

## China Today: Teaching About a Changing Cultural Landscape

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Change in China is not new. The myth of a static “Orient” was never true. However, ongoing developments in contemporary China promise to affect the lives of our students more directly and more profoundly than ever before. The National Council for the Social Studies’ flagship journal, *Social Education*, takes stock of the situation and offers teachers advice, information, and resources in its thematic January/February 2010 edition, “China Today: Teaching about a Changing Cultural Landscape,” edited by Kathleen Woods Masalski and Tedd Levy.

Rob Gifford, well known for his National Public Radio (NPR) reporting on China, contributes “Panda Huggers and Dragon Slayers,” a short, lively essay in which he advises educators to avoid binary thinking in analyzing China’s twenty-first century transformation. That might seem a trivial point to make, but these two phrases are widely used in the blogosphere, and interrogating the dichotomy they represent can be an effective way to teach critical thinking skills to secondary students. Gifford’s search for nuance characterizes the collection of articles Masalski and Levy have assembled. China’s dynamism over the past three decades has inspired a wide range of prognostications, often falling into the polar camps of excessive optimism and excessive pessimism described in Gifford’s essay. Citing rapidly changing statistics, Shiping Zheng warns against quick predictions in his piece, “A Reemerging China: The Time for Hasty Predictions is Past.”

Three personal narratives and one interview in a section entitled “Personal Experiences of China” offer glimpses into how change is being experienced on the ground level. The two Chinese accounts, a narrative by Richard Wang, and an interview with Juefei Wang, stress how far China has come, focusing particularly on the hardships of the Cultural Revolution period during which Richard Wang’s peasant origins placed him on one side of the ideological divide and Juefei Wang’s landlord ancestry placed him on the other. Two pieces by Americans offer observations that are more recent. Peter Hessler’s essay distills some of the historical background and his personal experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer that are detailed in his books, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (Harper, 2006) and *Oracle Bones: A Journey Through Time in China* (Harper, 2007). Ryan Bradeen takes a particularly effective case study approach, examining the transformations along one particular road, Liberation Avenue, in Wuhan, from its origin in 1949 through the current wave of gentrification, high-rise apartments, and the big box retailers that are displacing small shopkeepers.

Kristin Stapleton’s essay, “What I Wish My College Students Already Knew about PRC History,” provides remarkably concise introductions to themes that she believes are neglected at the pre-collegiate level. As she summarizes these five themes, the significance of Maoism, what Stapleton calls China’s “experiments in governance,” China’s economic development, conformity and diversity in China, and China’s foreign relations and global impact, the author also introduces a significant number of historical and social science terms relevant to the study of China.

Qi Chen’s subject is what is being taught about the PRC’s history and its relationship to the world. A writer for the official People’s Education Press, the author looks at recent changes in “Curriculum Reform and the Writing of High School History Textbooks in China.” While the article focuses more on expressed philosophies or intentions than on specific examples of coverage or analysis, it is interesting to gain an insider’s perspective on curricular decisions in China.

Jonathan Lipman’s contribution, “Chinese Geography through Chinese Cuisine,” explores the influence of local geographies, climates, resources, cultures and moments of intercultural contact in explaining the diversity of regional cuisines in China. Linking geography with food culture is an effective way to draw students into the study of any country, and it works even better if, as in this case, one dispels the myth that “Chinese food” is the stuff scooped out of warming vats at one’s local discount China buffet establishment. Despite its brevity, Lipman’s essay is a feast of information for teachers who have limited experience with China.

Confucianism’s resurgence in Chinese popular culture and official rhetoric is a fascinating and unexpected development in the contemporary PRC. Stephen C. Angle examines the Confucian revival in “Confucianism on the Comeback: Current Trends in Culture, Values, Politics, and Economy.” Noting that Confucianism itself defies simple categorization in Western terms, Angle explores the many facets of its deployment in business, scholarship, politics, international relations, and other areas as the PRC transforms its identity in the twenty-first century.

China’s fifty-five officially recognized ethnic minority groups are often ignored in high school texts. “Teaching about Ethnicities in China,” by Caryn White Stedman, is a useful, succinct introduction to key issues, to the roots of recent ethnic conflicts, as well as to strategies, references, and resources for teaching about ethnic diversity in the PRC.

An additional feature of *China Today* is Patience Berkman’s series of teaching tips, which are included with the essays. While the nature of the individual articles determines their usefulness as classroom materials or discussion prompts, Berkman’s suggested activities show the mind of a skilled teacher at work. Several of these are gems.

What emerges from the collected articles is a view of change that characterizes it appropriately as neither linear nor non-problematic. A shortcoming of *China Today* is the absence of articles focusing on Internet censorship and on China’s growing investment in Africa. Nevertheless, middle and secondary teachers will find much of interest and of use. ■

**Editor’s Note:** Although the print version of this issue of *Social Education* is sold out, NCSS members can access the issue electronically at <http://members.socialstudies.org/>. For non-members, abstracts are available online at the ERIC Clearinghouse (<http://www.eric.ed.gov/>). ERIC also provides a link to access a library near you that may have the publication on the shelf or in their electronic holdings. Since NCSS is the largest professional association of social studies teachers in the US, many school and university libraries are subscribers. You may also order specific articles from the Copyright Clearance Center at their website, <http://www.copyright.com/> or by calling 978-646-2600.

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