

Contesting Twentieth-Century China

A Simulation

By Joseph W. Esherick and Jeremy Murray

The twentieth century was a traumatic era of Chinese history with the fall of the last empire in 1911, the political chaos of warlord rule, the Japanese invasion, and the Chinese Communist revolution. It was also an exciting era, full of dramatic events and remarkable characters: the Communists' Long March and the charismatic and ruthless leadership of Mao Zedong, the Japanese seizure of the North-east and creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo, the kidnapping of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek by one of his own generals in the Xi'an Incident, then the full-scale Japanese invasion of China and the horrors of the Nanjing Massacre.

In teaching this history for years, most recently in a course entitled, "China in War and Revolution, 1911–1949," the central narrative has always been the Chinese revolution. There were many sub-plots of this story: Chinese intellectuals' turn from liberalism to Marxism after the May Fourth Movement, the Communist-Nationalist United Front of the 1920s and its collapse after the death of Sun Yat-sen, the progress made under Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist rule during the Nanjing Decade (1927–1937), Mao Zedong's new strategy of rural revolution, the explosive expansion of the Communist movement during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945), and the degree to which nationalism, class struggle, and party organization contributed to the Communists' success. The Civil War of 1945–1949 settled China's political future, though one could still debate whether this was a dramatic Communist sweep to power or simply a Nationalist collapse as a result of corruption, inflation, economic mismanagement, and disastrous military mistakes. Through all of this, one question remained paramount: how did the Communists win?

China is now both an emerging economic superpower and one of the few remaining self-proclaimed Communist states, and understanding the Chinese revolution remains a critical educational task. At a time when socialism seems an inefficient and outmoded economic system, it is important for students to understand why China embarked on a path of Marxist revolution. Still, revolution should not be the *only* story. We should help students entertain a variety of historical trajectories so that revolution does not appear to be the end of China's history.

Fortunately, recent scholarship on twentieth-century China has explored a number of different aspects of the modern Chinese drama. There have been path-breaking studies in social and cultural history—books like Leo Lee's *Shanghai Modern* (Harvard, 1999), Vera Schwarcz's, *Chinese Enlightenment* (University of California, 1986), Yeh Wen-hsin's *The Alienated Academy* (Harvard, 1990), and Gail Hershatter's monumental study of prostitution, *Dangerous Pleasures* (University of California, 1997). These fine works were shortchanged by our course's focus on political history, but there has also been important new work in this area, especially a flurry of scholarship on the losers in the revolutionary process. Studying these people forces us to

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consider the circumstances and the choices of the millions of people who did *not* support the Communist revolution.

Notable in this new scholarship is Jay Taylor's biography, *Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the China He Lost* (Harvard, 2009), which recounts the life of the much-maligned authoritarian leader of the Nationalist government. Relying extensively on Chiang's recently opened diaries, Taylor presents a remarkably favorable portrait of Mao Zedong's archrival. Even more striking are Timothy Brook's *Collaboration* (Harvard, 2005), and David Barrett and Larry Shyu's edited volume, *Chinese Collaboration with Japan, 1932–1945* (Stanford, 2001). Until recently, the Chinese who collaborated with Japan between 1937 and 1945 were viewed as politically and morally indefensible traitors to the nation. These books make a compelling argument that some Chinese collaborated in order to reduce the destructiveness of the Japanese invasion. Finally, during an era when China had only the most tenuous control of its border regions, there have been a number of important books on China's frontiers. Melvyn Goldstein's *History of Modern Tibet* (University of California, 1989), and Xiaoyuan Liu's *The Reins of Liberation* (Stanford, 2006) on Mongolia are just two notable examples.

This new scholarship allows us to get beyond the single question of why the Communists won. More importantly, it provides an opportunity for students to rise above the pattern of passive learning and really think about history. In this way, we can transcend the teleology, or self-fulfilling narrative of the revolution's history, so that other possible Chinese paths are given serious consideration. In order to reintroduce some of the contingency of history so that students could think seriously about the political choices that Chinese leaders and ordinary citizens made, we devised a new structure for our "China in War and Revolution" course. Students were assigned to teams with specific identities—Communists, Nationalists, Japanese Collaborators, and Frontier Peoples—and tasked to formulate and debate their group's plans for China's future. The result was one of the more enjoyable and successful teaching experiments in our careers, and this article is designed to introduce that experience. Although our course was for undergraduates, we are convinced that the simulation described can be modified for high school classes as well.

