

# TEACHING TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINESE HISTORY

By Lesley Solomon

In an ideal world of American education, both high school students and college undergraduates would begin the study of twentieth-century China with a deep understanding of the development of Chinese civilization and its place in world history. Certainly, the much-publicized economic challenge posed by contemporary China, as well as its expanding leadership role in East Asia and beyond, would make such an in-depth study crucial for all American students. Unfortunately, state and local history requirements have not kept pace with world affairs. Serving as a National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA) seminar leader, who prepares secondary teachers to teach East Asia, I needed to develop a twentieth century China framework that teachers can adapt for different courses and for students with varying backgrounds in Chinese history. Prepared for secondary teachers, the framework should also prove useful to teachers of undergraduates. While the format works well in a Chinese or East Asian history course, teachers can use it in a world history course, which is what most of our students will experience. In such a course, teachers will emphasize cross-cultural themes such as responses to the challenge of the West. They can, for example, challenge students to compare the ideals and methods used by Mao Zedong to those of Mahatma Gandhi in building mass revolutionary movements. In the section of this article on using a novel as a teaching resource, I suggest a number of these cross-cultural themes under the headings “Mao’s China in Twentieth Century World History,” “The Influence of the West on the Non-Western World,” and “The Effects of Totalitarianism on Youth.”

Since all of my successful teaching has been inquiry-based and interdisciplinary, I developed a format that includes using essential questions as an organizing principle, a simulation as a culminating assessment, and primary sources as the principal vehicle for information and discussion. I also incorporated two novels. The first, *Family by Pa Chin* (Ba Jin), chronicles the rejection of traditional values in the first part of the twentieth century. Set during the Cultural Revolution, the second, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, an autobiographical novel by Dai Sijie, describes the experiences of two teenagers condemned by their class background to “rustification” in the countryside. Both novels address historical themes that the students will explore through other sources. Below is an overview of my framework for teaching Twentieth-Century China, including a detailed section on using one of the novels, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, to pose questions about the Cultural Revolution and its place in Chinese history.

## FRAMING THE UNIT ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINA

To provide a clear focus for the teaching of Twentieth-Century China, I chose to address the question of “What is good government?” As members of the oldest continuous civilization on earth,

the Chinese themselves have always pondered this question as a natural outgrowth of a humanistic tradition buttressed by Confucianism. In the NCTA class, we base our first discussion on a section of Frederick Mote’s *Intellectual Foundations of China*. Tracing Chinese humanism back to the Shang period, Mote contrasts it with the spiritual focus of most ancient cultures, especially the Western concept of a personalized all-powerful god figure. In the Chinese “wise man” rather than “holy man” culture, Confucians really believed in good government. They felt called upon to serve and regarded no other activity as of equal value.<sup>1</sup> Since a messianic belief in the value of the American governmental system has guided many important events in American history, American students feel a natural affinity with the “good government” question. Therefore, my essential questions became: 1) How successfully have Chinese leaders met the challenge of governing China in the twentieth century? and 2) How can we predict the direction of Chinese leadership in the early part of the twenty-first century?

As students analyze diverse primary and secondary sources, broad-based questions such as these help focus class discussions and unify their study. Implicit in every teacher’s instructional blueprint is a set of “Essential Understandings,” which he or she wishes students to gain from their study. The following Essential Understandings inform my Twentieth-Century China framework:

1. For most of the past 2,500 years, China has maintained its role as a major political and economic power integrated into an international system. This point is important because some high school texts portray Chinese civilization as evolving in isolation.
2. Chinese leaders, whether emperors, Confucian bureaucrats, or Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials, have always focused on the art of governing effectively.
3. Chinese rulers have generally exerted extensive authority, unrivaled by an established church, a strong labor movement, or other countervailing institutions.
4. Since the nineteenth century, Chinese leaders have wrestled with the issue of how to integrate Western values.
5. Marxist ideology has shaped China, and has been reshaped in China.
6. In an increasingly global society, the ruling Chinese Communist Party faces strong challenges from non-governmental actors such as the Internet, the World Trade Organization (WTO), religious groups including a large Islamic population, AIDS and other epidemics, and human and environmental rights activists in China and the international community.

