

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Teaching East Asian History with Multimedia Approaches, Technological Artifacts, and Performative Activities

Editor's Note: This collection of essays was put together by Joseph W. Ho, Assistant Professor of History at Albion College. Each author of this essay collection was asked to answer the question “how each of your media activities will enhance student understanding of Chinese history and not just be something fun for students to do.” Their responses appear as sidebars in their respective essays.

Filmmaking as a Way to Learn East Asian History

By Paul G. Pickowicz

In the 1980s, I became extremely interested in the use of visual sources in the study of modern Chinese history. Very little was known about the history of feature filmmaking in China. After spending a year at the Film Archive of China in 1982–1983, I became convinced that Chinese-made films provide unique insights into the social, cultural, and political history of China—information about popular culture that can not be found in traditional print sources. My main interest was in the 1920s and early 1930s, the high tide of the silent film industry in Shanghai, the Hollywood of China. No source is a mirror reflection of contemporary reality. But I felt strongly that the body language, makeup, hairstyles, costumes, and performances of such brilliant silent era screen idols as Ruan Lingyu taught me a lot about the subtle nuances of gender relations, class interactions, urban–rural divides, and the impact of global culture. Soon, I began writing about what I was learning from these captivating film sources.

In the early 1990s, I thought it made sense to introduce this film material into my undergraduate course on twentieth-century China. Students liked this approach and truly appreciated viewing rare silent era gems. My initial challenge was to get them out of the habit of just sitting back and enjoying the films. I wanted students to learn how to function as historians of Asia. I urged them to try to dissect these sources by treating them as historical documents. How are films different from other types of sources, including newspapers and government files?

In 1995, I pushed the course in an even more experimental, multimedia direction. I wondered whether students would develop more perceptive eyes if they had to make films of their own. By this time, I was heavily involved in documentary filmmaking and was certain that shooting films made me a much better viewer of films. I capped the class at forty students and broke it down into four groups of ten students. I told them that by the end of the ten-week term, each group had to complete a twenty-minute live-action film based entirely on the fifteen silent era films they were seeing in class. In terms of aesthetics and themes, they could not do anything that could not have been done in the 1920s–1930s. That is, their films had to be black and white, silent (with appropriate background music), and include title cards for dialogue. Students had to do their own directing, acting, cinematography, screenwriting, etc. In terms of subject matter, they could only do what censors allowed at the time. The same approach could easily be taken in a course on early twentieth-century Japan.

Students always have low expectations at the start of the course. What? A 1920s Chinese silent film? Then, they get blown away by the quality of the original films and the surprisingly broad and edgy scope of social themes and aesthetics. To add drama, I insist that all groups work in secret, so they do not know what others are doing. Students are not allowed to spend any money making their films. In private meetings with the groups, I listen to their basic narratives but do not make decisions for them and do not want to see any of the films in progress.

I concluded early on that my assumption was correct: student eyes get much better at exploring film artifacts when each team has to make its own film modeled on the original sources viewed in class. Of course, the historical films are not their only sources. Students study scholarly works by Leo Lee and Lu Hanchao, and they read early twentieth-century fiction by Lu Xun, Ding

It is easy to say that Chinese film sources can provide students with fascinating insights into social history, but how can we lead students to become more astute explorers of such sources? Student eyes are sharpened when they have an opportunity to make films of their own.

Ling, and Zhang Henshui. I want students to think about the differences and connections between film and fiction sources.

I have been teaching the course for twenty-five years. It may be the only history course in the world that requires live-action filmmaking. No group has ever failed to complete its film. In the early years, the technology was primitive: clunky VHS cameras and half-inch videotape, plus time-consuming editing with a TV monitor. But the digital era changed everything. Filming and editing are easier for millennials, even when they have never made a film before. They learn fast, putting their iPhones to amazing use. They even use cost-free software to “antique” their movies with shading, bubbles, and scratches.

