

ESSAYS

Editor's Note: This article was originally presented as a paper at the March 2000 annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Committee on Teaching About Asia Roundtable on "Literature: How Valuable Is It When Teaching About Asia?"

Four Ways to Use Literature in Chinese History Courses

By Timothy Cheek

As teachers of Asian Studies courses, we have no doubt all used literature to help make our topic more accessible, challenging, and meaningful to our students. Over the years, I have come to use literature in four different ways in my Asian history and culture courses at Colorado College, a liberal arts college with small classes that promote discussion. I use literature as illustrative material, as confounding examples, as historical documents, and as liminal artifacts on the border between literary text and historical document. While the examples I give below are all from Chinese studies, it is my hope that they will suggest paths to take in other Asian history courses.

LITERATURE AS ILLUSTRATIVE MATERIAL IN A HISTORY COURSE

As we all do, I use literary texts to engage students in the *experience* of history—to make vivid what it was like for certain kinds of people to live through a certain historical era. Thus, for my Modern China course, I use the novel by Yuan-tsung Chen, *Dragon's Village*, to give flesh and blood to Chinese Communist land reform efforts and the changes in both village life and intellectual life in China in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The novel is more interesting to read than CCP party documents or essays by academics, yet we read Chen's novel in the context of such core texts—CCP resolutions on land reform, Mark Selden's picture of the "Yenan Way," and Merle Goldman's (and other) more negative pictures of intellectual thought reform. In my experience, the use of illustrative literature in this case works. Students "get" the issues of peasant poverty and intellectual alienation from the bulk of China's population much more forcefully and personally this way. The novel impels them to go back to the "basic" historical documents I want them to consider. Other fiction that I have used with similar success for social and gender issues in China of the 1920s and 1930s are: Ba Jin (Pa Chin), *Family* and Cao Yu (Ts'ao Yü), *Thunderstorm*.

LITERATURE TO CONFOUND STUDENT ASSUMPTIONS

We are fortunate to have some colleagues in the business that like to "go against the tide." Howard Goldblatt and Geremie Barmé have brought us confounding examples of modern Chinese literature and cultural life that not only enliven the class, but also

challenge our assumptions about China. Goldblatt's translations of modernist and postmodern fiction from China are well known, such as Su Tong's *Rice* and Wang Shuo's *Playing for Thrills*. I have used Goldblatt's translation, from the University of Hawaii Press "Fiction from Modern China" translation series he edits, of Gu Hua's *Virgin Widows*, which is much less weird than Wang Shuo's, and still challenges students to consider what has changed and what has not in women's roles in China. The crudeness of common life, as well as individual efforts to rise above it, characterize many of these modernist novels and thus take China off the Orientalist pedestal as either utopia or dystopia. These novels humanize the Chinese experience of the twentieth century and make it accessible to my students in surprising complexity. In a similar fashion, the short stories, essays, and rock lyrics, etc. that Geremie Barmé has collected over the years also challenge and engage my students. I often take selections from his classic *Seeds of Fire* and now his *Shades of Mao*.

LITERATURE AS HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

In my traditional China and comparative history courses, I have used fiction and poetry as standard historical documents to be analyzed as any other document—that is, to be read in explicit "conversation" with the context of the author and intended audience as a window into understanding human experience of that time and place. I have had most luck with Moss Roberts's excellent translation of the Ming novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. I still use his extracts published in 1976 by Pantheon, but he has done the definitive translation, and a paperback selection, with the University of California Press in the 1990s. I also use Arthur Waley's accessible translation of another Ming period novel, "Journey to the West," as *Monkey*, which is still available in paperback. For both, I have students isolate values and ideals reflected in the stories—from brotherhood and loyalty (not to mention cyclical ideas of historical time) in *Three Kingdoms*, to popular Buddhist ideas in *Monkey*. I find chapter 10 on Ming arts and literature in Li Zehou's *The Path of Beauty* provides an excellent twenty-page context for the production and reception of Ming fiction.

LIMINAL ARTIFACTS

Reportage and Memoirs on the Border of History and Literature

Increasingly, I use literature in history classes to problematize the borders between history and literature. What happens when we consciously read a text both ways—as history and as fiction? There are texts—mostly accounts of CCP history and life under Mao—that make claims to factual basis but come to us in genres that do not require firm historical documentation. So, I find my classes often turn to questions. "What is a fact?" "What is true in this case?" "What matters in such texts, for me the reader?" That is, we get to conscious discussions of *reading strategies*. Memoirs and reportage have the illustrative attractiveness of easy-to-read fiction but repay the careful historiographical questioning of reading literature as history. In assigning these texts, I therefore assign

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fewer pages than I would for illustrative purposes and set specific “source interpretation” questions that encourage reading these texts in context and in conjunction with a scholarly article or two. In most cases what these readings and these reading strategies lead class discussion to is something more methodological in historical studies—we reflect on how we generate historical knowledge by interrogating a text in its own context.

In this category I use selections from the large and growing PRC memoir literature. I have had the most luck with Yue Daiyun and Carolyn Wakeman, *To the Storm*, and Rae Yang, *Spider Eaters*, though clearly others would serve as well. For reportage I have used Liu Binyan’s excellent early post-Mao exposé, *Between People and Monsters*, and Dai Qing’s reportage (masquerading at standard history) about the Yan’an rectification movement, *Wang Shiwei and Wild Lilies*. These writings that cross the boundaries of literature and history so challengingly also bring various Chinese voices into our classrooms, not as passive “documents” to be analyzed, but as articulate, and opinionated, analysts in their own right.

There are certainly more creative ways to use these four approaches to using literature in teaching history classes, as well

as yet other approaches. We can hope to read of these in future issues of *Education About Asia*. At the very least, however, literature can help the historian with illustrative material, examples to challenge our students’ (as well as our own) assumptions, primary documents to analyze in class, and enticing examples of the borderlands of history and literature that provoke discussion of the nature of historical knowledge. ■

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