RESOURCES

TEACHING RESOURCES ESSAYS

Teaching the Cultural Revolution in China

Contested Pasts and Public History

By Georgina Clinton

On a hot July afternoon in 2012, an elderly man was found unconscious by police on a highway close to Huangshe Village, in the province of Zhejiang in China.[1] The man was recognized as Qiu Riren, the subject of a 1986 arrest warrant for his part in the murder of Hong Yunke during the Cultural Revolution. Qiu Riren was part of a local militia who strangled the doctor in December 1967. While the rest of the group was tried in 1986, Qiu Riren left the area and since then had been presumed dead. Sentenced to three and a half years in prison in April 2013, his trial and subsequent conviction sparked a debate in China, and worldwide, as to who should be held accountable for the violence that was perpetrated against the intelligentsia during the Cultural Revolution.[2] It was a debate that was to find its way into an undergraduate tutorial in Belfast in the spring of 2013.

The History and Historians module is a first-year course in Queen's University Belfast that aims to encourage students to participate in important debates concerning historical truth and "contested pasts."[3] The course uses case studies such as the Crusades, slavery, the Holocaust ,and the Cultural Revolution in China to teach students how to approach and discuss controversial historical topics. As well as attending lectures, tutorials, and movie nights, students also complete a tutorial journal each week in which they critique an assigned article in 450-500 words. Towards the end of the semester, the students work in groups to complete a proposal for a public history project, a process that allows them to examine the possible problems inherent in producing history for a public audience. They then write up their project proposal and deliver a twenty-minute presentation to the class at the end of the semester.

Fundamentally, the module encourages students to question both academic and public history. Students examine the influences at work on historians and come to a greater understanding of why people have different points of view. In turn, they learn to approach their work in a more sensitive and empathetic manner.

The spring semester of 2012-13 was the first time that the Cultural Revolution in China was included in the module, under the direction of Dr. Adam Cathcart. [4] While our students would have been familiar with the Holocaust and known a little about the Crusades, they had little to no knowledge of the Cultural Revolution or, for that matter, twentieth-century Chinese history.

The Cultural Revolution was taught over two weeks and comprised four one-hour lectures and two, two-hour tutorials. On the movie night, we watched Zhang Yimou's 1994 film *To Live*.[5]

The reading list contained both primary and secondary sources. For our discussion on perspectives, we used:

- Neale Hunter, *Shanghai Journal: An Eyewitness Account of the Cultural Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) (The introduction and the chapter on the Peking Red Guards). Hunter and his wife lived in Shanghai from 1965 to 1967 and witnessed the revolution from a uniquely Western point of view.
- Mobo Gao, *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2008) is a pro-Cultural Revolution source written by someone who lived in rural China during the revolution and argues that the revolution was a force for good.[6]

These two sources allow for an in-depth discussion of truth in history and what influences the writing of a particular subject.

Newspaper articles were used to discuss both the interpretation and memory of the revolution. These included:

- Josh Kurtzlantzick, "China's Repressed Memory of the Cultural Revolution: Silent Revolution," *The New Republic*, last modified http://tiny.cc/51vccx, September 18, 2006.
- Evan Osnos, "Letter from China: Angry Youth," *The New Yorker*, July 28, 2008.
- Tania Branigan, "Red Songs Ring Out in Chinese City's New Cultural Revolution," *The Guardian*, April 22, 2011.
- *Asia News*, "Bo Xilai Maoist Revival 'Worse than Cultural Revolution'," April 5, 2012.[7]

Documentaries such as *Morning Sun* (2003) and *China: A Century of Revolution Part Two*: *The Mao Years 1949-1976* (PBS, 1994) were also recommended to give students an overview of this time and to hear eye-witness accounts.

In the lectures delivered by Dr. Cathcart, issues such as "The Politics of Memory;" "Alternative Histories of the Cultural Revolution';" and "Popular Memory of the Cultural Revolution: Art, Nostalgia and Trials;" were addressed. Throughout the lecture series, the recurrent themes were:

- Alternative histories and how official state history can differ from popular history.
- Responsibility: Could individual Red Guards be held responsible for the Cultural Revolution, or did elements within the central government or primarily Mao largely orchestrate the event?
- Divergent memories of that time and, more specifically, Cultural Revolution nostalgia.
- The question of state censorship and how it informs the history of that time.

These proved invaluable for discussing the wider issues associated with that era. However, with respect to the tutorials, it soon became apparent that the Cultural Revolution could not be taught in isolation and that for it to be truly understood it had to be placed in the wider context of Mao's China. Therefore, in the first tutorial, a brief outline of China's history from 1949 was given to provide a background to the Cultural Revolution.

This week of teaching also concentrated on academic approaches to the Cultural Revolution. Using what we already knew from the sources, we looked at the causes of the Cultural Revolution itself, how that time period unfolded, the role Mao played, and the goals of the revolution. We examined various questions, such as:

- Did the Cultural Revolution represent a continuum in the general movement towards social and political change in China at that time?
- Was it a spontaneous event, or was it orchestrated from above?
- What prompted such levels of violence?
- What role does the state have in opening conversations?

In the second week of discussions, we looked at popular memory of the Cultural Revolution. The students all wore red armbands I made and discussed why they would mount their own revolution and how it would be staged. This was a useful exercise in that it prompted them to see the Cultural Revolution from their 1960s cohorts' point of view. They then compared their modern-day undergraduate experience to that of the 1960s Chinese student.

I played a CBS News clip publicizing Jung Chang and her book, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (London: Random House, 2007), which led to a discussion of her views and how her background as the daughter of a government official targeted during the revolution may have colored her perspective.[8] Comparing this work with that of Mobo Gao, the son of peasants at the time of the Cultural Revolution and someone who saw that time in a very positive light, was a very useful exercise. It allowed students to explore divergent perspectives on this era and the influences that informed the telling of its history.

