

Teaching the Everyday: Socialist Culture as Lived Experience in the Classroom

Emily Wilcox, University of Michigan

Over the past eight years, I have taught on PRC history from within a variety of programs, including anthropology, East Asian languages and literatures, Chinese studies, and Asian studies. Interdisciplinarity has allowed me to experiment with a range of teaching materials, from historical scholarship to memoirs, oral histories, performance and visual culture, and films. One of the greatest challenges I face in the classroom is providing students the tools to make sense of China's socialist culture and to understand why socialist revolution was at one time a compelling path for those who promoted it. I find that students have a relatively easy time judging and criticizing the mistakes of China's past. What is much more difficult—and, thus, I believe more important as an educational mission—is to help them understand the many factors that led to these decisions and their varied consequences for diverse social groups. I want students to understand the desires and ideals that motivated those who promoted the socialist revolution in different ways and at various levels, as well as those who fought and condemned it then and after. I also want students to comprehend the implementation of socialist revolution as everyday experience. I am interested in teaching students not only to evaluate PRC history but to feel its textures and empathize with its creators.

In cultural anthropology, we talk of something called “lived experience”—what my undergraduate mentor Arthur Kleinman described as “[t]hat felt world [that] combines feeling, thought, and bodily process into a single vital structure underlying continuity and change.” (Kleinman, 55). Anthropologists typically access lived experience through ethnography. This means observing people's actions as they unfold in real time, taking part in cultural processes through the interactive multisensory mode of direct co-participation, and collecting stories in which average people make sense of and narrate their own existence. Since the past is by definition not accessible via ethnographic methods, different approaches must be used to access lived experience for historical times. Nevertheless, as a cultural historian who specializes in an embodied and largely ephemeral art form, dance, I believe it is still possible to study lived experience in a historical way. That is, with effort, it is possible to reconstruct a world with enough vividness that one can imagine what it might have been like to live there. One can attempt to hear the sounds, taste the foods, wade in the anxieties, and endure the uncertainties of the people who inhabited that world. By attempting to place oneself within that complex terrain, one can better see both its coherences and its contradictions.

This is the approach that I try to take with my students. One way that I have attempted this is by bringing students into direct contact with people who lived through aspects of PRC history, so that they can ask questions of their own and also encounter, in a more direct way, the muddled process by

which narrative, memory, and translation come together to produce fleeting senses of past experience. In some of my courses, I bring guest speakers into the classroom to talk about their own lives. In others, I require students to conduct a personal interview with someone who grew up in the PRC. This has been possible in part because I have taught in regions of the USA that have large numbers of PRC immigrants, and my students are also often able to interview their own relatives or the relatives of friends and classmates. Of course, students' experiences vary considerably, and the open-endedness of the project makes it difficult to predict the concrete knowledge students will gain from this assignment. Nevertheless, I prepare students with basic interview strategies, and we also discuss the limits of oral history as a research tool, giving it an additional use as a lesson in research methods. Students are required to record their interviews and spend a specified length of time in conversation, and they then write short essays and present what they learned to the class. Overall, I find that it is a very powerful exercise for students to put real, living people into the historical processes about which they are learning. No matter how vivid the reading material or documentary, hearing a story told by a living person about their own life is a different experience. Additionally, the fact that each student interviews and then presents to the class on a different person means that as a whole the students hear a broader range of voices than they would if discussing a single assigned reading or video.

Another way that I attempt to approach lived experience in my teaching on PRC history is by expanding the range of sensory mediums through which students learn about the past. Several of my courses have a required student presentation component. For the subjects of these presentations, I specify concrete topics for which I know students can find audio-visual material on the Web. “Large-character posters,” “sent-down youth,” and “Teresa Teng” are a few examples. Then, I require that in their presentations students not only explain the topic but also provide a certain number of images and videos, as well as include what I call a “creative interactive component”—an activity of their own design that engages the participation of their classmates. For the examples above, the interactive component might include having the class create their own posters, mapping out the timeline and journey of a hypothetical sent-down youth, or singing a karaoke-style Teresa Teng song. Perhaps because of my background in performance studies, I often use acting and role-playing as a way to help students imagine and understand components of PRC history as an everyday experience. For example, in the past, I have had students act out the process of romantic matchmaking in a 1960s-era urban work unit to think about the nature of social networks and the role of “family background” in shaping life decisions at that time. I have also had them improvise social encounters between people of different social roles as described in official CCP ideology

about the pre-1949 era—a poor peasant, a landlord, a KMT soldier, etc. Additionally, I have had students act out segments of PRC plays from different periods and had them take part in music and dance workshops, all as ways of better understanding the cultural landscapes about which they are studying.

Apart from the design of specific assignments, I tend to organize the content of my classes in a way that allows students to build knowledge cumulatively and, ultimately, to apply what they have learned. That is, I try to layer new content so that students first encounter something as an abstract concept or idea, then see it in historical context, and finally use it as an interpretive tool. An example of this occurred in my recent upper-level undergraduate seminar "Revolution in Life: How Communism Changed China." In the first unit of the course, students learned about Marxist concepts and theories of revolution and read diachronic, top-down political histories of the Russian and Chinese revolutions. In the second unit, students gained a more bottom-up knowledge of the Chinese revolution by reading sections of social histories and memoirs focused on the experiences of rural citizens, women, students, and cultural workers. Finally, the course culminated in a third unit in which students watched a series of films from the socialist era, in which their contextualization and interpretation of the films required drawing on the information they had already learned in the previous two units. When watching *The White-Haired Girl*, for example, students applied their knowledge of class categories and considered how the film's narrative might stir rural citizens and motivate their participation in land reform. When watching *Five Golden Flowers*, they considered how the film represents the relationship between cultural workers and local villagers to present an argument about the ideals of artistic labor. In *Li Shuangshuang*, students applied their knowledge of the work point system and Maoist feminism to interpret the gender politics and humor of social criticisms presented in the film. In my view, this type of applied knowledge offered yet another way for students to access lived experience, since it allowed them to see the films through a greater degree of insider knowledge than they would have had they been introduced to the films without the knowledge gained in prior units. In this way, students felt a sense of accomplishment from being able to read the cultural symbols, imagery, and characters presented in the films, while they also gained a richer understanding of the films' meaning and impact by having developed a sense of the world in which they were meant to be viewed. This process of application further solidified students' grasp of the historical issues, since it allowed new opportunities to pose questions and clarify points not fully grasped in the earlier units.

Works Cited

Kleinman, Arthur. *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.