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CHINA IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING SURVEY STUDENTS

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In the winter of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic became an important touchstone for my students as they began to learn the history of modern China. We used the emerging pandemic as a starting point for our study of modern China, asking, “How did we get to where we are today?” This question is central to our World Since 1900 course, required of all ninth-grade students, but it resonates particularly well when we study places and events in the news today. Students take more interest when we study topics that they’ve heard about from social media or family and friends, and the learning process becomes more meaningful because they are no longer studying something that happened long ago that does not seem to matter to their own lives. Helping students see relevance and develop a sense of why the topic in question matters to their own lives is an important component of student engagement and learning.

As news of the coronavirus began to spread in January and February of 2020, we began each class by looking at the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 map to note case numbers in China (and, in time, to observe the global spread of the disease). As we did this, students began to share things they had heard in the news, and, without prompting, they asked questions about what was happening. We tailored our next steps based on these comments and questions, fact-checking



Figure 1: Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen showing social distancing by using a traditional greeting instead of a handshake in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

things they had heard and following up to find answers to their questions, which largely focused on the Chinese government's response. From there, we dove into China's past so they could learn about the rise of Mao Zedong and the People's Republic of China. These historical case studies focused on Mao's larger policies, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and the changes in China's government following Mao's death and Deng Xiaoping's later government, including the Tiananmen Square protests. Framing our historical studies with the expanding pandemic brought more buy-in from students and helped keep them interested in learning China's past so they could better understand China today.

The lesson plan below builds from that experience, offering specific strategies for using the COVID-19 pandemic to help students learn about modern China in relevant, accessible ways. The lesson divides into three independent parts: together, these create an in-depth inquiry into China today, but each part can also be used on its own. While it would be possible to condense all three portions into one longer class period of ninety minutes or more, splitting these across multiple, shorter classes would provide time for students to process what they have learned, develop new questions, and offer the opportunity for students' learning to become more concrete. The three parts of the lesson include:

- Part 1: How does the Chinese government work?
- Part 2: How has China responded to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Part 3: How can the COVID-19 pandemic help us understand the relationship between Taiwan and China?

Each part includes a guiding question, sources, and a procedure that could be adapted for small groups, large classes, or virtual learning. While the lesson is designed for students who have little knowledge of modern Chinese history, particularly students in a survey course that emphasizes broad coverage, it would arguably be most effective as the capstone for a unit on modern China or as part of a case study of major issues in East Asia today.

Because these three parts have been designed for the introductory survey, teachers will likely encounter students' misconceptions and misinformation. By the time my students study contemporary China, we have had earlier lessons to help them understand the differences between socialism and communism, which often address their prior assumptions about communism. We have also completed activities and research projects that focus on source evaluation and how to identify and read sources critically. The lessons below provide curated materials, but teachers could alternatively ask students to source articles or videos on topics and use that as a way to talk through identifying credible news sources. Additionally, the Stanford History Education Group's Civic Online Reasoning curriculum offers free resources and lessons to help guide students through evaluating sources (<https://cor.stanford.edu>).

Part 1: How Does the Chinese Government Work?

Objective: to help students understand how the Chinese government functions in the twenty-first century.

In part 1, students will examine sources that help them learn about the Chinese government. The resources provided include overviews of China since Deng Xiaoping, as well as Xi Jinping's leadership prior to COVID-19, and can be curated according to class time and needs. Deng Xiaoping's government provides a useful starting point so that students with little background knowledge can better understand how Chinese communism began adapting in the late twentieth century. Xi Jinping's political rule since the early 2010s is also important for students to understand so that they can build context for understanding his government's response to COVID-19.

Discover: As a class, watch the videos below, or assign them for homework before class meets.

- “Deng Xiaoping's role in transforming China,” *South China Morning Post*, November 19, 2018, <https://youtu.be/9c-hDzN7lX4> (3:05 min)

- “How China Became a Superpower: 40 Years of Economic Reform,” *DW News*, December 18, 2018, <https://youtu.be/1SBnK9XIIIZE> (6:08 min)
- “China’s 40 Years of Reform that Turned It into a Superpower,” *ABC News* (Australia), November 29, 2018, https://youtu.be/hF__EF_yrFA (3:23 min)
- “How President Xi Jinping Is Transforming China at Home and Abroad,” *PBS Newshour*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0f4o7n5UdQ> (12:10 min)

Discuss: Divide students into groups to dig deeper, starting with what they just watched in the videos and adding in the articles below. Longer pieces could be divided up for different group members to investigate and share with their group.

Each group should begin by identifying and defining important concepts in the sources to ensure understanding (examples: *What is GDP? Who was Deng Xiaoping? What has Xi Jinping’s approach to government been like?*). Next, each group will create one table that highlights key details of how China’s government works, focusing on economic and political elements. As students work, they should compile any remaining questions they have.

