Teaching Asian Political Economy

The Evolution of an Ethnographic Survey Course

By Gene Cooper

EDITOR'S NOTE: Sections of this article first appeared in an e-mail posted to the H-Asia list server <H-ASIA@h-net.msu.edu> in response to a query about teaching Asian "survey courses." Here the author elaborates further on the thoughts and experiences that inspired the original post.

Background

Let me confess at the start that I am not an economist, but an anthropologist with an interest in comparative political economy, and an area specialization in China. In the early 1970s, I conducted field research in Hong Kong on urban craftsmen, apprenticing as a woodcarver in a factory producing "art-carved" furniture and camphor wood chests. In later years, I conducted a study of the rural industrial sector of Dongyang County in China's Zhejiang province, the native place of my former Hong Kong "master."

My experience teaching about Asian economies derives from responsibility for two survey courses offered by our East Asian Studies Center, one undergraduate (EASC 150g), and one graduate (EASC 592). These courses rotate among the East Asian Studies faculty in our various social science and history departments, and change emphasis according to the respective talents/interests of the instructor. The undergraduate version usually enrolls from fifty to one hundred students, and the Center provides a teaching assistant who holds weekly discussion sessions and helps to grade papers. The graduate version usually enrolls five to ten students, and is conducted as a seminar. One or another of these courses circles back to me every fourth or fifth semester.

For several years, I struggled with the "little bit of this, little bit of that, in chronological order" syndrome in the undergraduate version (EASC 150g), that takes in "only" China, Japan and Korea, and satisfies a general education requirement in a non-Western cultures category. My woeful ignorance of Korean and Japanese history always made it an extremely trying experience. The class is usually filled with so-called "heritage students" which heightens the anxiety that one of them will come into class and proclaim that his/her grandma says "Dr. Cooper has it all wrong about Korea/Japan." There is less such anxiety for China, where I am more confident of my facts and their interpretation. But even with a stray guest lecturer here and there, one still ends up being pretty uncomfortable for more than half the semester.

New Incarnation

I succeeded in reducing my anxiety level in subsequent years, when I hung the course on a "world systems/political economy" framework. I began the semester by asking how it was that the somewhat different cultures of China, Japan and Korea responded to the differing strategies employed by the Western powers (and later the "exceptional" Japan) to colonize them. This gave the course a thematic unity it had always lacked. I had students read some essays by Immanuel Wallerstein to start; then a little Frances Moulder (*Japan, China and the Modern World Economy*); Phillip Huang/Victor Lippit (*The Development of Underdevelopment in China*); and Bruce Cumings ("The Origins and Development of the Northeast Asian Political Economy" in *The Political Economy of the New Asian Industrialization*), to supplement their more substantive background readings in each society. We discussed the "traditional" (nineteenth-century) baseline economic circumstances of each society, and then went on to examine the distinctive niches each came to occupy as they responded to the challenges posed by absorption into the developing world system. By the time we got to Korea in the final third of the semester, they had the routine down pretty well.

Second Incarnation

Some years later, in adapting the survey course to a graduate M.A. seminar setting (EASC 592), I experimented with assigning ethnographies (community case studies) as the basic building blocks of the course. Here once again, I started off with a dose of Wallerstein, then dealt with China, Japan and Korea through paired case studies, one urban/industrial, one rural/agricultural ethnography for each country.

For Japan, we read:

Industrial: Michael Cusamano, *Japan's Automobile Industry: A Comparison of Nissan and Toyota*;
Agricultural: Ronald Dore, *Shinohata*;

For Korea:

Industrial: Roger Janelli, *Making Capitalism: The Social and Cultural Construction of a South Korean Conglomerate*;
Agricultural: Vincent Brandt, *A Korean Village* (just to avoid using a second book by Janelli, such as his *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society*, which is also quite suitable).

For China:

Industrial: Bill Purvis, *Barefoot in the Boardroom*
Eric Harwit, *China's Automobile Industry* (also works quite well in comparison with Cusamano, above);
Ian Skoggard, *The Indigenous Dynamic in Taiwan's Postwar Development* (a study of the Taiwan shoe industry, and also quite suitable).
Agricultural: Anita Chan, et al., *Chen Village*, recently replaced by my own work, *The Artisans and Entrepreneurs of Dongyang County: Economic Reform and Flexible Production in China.*

After having immersed themselves in the detail of the various community studies, and having drawn out the cultural inflections in the local economic systems, I had students read David Harvey's *The Condition of Post-modernity*, which presents a kind of elaboration of world systems theory in a "post-Fordist flexible production" context. Harvey's book is also noteworthy for its remarkable critique of postmodern theory that more clearly enunciates the contributions of the postmodern paradigm than many of its own practitioners.