We divided the ten-week course into two five-week halves. The first five weeks were dedicated to a traditional lecture format, aimed toward an in-class midterm exam. After the midterm, we organized the class into groups of six or seven students. The students completed a questionnaire that established their general academic strength, their prior knowledge of modern China, and any Chinese language ability. On this basis, we formed groups that were roughly equal in the skills needed for the research and debate portion of the course. Their group assignment was to research one of the four political positions, and defend that position in a series of debates.

The four debate positions were randomly assigned to the twelve groups, with three teams for each position. (We asked the Frontier groups to decide whether to adopt a Mongol or Tibetan identity, and all chose to be Tibetans.) The debates, scheduled for the final weeks of the course, were imagined to take place in January 1941, a pivotal date for all parties. The teams' first assignment was to research the political climate of China in that month. Some enthusiastic teams compiled chronologies and a list of biographies for their own reference, including not only Chinese examples, but also relevant events throughout the world at the time. Sourcing relations between the US and Japan caught the attention of some

students, as did the military progress of the Third Reich, the position of the USSR, and the state of international alliances. More germane to the Chinese context was the New Fourth Army Incident that erupted in January 1941. This clash between Communist and Nationalist forces revealed the deep political tensions between the two parties supposedly allied in a United Front to resist the Japanese invaders. At China's frontiers, Tibet was in the midst of a transition to the leadership of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, with tensions between clerical and modernizing camps and debates on the proper policy toward China.

In the first two weeks following the midterm, we prompted the teams to research the social, political, and economic landscape of China in 1941, and then move on to thinking about how they could best advocate their position. Class sessions following the midterms were dedicated to team work. We circulated among the teams of students throughout the class time, helping them focus their positions, exploring alternative strategies, and suggesting readings. Attached to the course syllabus was an extensive recommended reading list of several dozen titles, divided into the four group categories. Each team assigned readings to its members, so that each student read independently and then reported to the team with notes that could be useful in planning a debate strategy. Students turned in these notes and they became (after the midterm) the second individually graded portion of the course.

In this class, students were engaged in the projects and eager to move beyond the conventional narratives. The personalities of the leaders of each political grouping (Mao, Chiang Kai-shek, and the Japan collaborationist Wang Jingwei, in particular), the ruling philosophies, the diversity of interests within groups—particularly the Nationalists—the corruption, the honesty, the honor, and the shame all became quickly apparent to a team that had to defend both the triumphs and the failures of its group. The project demanded accountability from each group, and an explanation for massacres, corrupt practices, and ruthless policies that were implemented in its name.

This engagement with the choices of modern China fueled the work of the groups, and it infused the class with the urgency and contingency of history. A group often seen as a victim or a passive entity in Chinese history, like the Tibetans within the Frontier camp, eagerly took up the task of defending territorial and political claims, and considered negotiating postures toward the Nationalists, Communists, and Japanese. Their position at China's margins gave them the opportunity to vie separately for each of the other groups' favor and arrive at the best possible arrangement for Tibet's future. At the same time, the inclusion of a Frontier group forced the Chinese factions to compete for the allegiance of the frontier (in this case Tibet) and confront the issue of including Tibet in the new Chinese nation.

The teams that represented the Japanese Collaborators were able to use the new scholarship to move past the facile denigration of their party in most histories of modern China. Their collaboration could potentially mitigate the viciousness of the Japanese conquest and save Chinese lives. Furthermore, the military successes of the Japanese and the economic development they fostered in Taiwan and Manchuria forced the other teams to account for their own inability to effectively or justly govern China.

The Nationalists, for their part, had to propose ways to limit the corruption that crippled their wartime government, but they found it difficult to do this without the draconian policies that emulated the fascist regimes of Europe. While the Allied international community rec-

ognized the Nationalist government, the US had not yet entered the war in January 1941, so the Nationalists could not count on foreign assistance to assure victory over Japan. Based in Chongqing in China's interior, the Nationalists had lost the most developed and richest portions of the country. They had abandoned the coast, and many in their leadership had prioritized defeating the Communists over dedicating their best forces to resisting Japan. Defending this decision was a challenge to the Nationalist teams.

Finally, the Communists were hardly a dominant force in January 1941. The Communist groups could not assume a victory without devising appropriate strategies. Advantages like their growing military strength and national popularity were balanced by the challenges of their limited territory and resources. As was clear following the New Fourth Army Incident, the Communists faced an immediate threat from the Nationalists as well as the Japanese. How could they preserve their independence, strengthen their military position, and still preserve the United Front with the Nationalists?