- Eleanor Albert, Beina Xu, and Lindsay Maizland, “The Chinese Communist Party,” Council on Foreign Relations, June 9, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinese-communist-party>.
- “Deng Xiaoping,” ChinesePosters.net, January 1, 2020, <https://chineseposters.net/themes/dengxiaoping.php>.
- “Profile: China’s President Xi Jinping,” *BBC News*, February 25, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11551399>.
- “What does Xi Jinping’s China Dream Mean?” *BBC News*, June 6, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22726375>.

Debrief: Assign a point person from each group to share their charts and questions; debrief by comparing across groups. Revisit the central question: How does the Chinese government work?

Deduce: To wrap up part 1 and bridge into part 2, have students hypothesize a response to the following question: *Based on what you know about China’s government and its vision for the country, how would you expect them to respond in the case of a national emergency?*

Part 2: How Has China Responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Objective: to understand and assess the specific steps China took in response to the COVID-19 public health crisis.

Sources in part 2 inform students about how the Chinese government responded to COVID-19. Some of the sources also analyze China's response to the pandemic, providing a foundation for students to think further about the effectiveness and implications of that response.

Discover: Using Google Maps, locate Wuhan, China, and project map to help students see where COVID-19 originated in China. Spend a few moments eliciting prior knowledge from students: What do they know about when and where the pandemic began?

Project the BBC Timeline, "Coronavirus: What Did China Do about Early Outbreak?" (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52573137>). Students could also view hard copies of the timeline or view the article on their own laptops. Spend several minutes reviewing the timeline details and ask students to pinpoint two or three moments that seem most significant. Ask students to share responses, then discuss:

- Why did you choose the moments you did?
- What makes them "significant" for understanding the pandemic?
- Finally, ask students to characterize China's response using one to two adjectives, based on what they read in the timeline.

Discuss: Move students into small groups and assign each group one article from the list below. (Depending on student level and the amount of time available, articles could be edited for length, or the class could focus on one article.) Within each group, students should read and discuss the assigned article, paying particular attention to the main points in their piece. Students should be prepared to talk further about what they learned.

- Amy Qin and Vivian Wang, "Wuhan, Center of Coronavirus Outbreak, Is Being Cut Off by Chinese Authorities," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/22/world/asia/china-coronavirus-travel.html>.
- "Coronavirus: China Admits 'Shortcomings and Deficiencies,'" *BBC*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51362336>.
- Li Yuan, "Coronavirus Weakens the Propaganda Machine," *The New York Times*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/26/business/china-coronavirus-propaganda.html>.

- Amy Qin, “China May Be Beating the Coronavirus, at a Painful Cost,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/world/asia/china-coronavirus-cost.html>.
- “Xi Defends China’s COVID-19 Actions, Backs ‘Impartial’ Review of Pandemic Response,” *National Public Radio*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/18/857868374/xi-defends-chinas-covid-19-actions-backs-impartial-review-of-pandemic-response>.
- “Nation’s COVID-19 Fight in Spotlight,” *China Daily*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202006/08/WS5edd70b6a31083481725155a.html>.
- “Timeline: How Xi Jinping led China’s COVID-19 Battle,” *Chinese Global Television Network*, June 9, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-09/Timeline-How-Xi-Jinping-led-China-s-COVID-19-battle-RbQnYSoXKg/index.html>.

Debrief: Provide each group time to report out. Consider the following options and select based on what works best for your class dynamics and environment:

- Use large paper, whiteboards/chalkboards, or similar virtual spaces (e.g., Zoom whiteboards, Google Docs or Slides, Padlet, Stormboard) to have each group write down main points, takeaways, and questions from the reading. Next, students rotate around the room (or virtual space), leaving post-its or comments to highlight things they have questions about, things that surprised them, or things that confirmed what they read in their own pieces.
- Redivide groups so that each group now has students who read different articles. In new jigsawed groups, each participant is responsible for sharing out what they learned.

Follow small-group debriefs with a full-class conversation to identify common threads of information and questions that students generated based on their reading and discussion.

Debate: Wrap up part 2 by having students debate the following questions:

- To what extent was China’s approach successful?
- What are the implications or costs of the Chinese government’s actions?
- How did their actions affect their relationship with the Chinese people? Other countries?

Extend: Have students evaluate China’s response to past pandemics or learn more about public health campaigns in China.

- A good starting point is Robert Peckham's Foreign Affairs article from March 27, 2020, "Past Pandemics Exposed China's Weaknesses," <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-03-27/past-pandemics-exposed-chinas-weaknesses>. The article includes four subsections outlining China's historical response to pandemics since the late nineteenth century. This structure would make it easy to provide to students or to divide amongst students in small groups.
- Additionally, the US National Library of Medicine offers a focused lesson plan on China's public health campaigns in the twentieth century: <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/education/chinesepublichealthposters/highereducation/class4.html#:~:text=The%20theme%20of%20integrating%20public,the%20diseases%20that%20plagued%20people>
 - Alternately, the National Library of Medicine has several sets of public health posters, including:
 - Chinese Public Health Posters: <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/chinese/posters/public.html>
 - Chinese Anti-Malaria Posters: <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/chineseantimalaria/index.html>
 - Chinese Anti-Tuberculosis Posters: <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/chineseantitb/index.html>

Part 3: How Can the COVID-19 Pandemic Help Us Understand the Relationship between Taiwan and China?

