in Beijing are not wealthy. You’re wrong.”

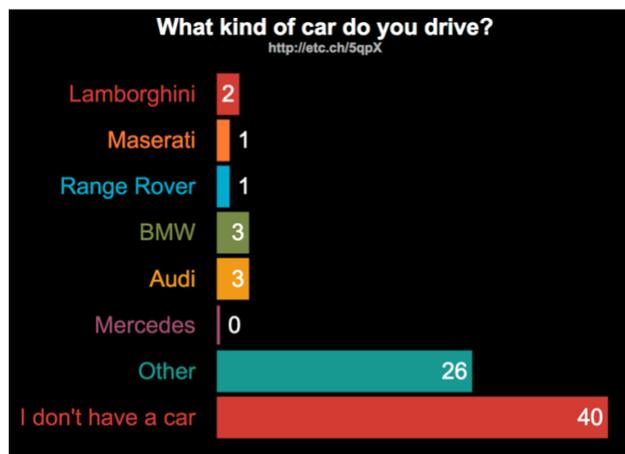
This exchange was one of many joyous moments I have experienced teaching PRC history to classes that include significant numbers of students from China. As our conversation continued, everyone in the room, regardless of their background, came away understanding that China is diverse and that students from China have diverse views about their country’s past, present, and future. In this essay I will discuss the broader ways in which PRC-born students enhance the overall learning experience for all students in Chinese history classes, especially those related to the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.

Like many other universities in North America, Simon Fraser University—a public, provincially-funded institution with approximately 25,000 undergraduate students—has seen an increase in the number of students from China over the past ten years. When I started teaching at SFU in 2008, there were 877 undergraduate students from China, representing 39.6 percent of all international students. By 2018, the number of Chinese students had increased to 2,729, a full 52.1 percent of international undergraduates.¹ Students from China make up the majority of those enrolled in my large lecture course on modern Chinese history, as Table 1 shows.² Many of the Chinese students in my class are Business and Economics majors for whom the course fulfills a humanities breadth requirement, although the number of students in this category has decreased in recent years.

Term	Enrollment	Students with Chinese Surnames	History Majors	Business/Economics Majors
Spring 2011	141	129 (91.5%)	7 (5%)	72 (51%)
Spring 2013	141	129 (91.5%)	9 (6.4%)	83 (58.9%)
Spring 2014	141	129 (91.5%)	5 (3.5%)	81 (57.4%)
Spring 2016	111	99 (89.1%)	7 (6.3%)	52 (46.8%)
Spring 2017	116	80 (69%)	12 (10.3%)	37 (31.9%)
Spring 2018	103	77 (74.8%)	14 (13.6%)	31 (30%)

Table 1. Enrollment Trends in “China since 1800” (History 255) at Simon Fraser University, 2011–2018

Tuition fees for international undergraduate students at SFU will be almost five times higher than what Canadian students pay in the 2019–2020 academic year.³ This fact, along with the presence of Bentleys, Ferraris, Lamborghinis, and Maseratis on campus and a drumbeat of alarmist articles in the *Vancouver Sun* about Chinese money driving up local real estate prices, affects the classroom dynamic. I address this flashpoint on the first day of my large lecture class by asking students to think about how stereotypes about Chinese students and Chinese money might not actually match reality. Students anonymously answer an online poll question featuring a list of ridiculously high-end automobiles. It turns out that most students take the bus to school (Figure 1).



We then discuss how the economic and linguistic diversity of China is reflected in the Chinese student body at SFU. We

reflect on how differential tuition rates for international and domestic students require some Chinese parents to make great sacrifices to send their children to university in Canada—a point related to the one that Chelsea made in her debate with Daniel and Greg.

In addition to economic and linguistic diversity, Chinese students come to SFU with an array of political opinions that have been influenced by their families, friends, teachers, and exposure to state-controlled media in China. Some students’ parents are anti-Communist and have taught their children to be critical and skeptical of propaganda from a young age. Some students’ parents are Communist Party officials or businesspeople (or both) that have taught their children to be cautious and to accept the Party’s judgments about recent history. What all of the students have in common is that they have chosen to attend university in Canada, not in China. They have chosen to study recent Chinese history in a liberal academic environment. This last point means that many students are curious about and receptive toward exploring sensitive topics—they know that they have been exposed to a limited view of Chinese history in China; they expect and hope to learn and debate things that were off-limits back home.

No topic is more sensitive than the Tiananmen Square protests and massacre of 1989. In 2013, linguist David Moser tweeted, “Many newly VPN’d Chinese immediately download Tiananmen stuff. It’s like being able to download porn for the first time.”⁴ Debating Tiananmen Square in a Canadian classroom is even more thrilling than surreptitiously watching YouTube videos about it. During the week my large lecture course discusses the Tiananmen massacre, I assign two short readings: an official verdict justifying the use of military force to “quell the anti-government rebellion,”⁵ along with an account written by Ding Zilin, whose son Jiang Jielian was shot and killed on June 3, 1989.⁶ I lecture briefly about the political environment of the 1980s and introduce students to Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang, Li Peng, and Zhao Ziyang. Then I show the 25 minutes of *China: A Century of Revolution* that cover the protests and massacre so that students can see video footage of the high hopes and happy moments of the protest movement juxtaposed with the machine guns and tanks that crushed it. Students then quietly write down questions about the films and readings, which is followed by a large-group discussion of questions that interest a critical mass of students. In recent years students have been most interested in the death toll, what protesters wanted and what they meant by “democracy,” why the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) used deadly force, and what alternatives there were to a violent outcome.

