

Essays on the Treatment of Mao in High School World History Testbooks

TEACHING
20TH
CENTURY
ASIA

EDITOR'S NOTE

We asked the author of this essay, as well as the one that follows, to read all references to Mao Zedong in two leading US high school World History textbooks, and provide commentary on the treatments of this important twentieth-century figure.

TEXTBOOKS UNDER DISCUSSION

Elizabeth Gaylor Ellis, Anthony Esler, and Burton F. Beers, Senior Consultant
World History: Connections to Today, Teacher's Edition
Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2003.

Roger B. Beck, Linda Black, Larry S. Krieger, Philip S. Naylor, and Dahia Ibo Shabaka
Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction
McDougal Littell, 2003.



Mao button. ©Imaginechina

MAO AND CHINA IN WORLD HISTORY HIGH SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

By Timothy Cheek

A picture is worth a thousand words, as the old saying goes. In two recent high school world history textbooks, Mao's picture appears in tellingly different ways. In *World History: Connections to Today* (Prentice Hall, 2003), Mao appears well into the section on China in "Nationalism and Revolution Around the World (1910–1939)." It is a photo of a distinctly older Mao from the 1970s (I suspect from the time of Nixon's visit in 1972). It appears in a box on page 863 that reviews Mao's call to "let a hundred flowers bloom" in the 1950s—and the purge of critics to which it led. The tag study question is: "What methods did Mao use to keep power to himself?"

In *Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction* (McDougal Little, 2003), Mao appears at the start of the chapter on "Revolution and Nationalism, 1900–1939" in his 1940s visage next to a photo of Mohandas Gandhi. Between them, literally, hangs the question: "How do you resist oppressive rule—with violent or nonviolent action?" Under each Great Man is a quote. Mao's quote gives his answer "A revolution is not a dinner party. . . . A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another."

Two images of Mao are embedded in two stories of modern Chinese history as part of a world history course. Reading these high school textbooks as an historian of modern China and a teacher at the university level, I am struck by the basic soundness of the story lines provided and by the really good ways these texts make Mao and the history of twentieth-century China relevant and perhaps even

a bit interesting to young readers. Nonetheless, there are limitations in the history that these texts "do", but they are limitations that reflect the scholarly literature—from university academics and scholarly journalists—in the assessment of Mao and in the relationship between great figures and history. In the end, I think dedicated and flexible teachers could easily make good use of either text.

For my money, I prefer the Prentice Hall's *World History: Connections to Today* for its successful brevity, sound tone, and particularly creative study ideas (I had the teacher's edition which includes classroom activities—such as having small groups of students illustrate a pamphlet that the Communists might have produced for rural audiences in the 1930s, which appears on page 736). This textbook is extremely telegraphic, giving less than half the number of words to sections on China between 1919 and today than *Modern World History*. However, it is broadly accurate in the story it tells of China's socialist revolution and post-Mao reforms. That is, the story it gives is what you would get from *The Cambridge History of China* or any of the sound college texts (such as Jonathan Spence's *In Search of Modern China*). Naturally, the text is incomplete and highly selective, but it provides a reasonable base on which to build with additional readings, activities, and videos. A particular strength of this textbook is the focus on primary sources, with short quotes (an eyewitness account of the massacre in Nanjing in 1937 by the Japanese) and cross-references to the volume's Reference Section (selections from Mao's seminal 1949 pronouncement, "The People's Democratic Dictatorship").

The two texts, however, share more than they differ. Both use Mao as a way to get at China's twentieth-century history and to make it concrete and vivid to students.

Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction provides a fuller treatment of the same history, with particular strengths in global contexts and comparisons, and in comparing revolutionary leaders from Gandhi to Stalin to Mao to Kemal. For Mao and the Chinese revolution, the focus here is the Cold War, the role of the Soviet Union (whose efforts date back to 1923 for China), and the US in its post-World-War-II role as champion of the Free World. Indeed, the focus on the Cold War gets out of hand in this text. There is too much hot language—"totalitarianism" gets a box on 396 as the defining characteristic of the Chinese Communist Party (and Mao); Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) still gets the General Stilwell rap as the bad general whose faults gave opportunity to the Reds (a view contested by recent research that is kinder to the Generalissimo); and Taiwan is treated as one of "Two Chinas" (a political fact of the Cold War, but demonstrably not the view of the democratically elected government on Taiwan today). Finally, the only reason offered to students for why the Communists won in China is because (p. 483) they promised land to the tiller. These hangovers from the Cold War master narrative do more harm than the bare-bones presentation in the other textbook: better to build your own narrative than fight your way out of a heavy-handed one (and a story-line lauding Mao and the CCP as China's one and only savior—which is the CCP's line—is just as unsatisfactory for the independent history teacher).