Frankly, this course is more time-consuming for me and the students. But students typically throw themselves into it. I have been invited to teach the course in Shanghai, Edinburgh, and Heidelberg. To add more drama, we always end the course with a glamorous mock Oscar event—the Golden Chopsticks Award Gala. Everyone gets dressed up, and we use a large venue with a big screen for the “world premieres” of the movies. Hundreds of people attend. A panel of faculty judges determines the award winners: Best Actress in a Lead Role, Best Director, Best Cinematography, Best Film, etc. I have always enjoyed teaching the course because students learn a lot, and many keep in touch for years.

Perhaps most important, students bond in this course. Regrettably, students normally function as solo acts in college courses. Working as a group better prepares them for the real world. “Find a way to solve group problems,” I say. “Don’t involve me!”

I believe this interdisciplinary, experimental learning format can be used in virtually all fields of Asian studies. Making a live-action film about the past or present in Asia involves a tremendous amount of learning. Documentary filmmaking, involving interviews with eyewitnesses to events of the past and present, is also an exciting option. Curious about such student films? Here are two examples: *The Gift Box* (2016, <https://tinyurl.com/wlxo3oe>) and *Stained* (2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yx7454wy>). ■

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Three Ways of Incorporating Storytelling into Chinese History Courses

By Jenny Huangfu Day

At Skidmore College, a large number of nonhistory majors take Chinese history classes to fulfill their non-Western requirement, to satisfy a curiosity about a region, or (often for international students) to learn about their own country from a different perspective. The challenge is to make history alive, tangible, and relatable to students from all across campus, and to bring students of diverse interests, backgrounds, and motivations together into one learning community. I implemented three semester-long class activities in my courses, each designed to take advantage of resources already available on campus to facilitate student-led learning and conversations across disciplines.

Constructing Family History from the Bottom-Up

In my survey course on modern China, each student draws from a set of identity cards that assign a social class (peasants, gentry, or merchants) and an ethnic background (mostly Han or Manchu, but more ambitious students are given more options, such as Central Asian Muslims or Tibetans) to the first generation of their fictional family. Throughout the semester, students conduct research (many take advantage of the one-credit research seminar offered by the library) to construct a “family history,” narrating how five consecutive generations of their fictive family lived from about the mid-nineteenth century. As a companion text on modern China, students read Joseph Esherick’s *Ancestral Leaves: A Family Journey through Chinese History*, in which the historian traces five generations of the Ye family from the 1850s to the 1960s.¹ As they progress through the book, students model Esherick’s research and exercise their own informed historical imagination by adding textures into their own fictional “family history.”

Each week, I give students open-ended prompts and debate questions to guide their research in developing their family histories: How do their family experiences change from their distinct local, social, and ethnic perspectives? How does each generation adjust their survival strategies to cope with political vicissitudes? How does the old social structure disintegrate and new classes emerge? What are the actual effects of the social and political policies of each regime on these families? None of these questions have single, definitive answers, but students’ own research and creative imagination help them make educated guesses.

This semester-long exercise encourages students to challenge the grand narrative of history, often told from perspectives of the dominant class, gender, and ethnicity, by assuming different roles. The result is a remapping of Chinese history onto many localized identities with marvelous complexity, as well as an opportunity for students to engage with contemporary debates about reform, human rights, nationalism, and ethnic policies.

Making and Exhibiting Historical Artifacts

As museum and gallery-based pedagogy became more integrated in college curriculums, the history department at Skidmore College echoed by purchasing four glass exhibit cases to decorate the hallway of our floor and opened up exciting pedagogical possibilities for our classes. In my upper-division course on the Qing dynasty, students build a mini Qing gallery with multiple panels showing the dynasty as a multicultural and multiracial dynastic empire distinct from the Han-dominated nation-state that inherited its mandate after 1912. The most exciting part for the students is the involvement of the college’s Makerspace and the artist-in-residence in a series of workshops to teach them how to use both the low and high-tech tools and machines in the Makerspace, including 3-D printers and vinyl cutters, to create visually compelling objects to populate their exhibits.

