

Anti-Colonialism and Modern History Education in China

By Woyu Liu

The last decade has seen increasing educational exchanges between American and Chinese students, but educators often find it difficult to reach consensus over many issues concerning modern Chinese history, and the US–China relationship in particular. Their divergences originate from the different ways modern history is taught in these two countries. As many readers of this journal are already familiar with the American educational system, this article is an introductory overview of how China’s modern history is taught at Chinese universities and colleges, and how history education shapes Chinese students’ understanding of their own country and the world.

Unlike their American counterparts, the administrations of Chinese universities and colleges, including entrance examinations and curriculum provision, are tightly controlled by the state. According to a directive jointly issued in 2006 by the Ministry of Education and the Department of Propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee, it is mandatory for all undergraduate students enrolled at Chinese universities and colleges—except foreign students and those majoring in history—to take the course *The Outline of Modern Chinese History (Zhongguo Jinxindai Shi Gangyao)*. The Ministry of Education also mandates the use of one course textbook with the same title as the course. The Outline of Modern Chinese History begins with the first Opium War of 1839–1842 and ends with the present. This course, however, is not categorized as “history education” but as “political education” instead, along with three other courses required for students of the same nature:

1. Basic Theories of Marxism
2. Introduction to Mao Zedong’s Thought, Deng Xiaoping’s Theory, and the Important Thought of “Three Represents”
3. Ideological and Moral Education and Elements of Law

Despite the confusing titles, these courses are designed to serve the same purpose of inculcating the ideology of the CCP to students. *The*

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Outline of Modern Chinese History’s preface is a useful indicator of the book’s ideological objectives:

[This book] is mainly about the history of Chinese people resisting foreign aggressions, struggling for national independence, overthrowing reactionary rule, and achieving people’s liberation. [It] helps students acquire knowledge of the history and situation of their country, and deeply understand how history and people chose Marxism, the Chinese Communist Party, and the Socialist road.¹

The choices of Marxism, the Communist Party, and the Socialist road constitute the major themes of the required textbooks. These “three choices” derive from a June 1949 article by CCP Chairman Mao Zedong in honor of the twenty-eighth anniversary of the founding of his party, titled “On the Democratic Dictatorship of the People.” In his article, Mao attempted to legitimize the new Communist regime by reinterpreting the history of China since the first Opium War. He made three historical interpretations in the article: First, ever since the mid-nineteenth century, China had been suffering countless humiliations and bitterness brought about by the Western imperialists and corrupt “feudal” rulers. Second, the “progressive” Chinese intellectuals tried various ways, such as peasant



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rebellions, constitutional monarchy, and the “bourgeoisie revolution,” to save the country, but all failed. The Chinese eventually found relief from internal and external oppression by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the introduction of universally applicable Marxism–Leninism. The Chinese were thus enabled to gain national independence under the leadership of the Communist Party. Since its publication, these historical viewpoints of Mao have become the CCP’s standard interpretation regarding modern Chinese history, and this Mao-inspired approach remains the guiding principle of basic modern Chinese history education at Chinese universities and colleges.

Modern Chinese history education in China today is still dominated by anticolonial rhetoric, which simplifies that period of history into anticolonialist struggles and ignores a variety of topics, such as the decline of the imperial system, increasing confrontations between ethnic groups, the pressure of population growth, and inadequate agricultural production within China. The Outline of Modern Chinese History offers no perspectives other than the official account of the party and fails to encourage students to develop critical thinking skills. Students are expected to remember the party’s orthodox conclusions and judgments. Regarding US–China relations, for example, Mao once declared:

*The history of the aggression against China by US Imperialism, from 1840 when the Americans helped the British in the Opium War to the time Americans were thrown out of China by the Chinese people, should be written into a concise textbook for the education of Chinese youth.*²

Consequently, many Chinese students sincerely believe Americans played a leading role in the Western colonization of China by occupying its territory, damaging its sovereignty, supporting Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists in the Civil War, and suppressing the rise of a unified and powerful China. It is difficult to assess how popular such ideas are among Chinese students, but courses like The Outline of Modern Chinese History surely play a role in cultivating anti-Western nationalism among young Chinese.