Objective: to learn about Taiwan's relationship with China and how that relationship impacts Taiwan on the world stage.

Part 3 focuses on educating students about Taiwan by highlighting how the country's status with China has kept Taiwan out of the World Health Organization and the significance of their absence. Part 3 can be a concluding piece to a study of China today, or an extension or stand-alone lesson.

Discover: Begin by providing students with an overview of the relationship between Taiwan and China. The two sources below support this goal; the video may be more accessible for younger students, while the article may be most appropriate for advanced secondary school students or college students.

- "Taiwan and China Explained," *TRT World*, January 11, 2019, https://youtu.be/a2a4yR4P_Vk (4:18 min)

- Zhiqun Zhu, “A Unique Trilateral Relationship: The US, the PRC, and Taiwan since 1949,” *Education about Asia*, Winter 2012, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/a-unique-trilateral-relationship-the-us-the-prc-and-taiwan-since-1949>

Discuss: Talk through these resources with students to assess their understanding of the relationship between Taiwan and China. Once students have established a baseline for understanding the connection between Taiwan and China, ask them to compare Taiwan and China’s experiences of COVID-19 using the map, table, and article below.

- Coronavirus Resource Center, Johns Hopkins University, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu>
- Select “View the COVID-19 Global Map”
- “Virus Outbreak: Timeline of preventive efforts against COVID-19,” *Taipei Times*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/04/14/2003734588>
- William Yang, “How Has Taiwan Kept Its Coronavirus Infection Rate So Low?” *Deutsche Welle*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/taiwan-coronavirus/a-52724523>.

It may be helpful to have students refer back to part 2 materials, particularly to compare the timeline of China’s response to the pandemic with the *Taipei Times* timeline. As students read and discuss their findings, ask them to consider these questions:

- How does Taiwan’s experience with COVID-19 compare to China’s?
- Why might it be useful to understand China and Taiwan’s successes and challenges in combating COVID-19?

Next, introduce the World Health Organization by asking students what they know or have heard about it. Show the video below and consider having students read the overview about the World Health Organization to learn more about WHO.

- “WHO: Guardian of Health,” World Health Organization, June 16, 2017, <https://youtu.be/p7liQk45fFk> (2:01 min)
- Peter Beech, “World Health Organization: what does it do and how does it work?” World Economic Forum, April 17, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/world-health-organization-what-it-does-how-it-works/>.

Once students understand the role WHO plays, particularly in a pandemic, give them resources to explore Taiwan’s status with WHO. Students should work in small groups to examine one or more of the resources below:

- Yu-Jie Chen and Jerome A. Cohen, “Why Does the WHO Exclude Taiwan?” Council on Foreign Relations, April 9, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/why-does-who-exclude-taiwan>.
- Ben Blanchard, “Taiwan Rejects China’s Main Condition for WHO Participation,” *Reuters*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-taiwan/taiwan-rejects-chinas-main-condition-for-who-participation-idUSKBN22R0HM>.
- Huileng Tan, “Taiwan ‘Disappointed and Angry’ about Being Excluded from WHO Meeting, Says It Is Developing Its Own Coronavirus Vaccine,” *CNBC*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/19/taiwan-says-it-is-disappointed-and-angry-being-excluded-from-who-meeting.html>.

Debrief: Ask students to take notes individually or as a group to track important facts and information they learn. Once students have finished exploring the sources, gather to wrap up by focusing on these questions:

- Why might it be useful to understand China and Taiwan’s successes and challenges in combating COVID-19?
- Why does it matter that Taiwan is not included in the World Health Organization?
 - What does this tell us about...
 - China’s relationship with Taiwan?
 - the global response to COVID-19?

Extend: Ask students to examine COVID-19 in Hong Kong. Like Taiwan, Hong Kong is also part of China, but both places have unique relationships to China. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, prodemocracy protests in Hong Kong began making international news in 2019. The sources below could be used to help students develop more context for these protests and Hong Kong’s relationship with China and to evaluate Hong Kong’s responses to COVID-19.

- “Hong Kong Protests One Year Later,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/world/asia/hong-kong-protests-one-year-later.html>.
- “How Hong Kong and South Korea Manage to Keep Covid-19 at Bay Without Enforcing Lockdowns,” *South China Morning Post*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBHGnsxEDN0> (4:55 min)
- “Officials Tighten Restrictions Again as Hong Kong Reports Record-High Covid-19 Cases,” *South China Morning Post*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9d3j8M1U88> (2:51 min)

- “Hong Kong to Start Massive COVID-19 Testing from Sept. 1,” *Chinese Global Television Network*, August 21, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-08-21/Chinese-mainland-sends-50-experts-to-HK-to-assist-COVID-19-testing-T8xkwES6DC/index.html>.