Introduction

Getting Past the Plexiglass

David Kenley

In the early morning hours of October 2, 2020, US President Donald Trump used Twitter to announce he had just tested positive for the coronavirus. "Trump's positive diagnosis," *New York* magazine wrote, raises "unprecedented questions from how he'll handle the duties of the presidency to whether others in the administration have been infected to how voters will react."[1] There were many unprecedented events in 2020. Indeed, "unprecedented" may just be the most overused word of the year, frequently employed to describe our political, economic, and demographic conditions. Certainly 2020 was unprecedented for educators and their students. It started with the near total shutdown of schools in the early spring, followed by hasty attempts to shift online in the late spring, and then it transformed into a long summer of hand-wringing and strategizing. By the time autumn arrived, educators and their students were desperate for a return to what proved to be an elusive sense of normalcy. Residence halls became quarantine centers. Cases dramatically spiked in small college towns. Student athletes sat by as their sports were canceled, restarted, and canceled again. Well-financed private schools provided regular testing, expensive technology equipment, and multiple distance-learning possibilities. More cash-strapped schools plowed forward with limited options, spreading out desks, installing plexiglass shields, and hoping for the best. The year was unprecedented for many reasons.

And yet, "unprecedented" was only one part of our 2020 vocabulary. We incorporated many new expressions into our daily conversations. It is remarkable to think that at the beginning of the year, most of us had never used such terms as "socially distanced," "herd immunity," "PPE," or "coronavirus." Even such common words as "bubble" and "face mask" took on entirely new meanings. In the realm

of education, we found ourselves talking about "Zooming it in," chatting about "HyFlex" courses, and discussing the most recent count on our school's "pandemic dashboard."

Teaching About Asia in a Time of Pandemic seeks to make sense of the unfamiliar situation educators and students are facing around the globe. As Sarah Grant explains in chapter 18, "pandemic pedagogy is necessarily rapid response pedagogy." However, as she reminds us, it must not come at the expense of intentionality, sound design, and scholarly curiosity. This volume contains sage lessons and insights from highly respected educators who have been engaged in "pandemic pedagogy." Each chapter is concise and engagingly written by highly qualified authors on areas of significance in Asian Studies. They have reflected on both the unique challenges and opportunities presented by COVID-19 and our transformed educational environment. Rather than succumb to resignation and despair, they challenge all of us to seize this opportunity to broaden our understanding, incorporate novel methodologies, and integrate new Asia-informed lessons into our curriculum.

For those of us teaching about Asia, the year of COVID-19 has been particularly significant. The virus originated in China, quickly spread to Korea and Japan, and proved to be dreadfully lethal in India. It has exacerbated tensions between Taiwan and China and diverted our attention from border disputes in the Himalayas. On a more practical level, missed classes meant teachers had to make difficult decisions regarding what to cut from the curriculum, with topics about Asia becoming often unceremoniously bypassed on the course syllabus.

The pandemic has highlighted many discouraging inequities within our global society. Service workers in the United States, street vendors in India, and migrant laborers in Southeast Asia have all been more likely to contract the disease than their wealthier neighbors. Beyond just infection levels, COVID-19 has highlighted disparities in employment rates, access to health care, digital access, and gender equality. Often these discrepancies correlate with race, providing another stark reminder of ongoing systemic racism. Countries around the world have responded to the pandemic by closing borders, shutting down market access, and stoking xenophobic nationalism. The so-called "China virus" led to a metaphorical pandemic of anti-Asian sentiment, with numerous companies, governments, and individuals infected. The study of Asia and cross-cultural difference has rarely been more important than during this pandemic, and *Teaching About Asia* is a potent tonic.

Section 1 of this volume analyzes how to teach Asian history, politics, culture, and society using examples and case studies emerging from the pandemic. Jeffrey Wasserstrom sets the tone for this segment by challenging all of us to move beyond our assumption that "we've never been here before" and to instead reflect on the

past for corollaries and precedents, including, for instance, the 1900 Boxer Crisis in China.[2] Even in the face of global catastrophe—both in 1900 and 2020—local issues and identities remain extremely important. "The world is often imagined to be growing ever flatter [as a result of globalization]," Wasserstrom writes, "but 2020 has convinced me, yet again, that the world remains stubbornly bumpy." Other contributors to section 1 show how COVID-19 can be used to teach Orientalism and exceptionalism in Korea, Buddhist devotionalism in Japan, political economy in India, Chinese foreign relations in Africa, and global politics as manifest in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Some take a more regional approach, discussing the concepts of mythmaking in East Asia or Sikh religious practices in South Asia and the United States. As explained by Susan Spencer in her analysis of medieval Japanese literature, many of the chapters in section 1 "concentrate on the themes of loss, sudden change, and a confrontation with the transitory nature of what one has taken for granted—life events that all of the students, regardless of background, were struggling with."