By repeatedly emphasizing the confrontations between China and the Western world, this nationalism may stimulate a desire for revenge in many Chinese. They dream that one day China will overtake the Western powers economically, militarily, and technologically, restoring its past glory as “the center of civilizations.” Many people also believe once China becomes powerful, it will naturally have the right to take advantage of small and weak countries, just as the Western colonists had done in China. Despite massive criticism of Western colonialism, the colonial worldview is still lingering in the minds of many Chinese as a result of contemporary history education.

It is difficult to estimate how many Chinese hold this worldview because there is no reliable data on this subject, but one can easily feel the mood of colonialism, often combined with ultranationalism, in the daily conversations and online remarks of many ordinary Chinese. A Chinese term was even coined to describe these people: *Xiao Fenhong* (Little Pink). A recent survey among roughly 300,000 Little Pinks shows that 56.2 percent are aged between eighteen and twenty-four, 58 percent females, and

about 85 percent in medium and small cities or rural areas. The survey was conducted by the *People’s Daily Online*, a website affiliated with *People’s Daily*, the CCP’s official mouthpiece. The survey report hails the Little Pinks for their “cultural self-confidence” because they disregard Western experiences and institutions, and “highly recognize the political system and the development road of China.” Little Pinks also regard sovereign independence and territorial integrity as inviolable and are ready to “argue fiercely” with anyone criticizing China or the CCP. In 2016, they launched several massive online attacks targeting foreign businesses or persons (mostly pop stars) for the words or behaviors they deemed offensive to the honor of China.³

Ironically, although significant numbers of Chinese students have accepted the anticolonialist narrative as the only interpretation of modern China’s history, they also find the textbook *The Outline of Modern Chinese History* very boring because it is not different from what they learned in high school. To make it worse, the class sizes of this course are usually large at most universities and colleges, and it is normal for 100 students to be enrolled in one section. Many teachers just repeat the textbook, and there are no discussion sections after lectures, certainly killing the interest of students in the course. Nevertheless, a small number of teachers, particularly at top universities, do strive to teach *The Outline of Modern Chinese History* as a real history class. By introducing viewpoints different from the textbook, they help challenge students and arouse their interests to explore history with new perspectives. Even so, few teachers dare challenge the official account directly, especially when it is concerned with politically sensitive figures and events, such as Mao or the Cultural Revolution.

If any teachers ignore this kind of content that authorities do not want discussed in the classroom and criticize the CCP directly, the cost will be high. Some student informants who are secretly recruited by the party cadres may feel offended and file charges to the university administrators, causing accused teachers to be warned or, even worse, lose their jobs. Given this circumstance, some teachers would rather skip the period of history beginning with 1949, believing it is better to keep quiet than to say anything that places them in professional jeopardy.

History proves that many misunderstandings and biases arise from ignorance, and the purpose of education is to dispel ignorance and enlighten minds. For teachers of modern Chinese history at China’s universities and colleges, to fulfill their duties as historians and educators requires both a resolute commitment to teaching historical truths and skill in presenting controversial information in an educational system lacking academic freedom. Their effort is admirable, but whether these dissident teachers are exercising influence remains to be seen. ■

NOTES

1. From *The Outline of Modern Chinese History* rev. ed., Beijing: Gaodeng Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2015.
2. See “‘Friendship’ or Aggression?,” in *The Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 4 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), <https://tinyurl.com/jqdtqy>.
3. The full text of the survey report is available at <http://yuqing.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1222/c209043-28968919.html>, accessed February 7, 2017. For a brief introduction to the Little Pinks, see Lotus Ruan, “The New Face of Chinese Nationalism,” *Foreign Policy*, August 25, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/hozakqo>.

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