

## PRC History in Sociology Instruction: Challenges and Opportunities

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Instruction on the PRC is an integral part of the sociology curriculum of American universities, especially among globally renowned campuses. Harvard, Berkeley, and Columbia each offer an undergraduate sociology course that focuses on politics, society, and culture under the PRC. Research universities, teaching universities, and four-year private colleges that have sociologists working on China often offer a similar course. At the graduate level, prestigious campuses, especially, recruit PhD students who are interested in doing sociological research on China. A quick online search shows that the sociology departments of Harvard and Berkeley each had no fewer than six such students in the spring of 2018. Because prestigious universities enroll in their other doctoral programs (e.g., political science, history, anthropology), students whose research focuses on China, the sociology departments on those campuses can offer a graduate course on the PRC at least once every few years.

Like most sociological courses offered in the U.S., those that examine the PRC see their instructors updating the content regularly to incorporate research on recently important issues (such as political repression in Xinjiang) as well as on enduring but evolving matters (e.g., official governance, economic organization, social inequality). Another change occurring with these courses is staffing. Many of the instructors who started their careers investigating the Mao era have switched to studying the post-Mao years. This is inevitable because sociology as a discipline appeared during the nineteenth century when questions about modernity and, especially its trajectories and possibilities, loomed large. Because of this characteristic of sociology, the China sociologists trained by their above teachers even more overwhelmingly focus their research on the post-Mao era. Put differently, even though sociology instruction on the PRC arose more than half a century ago because of intellectual (and political) necessity to understand life under Mao, critical issues regarding his rule and its consequences—or what have animated “PRC history” in the twentieth-first century—are raised in the classroom in increasingly condensed manners. Sometimes, the instructor may remove the examination of such issues altogether to make room for lectures and discussion on globalized China.

While the above dynamics support sociology instruction on the PRC but suppress the incorporation of stimulating contents from the young field of PRC history, the introduction of such contents in other sociology courses faces even bigger obstacles. Since the spectacular decline of Soviet-type societies three decades ago, sociology instruction on comparative communism – a forum ideal for sharing new knowledge from PRC history – has been removed from curriculums or replaced by instruction on post-socialism (because of the desire of updating course content noted above). Even more challenging is the fact that most sociology

courses are organized around an intellectual theme (e.g., religion, crime, gender) rather than interests in a region or, still less, a historical period (such as the PRC under Mao). Sociology instructors design undergraduate courses to help students understand analytical frameworks suitable for investigating the selected topic, if not also how they have evolved. Functionalism, Marxism, post-structuralism, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory are examples of such frameworks, the assortment of which varies with the topic. Instructors use case studies to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of the frameworks as well as to improve student learning of social issues and human experiences. Sociology graduate seminars are organized in similar fashions with one important exception: instructors emphasize theoretical and conceptual training. Case studies are selected to spotlight how they each serve to advance an analytical tradition or the synthesis of traditions. That is to say, like cultural anthropology, political science, women’s studies, or science and technology studies, PRC history is but one strand of intellectual inquiry, among many, vying for the attention of sociology instructors. Making the matter worse, *Seeing the World: How US Universities Make Knowledge in a Global Era*, a recent study published by Princeton University Press, suggests that the research (and we can therefore argue the teaching) of sociology faculty tends to focus on American society at the expense of promoting an interest in transnational knowledge across the discipline.

Faced with such formidable intellectual and institutional obstacles, can PRC history break into sociology instruction? Based on my teaching experience, I argue that PRC history has the potential to strengthen not only sociology instruction on the PRC, but also broader education in sociology. Sociology is an intellectually inclusive discipline. China sociologists, in particular, have a well-documented tradition of using their works to dialogue with political scientists, anthropologists, historians, and others inside and outside Chinese studies and even to extend the research agendas of those other disciplines. Andrew Walder’s now-classic sociological analysis of politics, work, and organization under Mao—*Communist Neo-traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry*—is an example. He took the theoretical accounts of actually existing socialisms of political scientists as his point of departure and produced a powerful reinterpretation of the character of such societies. There is no reason to believe that this inclusiveness of China sociologists is discarded inside the classroom. With my undergraduate PRC course, which focuses on the post-Mao era, roughly half of the readings are works by political scientists, economists, geographers, and anthropologists. The students themselves are from many disciplines. To be sure, scholars who focus on PRC history cannot compare with social scientists when it comes to producing analysis of China after Mao. Yet, no

instruction on globalized China would make sense without effective explanations of the revolutionary changes that preceded the unfolding second transformation of the Mainland. Or, how did the institutions, ideas, and identities formed under Mao's rule condition, confound, and constrain subsequent changes? Social scientists grappled with this issue during the 1990s. With unprecedented access to people, places, and papers, scholars who research PRC history are taking up this key question anew. They have produced, and will continue to produce, stimulating scholarship.