In my introduction, I ask students to consider the famous Confucian dictum on leadership: “If you sir want goodness, the people

They [the students] will also trace Chinese attitudes toward Western concepts of government from the ideals of the enthusiastic Westernizers of the May Fourth Movement to Mao's assertion that "this so-called two-party system is nothing but a means of maintaining the dictatorship of the bourgeois."

will be good. The virtue of the noble person is like the wind and the virtue of small people is like the grass. When the wind blows over the grass, the grass must bend."<sup>2</sup> Then, we compare the Confucian ideal with a segment of Mao's 1955 address on collectivizing agriculture: "... but some of our comrades are tottering along like a woman with bound feet . . . . We should guide this movement vigorously, warmly, and systematically, and not act as a drag on it . . ." <sup>3</sup> In both examples the leader rules through moral suasion, although Mao would certainly have rejected Confucius' scruples about "using killing." As the study progresses, students will note the many continuities between Confucian and Chinese Communist systems as well as significant differences. They will also trace Chinese attitudes toward Western concepts of government from the ideals of the enthusiastic Westernizers of the May Fourth Movement to Mao's assertion that "this so-called two-party system is nothing but a means of maintaining the dictatorship of the bourgeois."<sup>4</sup> During the time of the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square, intellectuals like Fang Lizhi rejected Deng Xiaoping's efforts to introduce capitalism without democratization. Like many in the May Fourth Movement, he linked democracy with economic progress, maintaining that "complete Westernization to me is complete openness, the removal of restrictions in every sphere . . . our culture lags behind that of the most advanced societies, not in any one specific aspect but across the board. . . . China has been a failure in every . . . aspect of economic and political life."<sup>5</sup>

### TEACHING TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINA: A SIMULATION

When students come with insufficient knowledge of Chinese history, the teacher will need to provide background on Confucian values, Imperial China, and clashes with the nineteenth-century West. To give students a challenging purpose for their study, I begin by assigning the final assessment, a simulated CCP Party Congress that debates: How should China's leaders govern in the first half of the twenty-first century? Students will conduct research, write position papers, and assume the roles of either "experts on current problems" or "key decision makers." Below are suggested assignments:

**Key Decision makers:** Confucius, Zhu Xi, Liang Qichao, Sun Yat-sen, Chen Duxiu, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Fang Lizhi, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao. Depending on the nature of your course, you might wish to add other figures from twentieth-century world history, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Mikhail Gorbachev, or Boris Yeltsin.

**Experts on Current Problems:** AIDS; religious dissidents, including Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Falun Gong; social problems such as a rising crime rate; economic inequity (rural/urban, coast/interior); labor unrest/floating population; problems of transition to free market economy including WTO, banking, and inefficiency of state-owned enterprises (SOES); environmental activists; relations with other Pacific nations, including Taiwan, Japan, North and South Korea, and the United States.

**Note:** The expert may want to take on a particular role, such as a businessman engaged in trade with Taiwan, or a displaced worker from a state-owned enterprise, etc.

Focusing on the essential question, the simulation will take place at the end of the unit of study. By that time, students can synthesize research on their characters or issues with insights gained from their study of twentieth-century China. Providing another means of assessment for the teacher, each student will come to the simulation with a position paper. The discussion itself will follow a modified Model United Nations format, in which the delegates speak, answer questions, and propose change in the form of resolutions.

Depending upon available class time, the teacher may use a version of the following time frame, which would take three to five days in a traditional high school:

**One or two days:** Experts testify briefly about a current problem and answer questions from key decision makers.

**One day:** Depending on their issues, assign experts to an appropriate committee. Committee assignments can include (1) Political Reforms (electoral procedures, etc.), (2) Economic Change in a Transitional Economy, (3) Social and Environmental Issues, and (4) Rights of the Individual. Each committee will prepare at least one proposal, consisting of two parts: (a) a series of statements describing a problem, and (b) statements presenting a proposed solution requiring governmental change. On this day, key decision makers will meet as a group. Each one should describe his or her reactions to specific testimony.

**One or two days:** Each committee will present its resolution to the CCP Congress. After each presentation, the teacher or presiding student will form a volunteer speakers' list of key decision makers, who will address the resolution and answer questions. Then, key decision makers will pass or reject each resolution by vote or consensus.

### USING PRIMARY SOURCES

The teacher and students will spend most of their class time discussing primary sources and literature depicting the three key periods that spanned twentieth-century Chinese history: (1) the May Fourth Movement of 1919, (2) the Cultural Revolution 1966–1976, and (3) the Tiananmen Square Uprising of 1989. Students should read the novels in the appropriate time periods so that they may compare each author's interpretation of events with the accounts in the primary sources.

In each period, questions of effective government, sources of political power, and leadership emerged as paramount. In each case, leaders of the movement defined a new direction for China's rulers, as well as for society as a whole. Since Western influence is a theme, it is useful for students to see that the Tiananmen Uprising began as a commemoration of the May Fourth Movement. One prompt for a discussion of each reading is a problem/solution approach: (1) How

does each writer define the major problem of governing China? (2) What solution is stated or implied in each reading?

