

Love and Passion: Teaching the PRC History in China Today

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This essay tells an untold story of teaching PRC history, the history of the Cultural Revolution in particular, in mainland China under Xi Jinping's administration. Since 2013, I have taught several courses on PRC history in the Department of History at Fudan University in Shanghai, such as *Chinese Society under Mao* and *Historical Sociology* for undergraduates, *C.C.P. History* and *Western Scholarship on Mao's China* for graduates. As I had an academic leave for two years (visiting scholar at Harvard Yenching Institute for the academic year 2016-17, and National Fellow at Hoover Institution at Stanford University 2017-18), the stories I share with you here are based on my teaching experiences from the fall 2013 to the spring 2016.

The stories that follow highlight several issues related to teaching PRC History in mainland China: students and student expectations; using sources (primary and secondary) in the classroom; teaching strategies: assignments and approaches; control over my course content; connections between research and teaching.

Promising and diversified: my students and their expectations

My students were multidisciplinary, from human sciences and social sciences—most were from the History program, with smaller numbers of majors in the natural sciences.

What were my students' expectations? I have three related stories to share.

First story: A freshman attended my seminar, *Chinese Society under Mao*, in 2015. I gave an introduction to the course during the first section. Red-faced and fists tightly clenched, the freshman stood up and asked me not to use the word "Mao" when speaking of Mao Zedong, whom I'd mentioned many times. "Why?" I asked him. "You should say Chairman Mao or Comrade Mao whenever you mention this great man! If you lived in my hometown for several months, you would never undermine Chairman Mao by using such a disrespectful word to name this great leader," he murmured.

Frank and brave, I like students of this kind. "Scholars in the field refer to three key figures during the Cultural Revolution, i.e. Mao Zedong, Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai, more simply as Mao, Lin and Zhou when speaking and writing about them. I don't think there is disrespect in those references," I explained. "But I really appreciate your frankness. At the end of this term, when you've finished all of the reading, writing, and other assignments, I hope you'll come back to me and tell me your thoughts on the question you asked me today," I added.

It turned out that he dropped my course when the "window shopping" period ended. After learning that he came from the countryside in Hunan Province, where Chairman Mao was born in 1893, I understood his deep admiration for Mao. All his knowledge of Chinese contemporary history came from school textbooks. His parents, relatives, and friends might share similar values with him. Though he was economically

disadvantaged, his intelligence and good performance in school won him a government scholarship, from a state-sponsored initiative to offer opportunities for higher education to students from China's less developed regions.

I took this student's comments seriously even though he didn't want to continue with my class. I printed all the reading materials, section by section, and I asked one of his roommates, who had remained in my course, to pass them along. He wrote me an email saying he'd like to take the course during the following term.

Second story: This one concerns academic misconduct by a student. At the beginning of each course, I explain the rules for student work and the criteria by which I assess it. I allow no exceptions, regardless of a student's creed, gender, family background, nationality or religion. As one of the top three universities in China, Fudan's students include many children of high-ranking government officials.

In 2015, Fudan's Teaching Office asked me to do a favor for a female student in one of my classes by awarding her a high final exam score. Of course, her father held a very important provincial-level post. Without any hesitation, I refused. I know that such requests have been regularly accommodated for quite some time in Chinese universities, but not in my class, not before my eyes.

Third story: This third story is a sad one. One of my female students was diagnosed with depression in late 2017. She was a very promising student, in the top 5% of my class. She was passionate about doing research on the Cultural Revolution after taking two of my courses in her sophomore year. During the 2016-2017 academic year, she went to Europe as an exchange student. There, outside the realm of Chinese internet censorship, she discovered things that began to make her miserable. The more she learned, the more she suffered. It was truly tortuous for her to uncover all of those dark histories at such a young age. The huge rupture between the past and the present took her breath away. Life came to seem absurd and meaningless to her, and she felt like there could be no future.

Finally, months of sleeplessness led her to see a doctor in a Shanghai mental health hospital. I burst into tears when she told me over the phone that she'd gone to the hospital by herself, without informing her parents. Those parents, who lived far from Shanghai, had been college students in 1989 and were survivors of the Tiananmen Square crackdown. They had forbidden their daughter from studying any sensitive topics and had quarreled with her on that very issue in the years since her high school days, when she had first shown an interest in China's contemporary history. The disputes continued when they failed to stop her, their only child, from pursuing a university major in History.