The real question is whether material on PRC history is valuable to the extent that sociology instructors will incorporate the scholarship in their lectures on contemporary China. For such instructors, the works of Roderick MacFarquhar, Ezra Vogel, Merle Goldman, Martin Whyte, and other historians and social scientists have been irreplaceable for introducing students to China under Mao, before turning their attention to what has happened since. These instructors have little incentive to alter those "preparatory" sections of their lectures, because there is an ever-increasing need to help students understand globalized China, which is an arduous task by itself given the Mainland's dizzying speed of change. I have found nonetheless three (non-mutually exclusive) kinds of inquiry from PRC history useful for improving my lectures on China under Mao. First, there are the works that focus on critical but under-examined issues. For example, Sherman Cochrane's edited volume, *The Capitalist Dilemma in China's Communist Revolution*, places the capitalist class of the early 1950s under the spotlight (six decades after the 1949 revolution!) and offers concepts and analyses for grasping official approaches and tactics of domination on one hand and family and personal reactions on the other hand. Second, a small set of studies has challenged conventional views on Mao's China. Neil Diamant's *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949-1968* is a trailblazer in this regard. He reveals layers of gender politics and women's agency under a socialist state. Third, an even smaller number of works has illustrated the Mao-era roots of post-Mao institutions, or the past in the present. Elizabeth Perry's explication of the construction and reconstruction of a revolutionary tradition by the Chinese Communist elites for purposes of political legitimation before, during, and after the Mao era is a case in point. In short, the following kinds of PRC history are valuable to sociology instruction on the PRC: elaboration of key issues related to China's transition to socialism; revision of conventional views about Chinese socialism; and illustration of institutional continuity between the Mao and post-Mao era.

The impact of PRC history on other areas of the sociology curriculum (outside of a China focus) so far has been minimal. No colleagues of mine has hinted that they are inspired by a new interpretation of China under Mao to the extent that they have adopted the work in their courses. This lack of influence of PRC history on sociology instruction does not have to persist. A central part of the sociology curriculum is built around understanding the rise and fall of world regions and nations and the evolution and influence of their institutions and cultures. I teach a course titled Global Social Change in which I explore with students the dominance of Europe in the

world economy during the nineteenth century and the rise of the US afterward, among other things. We look at bureaucracy, finance, trade, and other aspects of social life. A sociologist wrote the adopted textbook, the content of which is abundantly drawn from historical works. Eventually, similar courses and textbooks must address the ascent of China, as it has already become the world's largest economy based on a purchasing-power-parity measure. Sooner or later, it seems, China will surpass the US as the largest economy measured by gross domestic product.

Herein lies an unrivaled opportunity for PRC history to make its mark outside the discipline of history. For decades, social scientists and historians who studied China under Mao were colored by a Cold-War lens that sees actually existing socialisms as pathological compared to capitalist democracy but, at the same time, politically and socially stable. Many of such analyses thus have to be reinterpreted dramatically before they are usable for illustrating how the institutions, ideas, and identities developed under Mao figured into the unforeseen rise of China and the challenges it faces. For example, how has the institution of science organized under Mao underpinned and undermined technological innovation afterward? How has Beijing reformulated the notion of China as a revolutionary nation to earn domestic and overseas support? And how have state and society redeployed the worker as a political identity after the Maoist framework that gave the terms glossy meanings has lost its dominance? Put differently, sociology awaits PRC history to furnish a robust, layered, and nuanced narrative that connects the structures and cultures of globalized China to those in Maoist China. Sigrid Schmalzer's *Red Revolution, Green Revolution*, which shows the connections of Mao-era agricultural practices to those of today's, is a pioneering work. Andrew Walder's *China Quarterly* analysis of how the Cultural Revolution, contrary to Mao's final hope, paved the way for market reform is another example.

Last but not least, PRC history is well positioned to gain a place on the sociology graduate curriculum. The young field is founded materially on rich empirical resources once off-limits or unavailable to researchers. During the last decade, historians, political scientists, sociologists, and others have been using the resources to revise, extend, and even develop theoretical perspectives, or the very matter that underpins sociology graduate education. Walder's reexamination of the Red Guards movement, which culminates in *Fractured Rebellion*, deserves attention. He uses new evidence not only to interrogate conventional understanding of the officially sanctioned rebellion, but also to advance theoretical understanding of social movements. I taught a sociology graduate seminar on classification and identity a few years ago. I found Thomas Mullaney's *Coming to Terms with the Nation* very useful. His original, multifaceted, and detailed analysis of the construction of ethnic categories under the PRC provides an analytical roadmap for students who want to investigate processes of social classification under other contexts.

Of course, all of the instructional opportunities mentioned above presume that researchers of PRC history want to dialogue with their peers in other fields of study, influence how those other scholars see China, and even show them the

theoretical and analytical limitations of their own scholarship through the use of compelling Chinese cases. As Elizabeth Perry's 2016 critique of PRC history suggests, such a critical intellectual approach to PRC history has yet to become the norm. A good number of researchers of PRC history have only focused on elaborating heretofore-unknown activities and other kinds of details under Mao's China. They dig deep for material without seeking comparable depth in conceptual or theoretical terms. Thankfully, scholars who do insert their research on PRC history into broader intellectual debates are getting attention from and publishing with the prominent university presses, such as Cambridge, California, Columbia, and Cornell. These successes signal that the future of PRC history in sociology instruction is bright.