After lecture the students attend small-group discussion sections (we call these tutorials at SFU). Tutorials are led by teaching assistants, but one year a teaching assistant fell ill so I took over his three tutorial sections. In one section, all seventeen students were Mandarin speakers (sixteen from the PRC, one from Taiwan), so we held our discussion in Mandarin. The students debated whether the PLA’s violent crackdown was necessary and justified. It was a one-sided debate. The student from Taiwan unequivocally denounced the bloodshed, while the PRC-born students took turns saying that the use of force was necessary to ensure stability and

future economic growth. At the end of the hour, students turned in one-page essays reflecting on the day’s readings. One student from China approached me and said, “What I wrote here is what I really believe. I was just being careful today with my comments in class.” I looked at her essay and saw that she had deplored the massacre even more vigorously than the Taiwanese student had. Even though I have looked for and found zero evidence of students monitoring or reporting on each other’s political views to authorities (either at the Chinese consulate in Vancouver or to someone in China), some Chinese students actively censor themselves in a majority Chinese classroom environment. This is regrettable but it is also educational. Reflecting on self-censorship teaches students how repression in China can affect the Canadian university classroom. It connects past to present.

The atmosphere in my small fourth-year seminar focusing on the Tiananmen Square protests is different, mostly because only rather bold Chinese students choose to take a class all about Tiananmen. I have taught the seminar four times since 2010 and Chinese students have always been a minority: in 2010 there was only one Chinese-born student. In 2014 there were seven, in 2016 four, and in 2018 nine. Because the seminar is intensely focused on only a few months in recent Chinese history, over the course of thirteen weeks students can become experts on what happened in April, May, and June 1989 by first immersing themselves in primary sources, moving on to memoirs and journalistic accounts, and finally exploring scholarly literature. This sequence prepares students to use their newfound expertise to upload original content to Wikipedia at the end of the term.⁷

In addition to debating with their classmates, as Chelsea, Daniel, and Greg often did, students from China make major contributions to the Tiananmen seminar. Chelsea was so interested in Chai Ling’s memoir *A Heart for Freedom* that she compared the English version of Chai’s book with the Chinese version published in Hong Kong. Chelsea discovered telling differences between the two and shared them with the class. Because they can read Chinese, PRC-born students have access to a much larger body of sources when they add material to Wikipedia. This has allowed them to create articles about such topics as Ding Zilin’s son Jiang Jielian, independent researcher Wu Renhua, and a professor named Chen Mingyuan whose speech at Peking University on April 23, 1989 inspired students to intensify their protests. There are not enough sources in English to serve as the basis for research on many Tiananmen-related topics that deserve coverage on Wikipedia. Chinese students’ curiosity and language skills—plus the ability to upload material anonymously to Wikipedia without fearing repercussions—has fueled the continued productivity of the SFU Tiananmen Square Project.

My overwhelmingly positive experience with students from China studying PRC history in Canada contradicts gloom-and-doom articles bemoaning international students’ lack of preparedness for university life in North America.⁸ I am delighted to have something good to say and promise that I am not prettifying the situation. Academic freedom in North American classrooms—the freedom to form opinions based on critical examination of evidence—is a luxury that many American and Canadian students take for granted. Interaction

between Canadian and Chinese students studying PRC history is therefore mutually productive. Chinese students can feed their hunger for deep inquiry into topics that are forbidden in their home country, while Canadians can better understand the privilege of attending a progressive university in a liberal society. In my large lecture hall that is majority Chinese, non-Chinese students get to experience taking a class as a member of an ethnic and linguistic minority, many of them for the first time. This is a usefully uncomfortable experience. Most useful of all is how Chinese and non-Chinese students, by reading and discussing the same documents, work together to appreciate the high stakes of studying the authoritarian past of a country that is still troublingly repressive in the present.

¹ “Fall 2017 International Student Report,” Institutional Research and Planning, Simon Fraser University, http://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/irp/students/visa_report/visa.report.1177.pdf; “Fall 2018 International Student Report,” Institutional Research and Planning, Simon Fraser University, https://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/irp/students/visa_report/visa.report.1187.pdf.

² I do not have data on where students are from, so I can only crudely count students who have Chinese surnames, who include Canadian-born students as well as those from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and elsewhere. I estimate that more than half of the students who have Chinese surnames were born in the PRC.

³ “Budget and Financial Plan,” Simon Fraser University, http://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/students/calendar/images/Budget%20Book%202019_2020_final.pdf.

⁴ http://web.archive.org/web/20180621204633/https://twitter.com/david_moser/status/29842763117723904

⁵ Editorial Board of *The Truth about the Beijing Turmoil*, “Introduction,” *The Truth about the Beijing Turmoil* (Beijing: Beijing Publishing House), 3–5, <http://www.tsquare.tv/themes/truthurm.html>.

⁶ Ding Zilin, “Who They Were,” in *The China Reader: The Reform Era*, ed. Orville Schell and David Shambaugh (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 207–212.

⁷ For more details about the first iteration of the seminar, see Jeremy Brown and Benedicte Melanie Olsen, “Teaching Tiananmen: Using Wikipedia in the Undergraduate Classroom to Write about Recent History,” *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* (April 2012): 18–19. A list of Wikipedia articles, article sections, and revisions contributed by the SFU Tiananmen Project since 2010 is available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects/SFU_Tiananmen_Square_Project.

⁸ For one example see Adele Barker, “Are Chinese Students Driving Educational Imperialism?” *Inside Higher Ed*, October 19, 2015, <http://web.archive.org/web/20180621233029/https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/10/19/professors-experience-unprepared-chinese-students-essay>.