As I write, my student is now in her senior year, trying very hard to finish her thesis and earn her degree. I feel extremely sorry and guilty for the things that happened to her. I wonder, if

she hadn't taken my courses, if I hadn't encouraged her to do her research related to this tragic history, would things be different? I still remember well how fascinated she was by the materials we discussed in class, asking so many questions from the moment the course began. She was so ambitious to contribute to the field. Thinking of her, I ask myself if or how I could measure the strength of a student's mind before encouraging her or him to research the Cultural Revolution. We need more scholars in this field, especially from among the younger generation. But it's beyond my capacity to gauge the uncertainties and insecurities associated with doing this research in China today.

Readings, Sources, and Assignments

Even under the current circumstances, I try to introduce my students to as much material as I can. The texts I use in my courses include classical works and newly published, cutting-edge books and articles on PRC history. My students and I analyzed some chapters of Gail Hershatter's *The Gender of Memory* and Guobin Yang's *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* in 2016. We also discussed Elizabeth Perry's book *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition* and Frank Dikötter's *Mao's Great Famine*, comparing this last text to other books, such as Jisheng Yang's *Tombstone*.

In addition to these kinds of secondary sources, I use first-hand archival materials, such as personal journals, correspondence, working notes etc. We take a field trip to the Yang Peiming's Propaganda Poster Museum in downtown Shanghai or the Social life Archives Center of Contemporary China on the Campus of Fudan University. I also use video clips and interviews transcripts from oral histories I've conducted for my own book projects. In one such clip, my interviewee, Nanyang Li (李南央), recalled how she burned her family's books without hesitation in August 1966, and how desperately lonely she felt when she was denied admission to a factory college and told by the factory's Party secretary that she could never gain admission because her father (Mao's onetime political secretary Li Rui) was a "bad element."

Students also hear from guests, usually ordinary people or scholars who experienced the Cultural Revolution and are willing to share their stories. For example, we read a diary written by a Fudan student, from 1964 to 1968. The alumnus-author visited our class to listen to our discussion of his journal and answer our questions. The words of this visitor, of Nanyang Li, and of many others like them make a strong impression on the students, who understand history on a deeper level as they hear about lived experiences.

I ask the students to reflect on what they learn in various kinds of assignments. Every student does a presentation, with a Q&A, on one of the books from the course's must-read list. I always encourage them to analyze the main arguments, data and sources, findings, conclusions, contributions and flaws of a book. Learning from classic works in this way promotes critical thinking, helps students better construct their own research, and gives them a boost of confidence when they are able to identify defects in a published article from a distinguished journal, such as *The China Journal* or *Modern China*. At mid-term, the whole class prepares a stage show, 30 minutes in length, based on their

understanding of the Mao Era. Through this project, students gain an embodied understanding of the deep humiliation and fear felt by powerless people who were violently denounced by Red Guards. For their final assignment, students interview their own grandparents or other relatives who lived during the Cultural Revolution and ask them about their memories and their experiences. This work means students have to sit down with their grandparents and start a family history journey. Their knowledge of PRC history is thus assimilated into family stories, making their understanding of China's past all the more profound.

Whatever the title of a class, all my courses are about history and memory in the PRC, the Cultural Revolution in particular. I have learned a lot from the smart CCP editors, who worked in the big cities under the KMT (Guomindang) rule during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Fighting against the KMT's cultural censorship, Communist editors printed red classics by Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin and Mao Zedong, but enclosed them in covers touting contents like *A Romantic Lady*, *Fairy Tales*, *Hilarious King* or *How to Treat Meningitis*.

Guard the Pass: Content Control

To my knowledge, the institutional control over the content of my courses was handled by units at four levels: the department-level Teaching and Instruction Committee, the University Teaching Office, the University Teaching Group for Inspection Work, and the University Leadership Group Inspection. Before running my two new courses in fall 2013, I submitted the syllabus and a description of the contents to the Teaching Office in the Department of History, which passed them to the University Teaching Office. I had no trouble launching those two courses on the Cultural Revolution.

From the autumn 2013 to the spring 2016, my teaching went well. My self-censorship strategy was divided into three parts. First, all of my content was totally scholarly-oriented. The omnipresence of clearly visible "eyes" reminded me to be careful - all the classrooms on the campus are equipped with video recorders, and all classes are taped. My students and I tried to persuade ourselves that we did not need to be afraid, because everything we discussed was based concretely on archival materials and publicly published books or articles.

Second, small class sizes and heavy reading loads help to sweep student-informants out of my class. I emphasized in the first section of every course that the required reading for students would be heavy; most materials would be in English; the mid-term assignment and final paper would both be intellectually challenging and time-consuming. In addition, intensive preparation and participation would be obligatory. The only students who stayed with me were those that were really passionate about Cultural Revolution history.