Many of my primary sources come from *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, second edition, edited by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, and *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Volume II, compiled by Wm. Theodore De Bary and Richard Lufrano. For the May Fourth Movement, students discuss the following documents in addition: (1) a call for a change in Chinese political culture to achieve constitutional government from Chen Duxiu, Dean of Peking University,<sup>6</sup> (2) a section of the preface of Lu Xun's first collection of short stories, in which he explains why he abandoned his medical studies to become a writer. The passage contains a striking metaphorical depiction of China's problem in the early twentieth century: "Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. But you know since they will die in their sleep, they will not feel any of the pain of death. . . . But since a few have awoken, you can't say there is no hope of destroying the iron house."<sup>7</sup> (3) A call from the Anti-Foot-binding Society of Hunan for Chinese women to liberate themselves,<sup>8</sup> and (4) "Reform Our Study," a speech by Mao Zedong in which he condemns Communist Party members who do not adapt Marxism-Leninism to the Chinese situation.<sup>9</sup> For the Tiananmen segment, I also used a section of Perry Link and Andrew Nathan's translation of notes from CCP leaders smuggled out by a sympathizer of the reforms.<sup>10</sup>

## USING A NOVEL AS A SOURCE FOR TEACHING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, a number of survivors have written compelling and informative memoirs. For example, *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Nien Cheng and Liang Heng, and Judith Shapiro's *Son of the Revolution*, provide detailed accounts of the torments suffered by "class enemies." Both are suitable for high school students and college undergraduates. *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution* by Ji-li Jiang serves the same purpose for middle school students. Why add another loosely autobiographical novel? Perhaps, because like any good novel, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* contains a gripping plot line, an ill-fated love story, complex characters, irony, and large doses of satirical humor. It is the only book I assign that the NCTA teachers read before the due date on the syllabus. More importantly, the novel introduces themes of modern Chinese history that the Cultural Revolution exemplifies. Because it takes place in the countryside, the book examines the reality of Mao's mass movement with its "cult of the peasant." Through primary and secondary sources introduced in class, students will consider various historical interpretations of the following themes introduced in the novel:

### I. The Place of Communism, According to Mao, in Chinese Tradition

- Continuities between Imperial China and the rule of the CCP, including reverence for the leader, a specific literature of true beliefs, a privileged elite based on commitment to orthodoxy and loyalty to the leader, a centralized state without countervailing institutions, censorship, and government control of the economy and trade.

- Rejection of the Confucian tradition, especially reverence for intellectuals, substituting a cult of the peasant.
- Centrality of culture in Chinese tradition, a humanistic society that valued history, literature, and the arts. An heir of the first cultural revolution of the twentieth century, Mao led a second, in this case, one that rejected both traditional and Western values.

### II. Mao's China in Twentieth-Century World History

- Imposition of a totalitarian system that used terror as a means of control and regulated many aspects of private life (cf. Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia)
- Creation of a cult of personality
- Mao's contribution to Marxist theory that glorified the peasant rather than the urban worker, and defined guerilla warfare
- Conversion from an elitist nationalist movement to a mass revolutionary movement (cf. Gandhi)
- Use of a Western philosophy to create a Chinese nationalist movement (cf. Stalin).

### III. The Influence of the West on the Non-Western World

Influence of the West as a symbol of imperialism and tyranny on one hand, and freedom on the other

### IV. The Effects of Totalitarianism on Youth

- Re-education and its unintended consequences (cf. Native Americans, etc.)
- Effects of persecution of the intellectuals on economic development
- Effects of a system that seeks to eliminate freedom of choice and, therefore, hopes for the future.

As the narrator and his friend Luo, sons of "class enemies," begin their new life in the countryside in chapter one of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, Dai introduces several of these themes, including the persecution of intellectuals, conflicting attitudes toward the West, and the cult of Mao: "Like an officious customs officer searching for drugs, the village headman inspected the narrator's violin, the sole item that exuded an air of foreignness, of civilization, and therefore aroused suspicion!"<sup>11</sup> At once, the violin becomes a dual symbol of Western influence and of the boys' bourgeois background. The narrator describes himself and Luo as "pathetic little reactionary soldiers" surrounded by valiant peasants. Displaying his imagination and talent for swaying a crowd, Luo announced that his companion would play a Mozart sonata. This announcement terrified the narrator, who knew that Mozart and all Western composers had been banned for years. Then Luo announced the title of the piece: "Mozart is Thinking of Chairmen Mao." The scene ended with the headman and Luo agreeing that "Mozart thinks of Mao all the time."<sup>12</sup> As Dai shows, the most extreme excesses of Mao worship occurred in the countryside.