After preliminary debates to determine the best teams for each political position, the judgment on which of the four positions had the best plan for China's future would come in the final debate, held during the three-hour final exam period. Those students who had been eliminated in earlier rounds watched and judged. At the end of the debate (as in each previous round) they voted by secret ballot, based on whose arguments were the most appealing and persuasive. Some teams appeared in appropriate costumes, or plastered the walls with propaganda posters. Some brought in refreshing bribes of baked goods or sweet drinks. (One imaginative Communist team brought a case of "Leninaid.") In the end it was the substance of the debate that prevailed (aided by the fifteen votes of the professor and ten of the TA), so few complained about the potentially corrupting influences of the snacks.

The final third of the students' grades was based on their team's performance in the debates. A certain number of points was allotted for each round. Teams that were eliminated in the first round, then, were denied points available to those who went on to the second and third rounds. This led to a grading challenge for students in teams that had uneven participation among the members, with some pulling more weight than others in the research and debate preparation. An eliminated team, for example, might have some very strong students. To offer a potential remedy to this, students in eliminated teams could offer their services to any of the winning teams, and gain credit for the knowledge and energy they contributed. They could also earn extra points by writing critiques of the debate performances of other teams.

Although all students were required to attend class throughout the debates, eliminated teams naturally did not have to continue their research or hone their debate presentations. We found, however, that the stronger and more intellectually engaged members of eliminated teams seized the extra-credit opportunity, assisting other teams or writing intelligent critiques, which made up for lost points. As in any group exercise, identifying "free-riders" presented a problem. There were surely some weak or less committed students who benefited from a strong team's performance grade. Anonymous assessment of teammates by each student would help identify such cases.

Despite the grading challenges, the competitive juices spurred by the team debate format provoked an exceptional level of student engagement. We might have further increased the inter-team activity by encouraging teams to haggle about possible treaties or, more nefariously,

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to engage in inter-team espionage and defection. We had hoped, for example, that the Frontier groups and the Japanese collaborators might find common cause (as many Mongols in fact did), or that some Nationalists might defect to the Communist side. Such interaction between teams as did occur served to fuel enthusiasm and led some students to recognize the pliability of political positions, but the debate format did not allow as much inter-group negotiation as we might have wished.

Further experimentation within this general framework is a promising way to encourage students to grapple with the choices and strategies of historical actors and the contingencies of historical processes. For our students, the Chinese revolution was distant in time and space. The challenge of every history teacher is to bridge this distance with the relevance, resonance, and urgency of the real lives and choices of historical actors. Lectures and assigned readings in a traditional format begin this process. Arguing a position on an exam or in a paper is the next step. We found that the next and most exciting step for the students was to take up positions in a large team debate format, to challenge others and to defend their own position as if the fate of the Chinese nation was at stake. If we can make history come alive in this way, much of our pedagogical mission has been accomplished. ■

RECOMMENDED READING

Chinese Communist Party

Chen, Yung-fa. 1986. *Making Revolution: The Communist Movement in Eastern and Central China, 1937–1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goodman, David S. G., 2000. *Social and Political Change in Revolutionary China: The Taihang Base Area in the War of Resistance to Japan, 1937–1945*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Collaborators

Barrett, David and Larry Shyu, eds., 2001. *Chinese Collaboration with Japan, 1932–1945: The Limits of Accommodation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Boyle, Jonathan Hunter. 2007, 1972. *China and Japan at War, 1937–1945: The Politics of Collaboration*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Brook, Timothy. 2005. *Collaboration: Japanese Agents and Local Elites in Wartime China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nationalist Party

Eastman, Lloyd E. 1984. *Seeds of Destruction: Nationalist China in War and Revolution, 1937–1949*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Taylor, Jay. 2009. *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tibet

Goldstein, Melvyn C. 1989. *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lin, Hsiao-ting. 2007. *Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier: Intrigues and Ethnopolitics, 1928–1949*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia.

Tuttle, Gary. 2005. *Tibetan Buddhists in the Making of Modern China*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mongolia

Bulag, Uradyn. 2002. *The Mongols at China's Edge: History and the Politics of National Unity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Liu, Xiaoyuan. 2006. *The Reins of Liberation: An Entangled History of Mongolian Independence, Chinese Territoriality, and Great Power Hegemony, 1911–1950*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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