The role of censorship in molding memory and history in China was examined, particularly Cultural Revolution nostalgia and the implications that it might have for modern-day China. Given that the trial of Qui Riran was receiving global attention at this time, we also discussed recent developments in twenty-first century China with respect to the issue of responsibility.

The tutorial journal was a particularly useful learning device because it gave students an opportunity to critically analyze an article, providing them with an additional source to help them discuss relevant issues during the tutorials. These assignments were given in the form of academic work and newspapers articles.[9] In an effort to get them to think about "historical truth" and whether there is such a thing as "unbiased history," students were asked to investigate the author of the article and consider how his or her background may influence points of view. They were then asked to identify the key themes of the article and suggest who the intended audience might be (academic, the general public, etc.). Students were also asked how the themes in their tutorial assignment contrasted to those found in other literature, academic or otherwise. The students wrote a tutorial journal entry every week for six weeks, and the exercise improved their analytical skills and ability to discuss sensitive issues in a respectful manner.

In the last part of the semester, students constructed a proposal for a public history project on a topic of their choice. They had to decide on the scope and audience of the proposed project, the historical ideas they would be trying to communicate through their work, and why those ideas were important to the public. Another important question students were required to take into consideration was how they were going to deal with the sensitivities and difficulties in relating any controversial issues that may arise. The aim was to get them to think of a unique way to communicate the Cultural Revolution through a public history project and the advantages and disadvantages inherent in that process.

One example of a group proposal was a project titled "China's Red Legacy." The main aim of the project was to provoke discussion with respect to China's past and how the Cultural Revolution has influenced contemporary China. Their work was devised to be a gateway for those with no knowledge of the revolution and to provide sources for viewers to give them a more comprehensive background of that time in history. The group decided on a web-based public history project and created a Twitter feed to advertise their online activity and also to encourage debate.[10] In contrast to other public history forums (museums, etc.), the project was capable of reaching a worldwide audience. The 140 character tweets forced students to be concise, and therefore, the information was limited. Nonetheless, the group realized that a succinct tweet about the Cultural Revolution would be more easily digestible by the novice.

As the project was aimed at people who had no previous knowledge of the Cultural Revolution, they created a website to expand on what was being introduced on Twitter.[11] They chose five different subjects (Mao, violence, individual accounts of the revolution, China's current leadership, and education and awareness) and discussed them in greater detail.

The Twitter feed @qubcrl did generate debate about the nature of the revolution and the issues of responsibility and transparency. Of course, in a place such as Northern Ireland with its troubled history, comparisons were made via Twitter, which again forced the students to

think about this issue in a wider context and taught them to approach the subject in a more sensitive way.

The groups were given twenty minutes to discuss their proposal at the end of the semester. Working as a team, they were expected to produce a precise justification for their choice of media and explain the usefulness of and problems with their proposed project. Therefore, this exercise gave them the opportunity to put an aspect of the Cultural Revolution in a context that was easily understandable but forced them to confront the problems associated with public history.

The usefulness of such projects was immeasurable. Our first-year students were confronted with difficult issues in history and had to find a way to tell a history in a public arena that was both simple enough for the novice to understand but sufficiently comprehensive to demonstrate an awareness of the sensitivities associated with discussing the topic. By the time they had completed this project, students had a greater understanding of the principal historical controversies underlying the Cultural Revolution. They were now able to analyze a diverse selection of primary and academic sources in a critical way, had a grasp of the nature and possible difficulties involved in providing a public history of that time, and learned how to work in a team. By the end of the exercise, they not only had a clearer understanding of the Cultural Revolution but had honed their skills as young apprentice historians. ■

NOTES

1. Tom Lasseter, "Murder Trial Raises Questions of Mao's Role in China's Cultural Revolution" *McClatchy Washington Bureau*, March 6, 2013, http://tinyurl.com/qdv49l4.
2. "China Jails Man for Cultural Revolution Murder," *BBC News*, accessed November 9, 2013, http://tinyurl.com/lb3y22k.
3. Module convenors were Professor Catherine Clinton, Dr. James Davis, Dr. Danny Kowalsky, and Dr. Adam Cathcart of Queen's University Belfast. (Dr. Cathcart is now a lecturer in Chinese History at the University of Leeds, UK.)
4. The case studies in this semester were the Crusades, the Holocaust, and the Cultural Revolution in China.
5. *To Live*. DVD. Directed by Zhang Yimou. Shanghai: Shanghai Film Studio, 1994.
6. Mobo Gao, *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), http://tinyurl.com/ouxepa5.
7. Other sources on the reading list were Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: The Coming of the Cataclysm 1961-1966, vol. 3* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997); "The Revolutionary: An Unrequited Love for China," *National Public Radio*, October 19, 2012, accessed March 6, 2013, http://tinyurl.com/qzs56be; Lucian W. Pye, "Reassessing the Cultural Revolution," *The China Quarterly* 108 (1986): 597-612.
8. "The Real Mao Tse Tung," *CBS News*, January 28, 2007, accessed March 6, 2013 http://tinyurl.com/k288kb7; Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (London, Random House, 2007)
9. Two of the assignment articles were: Jason Lee, "Review of The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution,' by Mobo Gao," *China Book Reviews*, August 29, 2008, http://tinyurl.com/79tyuom; Neale Hunter, *Shanghai Journal: An Eyewitness Account of the Cultural Revolution* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1969): 3-13, 88-110.
10. "China's Red Legacy," accessed November 9, 2013, https://twitter.com/qubcrl.
11. "China's Red Legacy," accessed November 9, 2013, http://qubcrl.weebly.com.

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