Inspired by Dorothy Ko’s *Every Step a Lotus*, one group of students used clay, cloth, silk, and embroidery tools to make model shoes for bound feet and illustrated how late Imperial Chinese women cherished footbinding as a family

By constructing imaginary family histories, making web-based documentaries, and handcrafting their own exhibits with 3-D printing techniques, students challenge grand narratives of Chinese history and engage public audiences with their learning activities.

tradition.² Another group used the 3-D printer to construct Emperor Kangxi’s double persona as a horse-riding Manchu warrior and a Confucian-style emperor. Students learn how to construct the gallery space and write illustrative texts by reading chapters from Beverly Serrell’s *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*.³

Visual Storytelling

My course on the media history of modern China invites students to write a research paper on a topic of their interest and to turn their research papers into three-minute narrated videos. This dual role of an academic researcher and filmmaker offers students a chance to understand firsthand the mediated nature of their own perception of history: to find out how the same story is told differently in textual and audiovisual media (and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each); and, finally, to acquire the technical and artistic skills to become visual storytellers themselves.

I also use this class as an opportunity to rethink the classroom in the virtual realm. How can we shape our media-savvy students into responsible citizens pursuing their intellectual endeavors on the internet? The course contains three interlinked interfaces: a public-facing website supported by WordPress where students blog and present their films, a research website tailored for the course by a librarian, and a traditional Blackboard website accessible only to the students. The goal is to provide students an integrated experience: they acquire common course readings through Blackboard, conduct their own scholarly research by using the library website’s academic resources, and share their critical insights and videos (uploaded onto YouTube and presented on the class’s WordPress website).⁴ In the video-making and recording workshops, they learn how to acquire audiovisual materials within copyright law, how to use iMovie to edit their films, how to record their voiceover narration with professional equipment and how to integrate audio and visual to produce a compelling video. Collaboration with the technology instructors on campus is key to the success of this class.⁵

These pedagogical experiments add a sense of purpose to the classes and help students acquire important research skills and multimedia experience. The video and exhibit assignments also yield results that are visible, portable, and visually compelling, and I was pleased to see how they became advertisements for the courses and helped bolster my enrollments in future semesters. The pedagogical techniques work well to promote interest in East Asian history in our increasingly diverse student body, but more importantly, they help integrate the history of East Asia into larger conversations about globalization, inclusivity, digital humanities, and creative teaching at my college and beyond. ■

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The Peach Blossom Fan with a Modern Twist

By Ya Zuo



As a premodernist, my paramount goal in the classroom is to make pre-twentieth-century China interesting and relevant to my students. This ambition undoubtedly comes with a challenge. If modern China seems fascinating yet distant, premodern China is even further removed from the experience of my North American students. My solution is to compensate for the lack of familiarity with simulated experience. Here, I discuss one project of this kind: role-playing in a historical drama—*The Peach Blossom Fan*—with creative modern twists.

I have experimented with this project in different institutional contexts, from a broad survey of East Asia at a

large public university to a China-specific seminar at a small liberal arts college. In each case, the assignment was well-received. In a way, a simple setup allows versatility. The drama has an abbreviated English translation that can be read in one sitting.⁶ I usually divide students into groups of five, a method applicable to any class size. Moreover, the project is suitable for any course with a China component, such as a world history survey with two sessions on China (premodern and modern).

The Peach Blossom Fan is a romance situated in seventeenth-century China. Two main characters—Li Xiangjun and Hou Fangyu—are central to the plotline. Li, a courtesan living in a high-class brothel, is famous not only for her beauty but also for her talents in arts and literature. Hou is a scholar and political activist, an opponent of the state. The two fall in love and marry. Li thereafter devotes herself to supporting Hou and his political cause.

Students find the first encounter between Li and Hou their favorite part of the story. The two meet at a party organized by Li's fellow courtesans. As they pass by the revelers, Hou and a friend are drawn to the sounds of joy. Having long heard about Li, Hou sees an opportunity to finally meet her. As a token of his admiration, Hou tosses a gift upstairs. To his delight, Li responds by throwing a gift back. The exchange of mutual interest is followed by the first meeting between the two. They enjoy each other's company while playing drinking games and improvising poetry. At the end of the day, they agree on a date to tie the knot.

