

Introduction

Brian DeMare, Tulane University and Covell Meyskens, Naval Postgraduate School

The boundaries of history are by definition fluid and ever changing. Yet history, as an academic discipline, tends to move in fits and starts. This seems particularly true for China, where the extreme length and complexity of the historical record has complicated research agendas and teaching strategies. Not long ago, the years following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 were deemed too recent to count as true history. Historians working on "modern China" investigated the end of the imperial era or the rise of the Chinese Communists and the downfall of the Nationalists. Courses on modern China abruptly ended when Mao Zedong declared the Chinese people to have stood up; students interested in contemporary China were instructed to similarly stand up, this time to seek out professors trained in the social sciences.

The boundaries of what parts of the Chinese past should be considered historical have, however, decisively shifted in recent years. In a highly influential 2002 essay, Paul Cohen urged historians to transgress the 1949 divide.¹ From the vantage point of 2019, it is clear that his call was an unequivocal success. Once a novel concept kicked around by archival-minded historians, the field of PRC history has definitively arrived. New research has expanded our understanding of decades of Maoist rule. Journals and book series have confirmed the importance of the category of PRC history. And with debates over the larger meaning of recovering daily experiences at the grassroots level, it is tempting to celebrate the founding of a new historical discipline.²

With all the excitement over PRC history as the field passes milestone after milestone, it is all too easy to forget that research and writing are only part of a historian's duties. What then, about teaching? We spend much of our time in the classroom, and because of the infancy of the discipline, PRC historians are on the frontlines of an evolving pedagogical battlefield. How, exactly, to teach these decades of shifting historical terrain, from revolutionary mass movements to economic, social, and political transformations? Starting from the belief that teaching and research are fundamentally linked, we reached out to scholars known for quality research, in the hopes of learning how their work in the field has informed their careers in the classroom.

From the outset, we were determined that the essays collected here reflect the tremendous diversity that characterizes the field. This began with reaching out to a wide-range of scholars working at large state schools, the Ivies, smaller colleges, and even outside of traditional academia. We also made sure to include colleagues working outside of North America, allowing perspectives from Europe and within the PRC itself. And in recognition of the fact that scholars have long been investigating the history of the PRC prior to the development of the field, we also made sure to hear from colleagues working in other disciplines including political science, sociology, and literary studies. Learning about the

classroom experiences of scholars we only knew from conferences and publications was an experience both humbling and educational; we must express our profound gratitude to the talented individuals who signed up for this project.³

As editors, we believe the value of the individual essays to be self-evident: in each piece an expert introduces readers to the challenges of teaching the topic or theme that drives their research, while other essays explore what PRC history looks like from other academic disciplines. Taken collectively, these essays reveal the contours of PRC history to be profoundly shaped by the interaction between the dual demands of teaching and research. Careful readers will uncover a host of themes shared by most, if not all, of the essays in this collection. Three themes strike us as particularly meaningful.

Audience: These essays demonstrate that our students are just as diverse as the practitioners of PRC history. Surveying classrooms in the West and in China itself, we find no typical student. Some well-meaning students have a shocking ignorance of the PRC; others are passionate about PRC history. Few, however, arrive in the classroom without preconceived ideas about China and its recent past. PRC historians must challenge these ideas, which are typically simplistic, while also guarding against the tendency of many students to jump to easy conclusions. We also must encourage interaction between Chinese and Western students, recognizing that all students can develop new perspectives on the past, even and perhaps especially when family members have lived through the decades discussed in our classrooms.

Sources: Reading through these essays, it seems impossible to overstate the importance of sources, both primary and secondary, for our pedagogical mission. Primary sources rightfully lie at the core of the PRC history syllabus, with the important caveat that we must teach our students how to properly read documents that typically employed textual strategies and were often used as propaganda. Essayists introduce readers to a wide range of sources, from films to posters. Multiple contributors pointed to the importance of oral histories, and the value of bringing students into the process of interviewing Chinese citizens to collect first-hand experiences. Our sources, finally, teach students not only historical content, but the varied methods of PRC history itself.

Narratives: Because of the human impulse to understand the past in narrative frameworks, historians have long struggled with the relationship between event and story. This is true when we write history, and it is true in the classroom as well. In PRC history this problem is complicated by the fact that the Chinese Communist Party has developed and promoted a powerful narrative of itself as China's socialist liberator from the oppression of imperialism, capitalism, and tradition. For some practitioners of PRC history, our own entry into the field was partly motivated by the allure of this

narrative, filtered through popular English language accounts of the revolution. Even as we push back against this official narrative, however, we must ponder what comes next. While these essays suggest questioning any simple narrative, it seems prudent to start with embedding gender and other critical themes into the larger narrative of PRC history, while also placing this history into larger global narratives such as the Cold War.

Along the way, we discovered that learning about teaching the PRC sheds much light on the young field of PRC history. One realization concerned the return of an old problem, perhaps the very problem that spawned the discipline's origin. Where history classes had once essentially ended in 1949, many modern China courses now essentially end with detailed investigations into the massacres of 1989 before quickly jumping to contemporary events such as the Belt and Road Initiative or Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution. The 1990s and 2000s, the decades PRC historians have personally lived through, are seen as too recent to count as genuine history. Reflecting on our discipline through the compilation of this special issue, it seems particularly important to guard against the construction of a new temporal watershed to replace the old division between history and the social sciences. As scholars, many of us are inclined to the archives and the past. But current events demand historians of the PRC work with all of our students to help them resist the simplistic narratives often constructed around China.

¹ Paul Cohen, "Reflections on a Watershed Date: The 1949 Divide in Chinese History," in Jeffery N. Wasserstrom, ed., *Twentieth-Century China: New Approaches* (London, Routledge, 2002).

² For more on the methods and problems of PRC history, see Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, "Introduction," *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) and Elizabeth J. Perry, "The Promise of PRC History," *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 10:1 (2016).

³ Thanks are also due to Matthew D. Johnson for first conceiving of this project, and to Fabio Lanza and Aminda Smith for their careful editorial work.