I am also looking forward to using André Gundar Frank's new book, *ReOrient*, in a future incarnation of this course. This revisionist critique of world systems theory and its Eurocentrism, from the pen of one of its earlier proponents, argues that the so-called European "core" nations of the world capitalist system "bought a cheap ticket" on the Asian gravy train with New World silver, beginning in the sixteenth century. European trading nations remained peripheral in and to the true Asian "core" of the world economy for three hundred years and did not surpass Asia in any major economic parameter until the nineteenth century. The book is rich with similar results of recent research in world history.

Third Incarnation

In a subsequent semester, I readapted the ethnographic approach of the graduate seminar into the undergraduate version of the course (EASC 150g) as well, eliminating much of the former's heavy theoretical emphasis, but sticking with the ethnographic case studies. Students learned about flexible production, but only in the context of the substantive discussions of the industrial ethnographies. They didn't read Harvey, and I didn't encourage them to question whether any meta-narrative, let alone the one being used by their professor, could ever be considered valid. But they were encouraged to think of political economy in its broadest sense, which is to say, taking in any number of kinship practices, religious beliefs, and folk habits and customs that affect the local economic structure and performance.

In addition, I prepare questions for discussion of each ethnography, keeping a week or so ahead of the class, rereading my underlining in each ethnography for inspiration. The questions mainly regard the social and economic conditions of each community, and the significance of the institutions described for understanding microeconomic patterns of behavior in each distinctive locale. Given the overall world systems perspective of the course, I also try to link the ethnographic descriptions to broader political and economic forces and events in Asia and worldwide during the past century. By the end of the semester, students had read six ethnographic case studies about three soci-

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eties, contextualized them in a world system ("global" system seems to be the more fashionable term nowadays), and had hopefully begun to get some sense of the similar, yet distinctive, microeconomic patterns of each society.

Fourth Incarnation

More recently still, I have adapted the ethnographic/political economy approach of the survey course to teaching a more specialized graduate seminar (Anthro. 599), Regional Ethnology: China. I assigned eight ethnographic studies conducted in the various regions of rural China, during or concerning various time periods.

For the Republican period: Fei Xiaotong (Hsiaotung), *Peasant Life in China*; Alvin So, *The South China Silk Districts*; Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China.*

For the Maoist period: G. William Skinner, "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 24; Friedman, et al., *Chinese Village, Socialist State*; Helen Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China.*

For the postreform period: Yan Yunxiang, *The Flow of Gifts*; Eugene Cooper, *The Artisans and Entrepreneurs of Dongyang County*.

Once again the emphasis was on rural political economy in the broadest sense, and discussion was focused on the ethnographic case studies. The graduate students who attended (from Political Science, History and Anthropology) were rather surprised in the end by how much they had learned from the experience of immersion in the everyday world of China's towns and villages, and how well the course established for each a firm foundation on which to continue specialized study in Chinese society and civilization.

Overall Evaluation

The advantage of assigning ethnographic case studies is that they expose students to batches of new material in wholistic but finite packages that are (most importantly for me) easier for the instructor to control. But they are also easier for students to get a handle on to discuss, and are generally comparable along similar lines. Needless to say, in a survey course such an approach leaves out a whole lot (several millennia to be sure), but trying to "introduce" China, Japan and Korea in a single semester, there are bound to be lacunae. One can only hope that the experience of comparative contemporary political economy will tweak student curiosity sufficiently and that some will go on to take more specialized courses in the history, culture, politics, and economics of the region. If students leave a survey course in such a frame of mind (and admittedly, many who are taking it to satisfy a general education requirement do not), then one has succeeded.

I realize this ethnographically based political economy approach may not be everyone's cup of tea. But after years of wrangling with putting on a presentable survey of East Asia, I have found that it has rekindled my enthusiasm for teaching EASC 150g, and has also proved adaptable to my more specialized regional courses on China. ■

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