The story has an intriguing resonance with modern sentiments, and I encourage students to bring out the connection by coming up with creative contemporary renditions. One group of students turned the story into an online dating situation. A male student (as Hou) meets a female student (as Li) on a dating app called Bumble. Users of the app can see photos of a pool of potential dates. If user A likes the photos of user B, and user B likes A's back, they become a "match." In the case of a heterosexual match, only the woman has the privilege of starting a conversation after the revelation of mutual interest. In the play, the male student anxiously holds his phone, waiting for the female student to contact him. Eventually, he thrills to her response, and the two enjoy their first date by singing a cappella with their friends.

Another group set up the story as an episode of the TV show *The Bachelor*. Li, played by a male student, is the bachelor(ette), and she is accompanied by fellow courtesans, played by women students. Multiple female students act as Hou and his scholar friends, three of whom plan to court Li. The three suitors introduce themselves via flashy PowerPoint presentations. Li and her friends "interview" each suitor by playing trivia, with all questions a test of

In a performative project based on The Peach Blossom Fan, students are motivated to connect with history on affective levels; view historical figures as fellow humans; and engage difficult, foreign historical concepts with empathetic, holistic understandings.

"cultural compatibility" in terms of tastes in music, movies, and literature. Eventually, Hou succeeds by demonstrating the most compelling common interests with Li.

Students in the audience greeted both performances with great enthusiasm and lots of laughter. The role-players showed an accurate understanding of history and a talent for concocting brilliant modern parallels. Both performances effectively articulated Li's identity without falling into the trap of stereotyping a sex worker or a submissive, oppressed Chinese woman. In fact, students highlighted Li's agency and cultural significance by transposing her into consciously feminist modern contexts. In play one, students chose a dating app that explicitly advocated for women's agency, in contrast with the traditional acquiescence of a woman to a dominant man in romance. Students in play two placed Li in a coveted position ("the bachelor") with full control (the trivia tests) and ample freedom of choice. They cast a male student as Li to accentuate this position of power by tapping into traditional heterosexual dynamics with a sense of irony.

Students also accurately captured the nature of the relationship between Li and Hou. Instead of seeing it as a transactional encounter conventionally associated with modern sex work, they immediately acknowledged the central importance of emotion. The comparison to modern dating, therefore, was particularly illuminating. In addition, students noticed the role of ritual in courtship and its intimate relationship with scholarly culture. In an apt comparison, they retold the story with details of modern ritualized activities (a cappella singing) and cultural activities representative of modern life (music, films, and literature).

The entertainment value of putting on a contemporary adaptation is obvious and almost irresistible to the student audience. But "fun" is merely the doorway to understanding. In a project like *The Peach Blossom Fan*, premodern China shines with refreshing relevance and inspiration. ■

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Encountering East Asia in Historical Sight, Sound, and Things

By Joseph W. Ho

The opening lines of L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* are both a call and a challenge for teachers of history: "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."⁷ In this light, how might we and our students see East Asian and world history through the material traces of this "foreign country"? By this, I mean not only readings and discussions that are our stock-in-trade, but also quotidian things and technologies from lands, literal and figurative, through which we journey as scholars. Hands-on demonstrations lead students to critically consider how materials embody historical experiences, while providing multisensory learning engagements in fresh contrast to media that is constantly filtered through digital devices and content.

I regularly use artifacts in my East Asian history survey and courses on US–China encounters, modern Chinese history, the Pacific War, and East Asian visual culture. While I am currently based at a private liberal arts college, these methods have also worked well for students at large public universities. The demonstrations always center on materials as having cultural biographies (transformations from commodities to artifacts across space and time), performative qualities (how they "script" human interactions), and "materialized memory traces" (physical expressions of experiences and imaginations).⁸ Our goal is to get as close as possible to stepping into the shoes—or eyes, ears, hands, and minds—of historical actors whose lives crossed paths with these things, while using primary and secondary texts to contextualize these engagements.