Third, I asked my students to choose their own seats during the first section. Those became their assigned seats for the semester. Once I had the final class list (after adds and drops), I made a seating chart with students' recent pictures. Thus, right from the start, even before I got to know the students, I could easily identify any stranger who appeared in my class.

Why would a stranger appear in my class? A stranger might be a member of the University Teaching Group for Inspection Work, which is made up of retired professors from different

disciplines. As personnel dispatched from the University's Teaching Office, these individuals can come to my classroom and evaluate my teaching. But I can refuse to allow them to attend my class if they forget to inform me of their attendance in advance, either by sending me an email or by telling me in person. This rule is written in the handbook of inspector's work, which I found in the homepage of the University's Teaching Office. I rejected one inspector who arrived without contacting me first. I assume my uncooperative attitude made an impression on him. Since his visit, I haven't had another inspector.

The situation is different, however, when it comes to other types of observers. I can't refuse an inspection from the dean of my department, the director of the University's Teaching Office, or the President or the Provost of our University. It's not all political surveillance, of course. Leaders naturally attach importance to undergraduate teaching, not only because of our educational mission and the fact that students' life achievements closely contribute to university's reputation, but also because school fees and other student costs contribute to the economic performance of university-owned companies and the local economy.

Since the fall of 2016, Chinese universities have increased their efforts to manage teaching in the social sciences and human sciences in particular. In the fall of 2017, Professor Tang Shaojie of the Department of Philosophy at Tsinghua University planned to offer a course on the Cultural Revolution as a key issue in the history of Marxist philosophy. The class, called *Chinese Cultural History from 1966-76*, was cancelled.

I myself was slated to offer my usual courses on the Cultural Revolution in the fall 2018. In May and early June 2018, the university demanded me to submit my courses for re-approval, first by the History department's Teaching and Instruction Committee and then by the University's Teaching Office. My department's Teaching and Instruction Committee asked me not to use the term "Mao Zedong Era" in the title of my course for undergraduates. I replied saying that I had purposely replaced "Mao Era" with "Mao Zedong Era" because I didn't want domestic and/or international spectators, who are unaware of the truth, to misunderstand the situation with regard to teaching PRC history in mainland China. As the mainstream media in China still uses "Deng Era" and "Xi's New Era", I think it's appropriate that I use "Mao Zedong Era" to identify the period of his national leadership from 1949 to 1976. The Committee still has not replied.

Love and passion: Connection between research and teaching

My research focuses on everyday life during the Cultural Revolution, material culture and consumption in the Mao Era, and urban history. My teaching centers on those same themes, with an emphasis of the history and memory of the Cultural Revolution. I love and enjoy teaching, not only because it is always closely connected to my research, about which I am passionate, but also because I hope I can support the younger generation when they need me to do so in a spiritual and moral way. Let me give you an example to illustrate this point. In fact, the real motivation behind my new book project, which will be my third one, is closely inspired by my teaching.

As instructors, we all face problems related to how much of the reading from our syllabi our students actually

accomplish. Most of the students in my classes are honorable (because of the highly selective *gaokao* - the national examination for high schoolers who hope to enter colleges and universities in China - most students who gain admission to Fudan are very hardworking and serious, active and enthusiastic learners). But still, each term I have a few students who don't read all of the books enlisted in the syllabus for variety reasons - especially as "fast-food" reading styles and overwhelming "information bubbles" on social media have constructed a barrier, which can keep students from immersing themselves into deep and critical reading and thinking. I encouraged them to read more by telling them about the scarcity of reading materials and the difficulty of getting access to sources. At one point I offered them an example - how little we have to read about the Cultural Revolution's sent-down youth generation. In fact, I myself knew very little about this topic. To better persuade my students, I launched my new book project on *Underground Reading of the Sent-down Youth Generation: History and Memory of the Cultural Revolution*.

How do we teach the PRC history in this "beautiful new world"? A universal issue for teaching history is the large-scale apathy among young people. Many of our students, born in the 1990s, show less interest in history. This includes Americans, Chinese, and their peer groups in other countries, in this new era, characterized by artificial intelligence, big data, and machine deep leaning. "What's the point of reading historical books and learning about domestic and global histories?" students ask. "How can we live in the present without remembering the miserable things that happened only a few decades before?" I answer.

I have had no publications in simplified Chinese since 2015 and given no public lectures or talks in China since September 2018. My experiences teaching between September 2018 and June 2019 have not been at all pleasant. Informants abound and Big-Characters Posters adorn my office door. I endure personal attacks on social media, spot checks on my courses from all levels of university inspectors, and receive formal requests that I rectify my courses. And still, teaching remains as my last battlefield. Fudan is the only university in mainland China that still offers courses in China's Cultural Revolution. Till when? Let's wait and see.