Whereas section 1 focuses on what to teach in light of the pandemic, section 2 focuses on how to teach it. It includes chapters written by seasoned online instructors as well as those who have recently been forced into an online environment because of COVID-19. Their recommended instructional approaches are applicable to both high school and undergraduate courses. All of the chapters in this section force us to reflect on our own methodologies and how to adapt them to new realities. For instance, how do we utilize kinesthetic, somatic methods to teach about Asia when our students are disembodied images on a screen? How do we promote fieldwork for our students when society is in lockdown? Several authors in this section challenge us to incorporate new tools or rethink how we employ them, ranging from Google Maps to blogs, podcasts, apps, simulations, and, of course, Zoom. Section 2 concludes with specific lesson plans from both respected university researchers as well as expert high school teachers working "in the trenches."

While aspects of the 2020 pandemic might indeed be unprecedented, the pandemic's educational impacts will certainly last well into the future. Even when a vaccine becomes available and we are able to return to "normal," it will most certainly be a new normal. For example, now that teachers have demonstrated the ability to teach remotely, several school districts in the United States have announced the end of the beloved tradition of "snow days." College professors who just a few short months ago were adamantly opposed to teaching online have now become accustomed to attending class in their dress shirts and "Zoom pants." Study abroad in Asia may well take years to recover to pre-pandemic levels. And students may come to see HyFlex as an inalienable right.[3] In short, the relevance of this volume will extend well beyond the arrival of a COVID-19 vaccine.

There are many people to thank for their help with this volume, especially since they worked with great speed in getting it published. In the spring of 2020, William Tsutsui was working with Vinayak Chaturvedi to develop a scholarly volume on the pandemic for inclusion in the Asia Shorts series. Tsutsui quickly realized that the situation called for a companion volume focused on the pedagogical impacts of the pandemic and therefore reached out to Lucien Ellington, the editor of *Education About Asia*, to seek his collaboration. I am grateful for Tsutsui and Ellington's inspiration for this volume, and for their unfailing editorial assistance over the ensuing weeks and months. Their commitment to the scholarship of teaching is admirable. The Henry Luce Foundation also saw the value of the proposed volume and contributed financial support, for which I am very grateful. Members of the *Education About Asia* editorial board offered critical insights, as did several individuals associated with the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia. Jon Wilson, Maura Elizabeth Cunningham, Jenna Yoshikawa, and Hilary Finchum-Sung of the Association for Asian Studies have selflessly provided their expertise in terms of production and promotion. I am grateful to Michael Jauchen for his skilled copy editing and to Columbia University Press for their help with promotion and distribution. Of course, the volume would not exist except for the talented author-educators who contributed their work. I have enjoyed working with each of them. This volume is dedicated to them and to all teachers worldwide working under pandemic conditions.

In the West, it is widely believed that the Chinese word for "crisis" (危机) is a combination of the characters "danger" and "opportunity." While Victor Mair has thoroughly debunked this popular trope, it nonetheless persists precisely because we hope to find meaning in times of difficulty.[4] COVID-19 has certainly created a crisis for educators at all levels, but the contributors to this volume have responded by capitalizing on new pedagogical opportunities. Each approached the contagion crisis with creativity, enthusiasm, and most importantly, sound educational practice. We are all the beneficiaries of their pandemic pedagogy.

Notes

[1] Matt Stieb and Margaret Hartmann, "Trump Tests Positive for COVID-19," *New York Intelligencer*, October 2, 2020, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/10/trump-quarantines-after-aide-hicks-tests-positive-for-covid.html.

[2] According to the Chinese zodiac, both 1900 and 2020 are "Metal Rat" years, which indeed seems a fitting appellation for our current time.

[3] *Inside Higher Ed* explains, "In a HyFlex course, courses are delivered both in person and online at the same time by the same faculty member. Students can then choose for each and every class meeting whether to show up for class in person or to join it online. The underlying design ethos behind the HyFlex Model is flexibility and student choice." See

Edward J. Maloney and Joshua Kim, "Fall Scenario #13: A HyFlex Model," *Inside Higher Ed*, May 10, 2020, https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/fall-scenario-13-hyflex-model.

[4] Victor Mair, "Danger + Opportunity ≠ Crisis: How a Misunderstanding about Chinese Characters Has Led Many Astray," *Pīnyīn.info: A Guide to the Writing of Mandarin Chinese in Romanization*, September 2009, http://www.pinyin.info/chinese/crisis.html.