While my examples are from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and personally purchased (many from eBay and secondhand shops in the US and Asia), collecting objects is not the only way to go about this. Archives and special collections at your institution or partner museums are excellent allies. In planning, ask for material artifacts, which are often overlooked but may be waiting to be used for teaching. I was thrilled to find that my college had a brilliant collection of eighteenth- to twentieth-century Japanese and Chinese woodblock prints in the art history department. Other objects may appear in special collections, given Albion's connections to Methodist missions in late Imperial and Republican China (hint: many American institutions had similar contacts with Asia and material traces of them). Class sessions in on-campus collections can richly expose students to nontextual sources, as well as the challenging but rewarding detective work of historical research.

My first example is a record player—an "outmoded" device that nearly all educational institutions once owned (and yours may still, in storage)—though I do not reveal this right away. Rather, I begin the activity by providing students with a translated "poem." Having previously read about nationalism in 1920s and 1930s East Asia, they discuss how the stanzas represent national identity, jingoism, literary tropes, etc. At an appropriate point, I announce that we are, in fact, reading song lyrics. The record player materializes (a certain magic is involved), and I put on an eBay-sourced 78 rpm record of the popular Japanese wartime "Patriotic March" ("Aikoku Kōshinkyoku"). The physical record spinning before their eyes, crackling audio, and surprise of encountering a strident march (instead of a silent "poem") all transport students into the time and space of the song as experienced by historical actors. They then think and write about how the musical background, technology, and modes of reception radically reframe the text they previously examined. Responses range from unexpected excitement ("Nationalism is catchy") to connections drawn between the unfamiliar Japanese lyrics to a familiar Western musical background ("It's like a college fight song"). We then better understand how interwar Japanese militarism and nationalism were globally influenced, while also expressed and consumed in popular culture.

My second example involves commercial photographs of East Asia, mass-produced by Western companies throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Again, eBay has tens of thousands at any given moment; others were found, also inexpensively, in US bookshops. In this activity, students handle postcards and stereo photographs after reading about topics

With most—if not all—of our students living in a world of digital devices and social media, classroom demonstrations of vernacular artifacts and "outmoded" audio-visual technologies provide refreshing hands-on engagements with material-focused experiences and imaginations of East Asian history.

including Western imperialism in China, the Russo–Japanese War, and Sino–US encounters. Using our readings, we try to imagine the experiences of makers, subjects, and audiences mediated by the visual materials. We pass around stereoscopes (antique store finds) to view stereo photographs in 3–D, mirroring historical visual practices. I ask students to note what they see, along with any captions or inscriptions. I provide questions ranging from broad ("How do these postcards represent American interest in East Asia?") to speculative ("Knowing how the Russo–Japanese War was fought, what would you want to see that isn't in the image—and why do you think it isn't?"). I encourage students to share images, discussing similarities and differences in content, as well as their personal viewing experiences. Most fundamentally, we understand that we are reenacting historical modes of reception, with image sharing and discussion shaping how Westerners visualized Asia from afar. The students thus directly handle and think about links between consumerism, materialized images and text, and imperial or global perceptions of modern East Asia.

By exploring things and media technologies as "go-betweens" from far-away times and places, we can inspire real student interests in historical materials, experiences, and imaginations of East Asia—tangibly demonstrating that the past need not be so foreign after all. ■

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NOTES

1. Joseph Esherick, *Ancestral Leaves: A Family Journey through Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
2. Dorothy Ko, *Every Step a Lotus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
3. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).
4. The class website with students' videos can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/w2svweb>.
5. Many colleges also provide access to software training video websites such as VTC.com and Lynda.com, which students can use as resources.
6. Kong Shangren, *The Peach Blossom Fan*, trans. Chen Meilin (Beijing: New World Press, 2001).
7. L. P. Hartley, *The Go Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), 1. In the novel, these lines are followed by a meditation on personal ephemera linking materiality, memory, and experience.
8. See Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, eds., *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Photographic Essay: Four Case Studies," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).