The two texts, however, share more than they differ. Both use Mao as a way to get at China's twentieth-century history and to make it concrete and vivid to students. He serves as a vehicle for that history (China's revolution) and for themes (as the photos indicated: power corrupts or violence and totalitarianism). These uses of Mao are utterly normal in the current scholarly literature. In most college-level texts, Mao naturally is portrayed in greater detail, and with more nuance as to changing contexts, but in the end he stands for the Chinese revolution—its hopes and promise, its initial successes in driving out Japanese and European imperialists and in broad-based industrialization and modernization, and finally its tragic flaws, abuses of power, waste of life, and now troubled legacy.

Newer research on Mao, however, has moved from arguing over points of this narrative to ask new questions. Tony Saich and David Apter ask *why* ordinary cadres in Yan'an in the 1940s experienced Mao and his revolution as a profound personal transformation that most closely resembles religious conversion (*Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic*, Harvard, 1994). Roderick MacFarquhar, in his three-volume series on *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, and Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun in their studies of elite politics in the Mao period ponder why China's top political leaders were so loyal to Mao when he was clearly wrong (as in the Great Leap Forward) and even when it meant their personal demise (as in the Cultural Revolution). New questions about Mao are not limited to explanations of the man. In the words of Jeffrey Wasserstrom, the question in Mao studies has moved to "explaining the millions of Maos in the heads of people across China."

These practical pedagogical choices drive us back to fundamental questions of historiography: what is significant about the life of a notable figure? Both high school textbooks have come down

squarely on the "representative" role of Mao. But is there more we can do with Mao? More to the point, is there more we can encourage our students to do with Mao's story? These textbooks, blessedly, avoid extreme characterizations and thereby leave the door open to the classroom teacher to explore additional ways to use Mao's story and Mao's writings to make both Chinese and world history come alive. Without delving into thousands of pages of monographs on Mao, I think classroom teachers and high school students can address the questions Wasserstrom and other Mao researchers are addressing in our weighty tomes. The two questions that would create a valuable supplement to these textbooks are: (1) Why did various people follow Mao? What attracted peasants at different times? Intellectuals? Soldiers? Women? And (2) What was it like to "experience Mao"? What did people who met the man have to say—over the decades from Edgar Snow's interviews in 1936 to the reflections of one of Mao's personal doctors around 1960? How about those Red Guard teenagers worshiping Mao in 1966? Or writers studying his words in the 1950s? Or taxi drivers in Beijing in the 1990s with Mao icons on their dashboards? All these questions come down to variations on: What did Mao mean to various people and why?

Fortunately, there are ready resources for classroom teachers. Most basically and most easily accessible is a large cache of Mao's writings—his official oeuvre from the translated four volumes of his *Selected Works*—available for free via the Internet. This gives broad access to students to read what he said (www.marx2mao.org/Mao/Index.html). For more context, Jonathan Spence's short biography, *Mao Zedong*, in the Penguin Lives series (in the US published by Viking, 1999) gives a sound context for each period in Mao's life to help understand his writings. Spence's biography of Mao is short and so well written that it will attract high school and college readers. Finally, the graphic and pictorial resources for making sense of how others made sense of Mao are massively improved by the Internet. My favorite site is Dr. Stefan Landsberger's collection of CCP propaganda posters at <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/>. These colorful posters from 1949 to the present are presented with enough contextual information to start the student on the way to using them as windows into Chinese experiences of the Great Helmsman.

In the end, my strongest suggestion is: let your students read Mao. So many of his essays are powerful reading. There are long ones that build and build, such as his 1927 "Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan," and short pithy ones, such as "Serve the People" or "Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountain" (which became famous in the Cultural Revolution). The two textbooks under review can set the stage, but they cannot finish the job for a history teacher. Fortunately, reasonably balanced and inventive textbooks, such as these, and the greater availability of primary documents (both written and pictorial) make that work easier. ■

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