After this incident, the boys speculated on Mao's real motive for launching the Cultural Revolution. They settled upon his hatred of intellectuals as a key factor, while they also discuss his "ploy to get rid of the red guards who were slipping out of his grasp."<sup>13</sup> As

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students explore these ideas in other sources, they will find much support for Dai's interpretation. According to some estimates, the heaviest loss of life during the Cultural Revolution came from the PLA suppression of the Red Guard Movement in 1968.<sup>14</sup> Like many Marxists, Mao's hatred of intellectuals was ironic, since he, himself, was a product of the intellectual ferment of the early twentieth century. He had studied classical Chinese poetry. Yet, he expressed his suspicion of intellectuals in the early reforms of the 1950s. In a speech at Chengdu in 1957, Mao lamented that, "... Marxists are afraid of bourgeois intellectuals . . . not of imperialism but of professors . . . that's strange. I think this kind of mentality is also a remnant from the slave system of 'Thank God for his great blessings.' I don't think that one can stand it any longer."<sup>15</sup>

At about the same time, Mao formulated the theory of intellectuals' learning from the peasants, a reversal of Confucian teachings that he put into practice to its fullest extent during the Cultural Revolution. In 1957 Mao had written: "Give everybody a few sheets of paper to write down some folk songs; get some people to write for laboring peasants who cannot write . . . It won't consume much labor and makes one feel more comfortable than reading poems by Tu Fu and Li Po."<sup>16</sup>

In *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, a third "class enemy" sent for re-education exemplifies the theme of "learning from the peasants." It is Four-Eyes' attempt to comply with Mao's request to "write down some folk songs" that provides one of the most darkly humorous incidents in the novel. In return for her son's successful pursuit of authentic folk songs, Four-Eyes' mother, a noted poet, received a promise of his release. Because of his timid nature, Four-Eyes promised to share his stash of Western novels with the narrator and Luo, who take on the assignment of interviewing a crusty old miller with garbled speech, whose lodgings are infested with lice. After a night of drinking, and scratching, the old man produced the following "authentic folk song:"

Tell me/ An old louse/ What does it fear?/ It fears boiling water.  
And the young nun/ tell me/ What does she fear?/ She fears the old monk/ No more and no less.

Angrily, Four Eyes saved himself by revising the lyrics:

Tell me/ Little bourgeois lice/ What do they fear?/ They fear the boiling wave of the proletariat.<sup>17</sup>

As students read other accounts of the Cultural Revolution, they may conclude that Dai's portrayal of this slavish adherence to the party line is hardly exaggerated.

While the novel provides yet another picture of the plight of intellectuals, it also offers a powerful repudiation of Mao's rhetoric about the peasants as the most deserving of Socialism's benefits. The peasants of Phoenix of the Sky, converted from opium growers to poor peasants by the regime, labor like "coolies" or "beasts of burden" in the copper and coal mines.<sup>18</sup> All, including the privileged few, lack a rudimentary education or basic health care. Consistent with other accounts of peasant life before and during the Cultural Revolution, Dai's novel shows that the villages did not share equally in the fruits of the CCP state. Peasant incomes remained about the

same, but the CCP leadership continued to drain profits from the countryside to benefit urban industries. As suggested in *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, the state tightened its economic control over farming areas during the Cultural Revolution, often leaving villagers more impoverished. For example, private plots, which had grown to fifteen percent of cultivated land, were now limited to five percent.<sup>19</sup>

The plot of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* turns upon the last two themes, the complex image of the West in twentieth-century China and the effects of totalitarianism on young people who have known nothing else. For Mao, the Korean War had reaffirmed the threat of Western imperialism that had spurred the end of the Confucian system early in the century. In the novel, Dai's protagonists are the heirs of those reformers who considered the West a model of freedom and progress. As the boys read their way through Four-Eyes' suitcase of Balzac and other Western classics, the books provided models of free will and individual action in a hostile environment. Regretting that all books were banned except those by "Mao and his cronies, the boys began by reviewing the titles, mysterious and exotic names that evoked unknown worlds."<sup>20</sup> Determined to commit an act of free will, the boys decided ironically to direct their own re-education of one of the peasants, the beautiful daughter of the local tailor. In the final irony of the book, the consequence of their effort foreshadows the reforms that follow the Cultural Revolution. As Mark Twain used satire to illuminate the evils of the American slavery system, Dai Sijie's satirical work exposes the bizarre and inhumane excesses of Mao's Cultural Revolution.

## CONCLUSION

By focusing on government, our students can explore the potential in China for the compatibility of democratization with an authoritarian tradition shaped by both Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism. Like many non-Western societies, China developed a twentieth century nationalist movement inspired by a desire to stand up to the West. In developing these movements, most of these societies, China included, looked to a variety of Western models, including constitutional government, Marxism-Leninism, and fascism. In the postwar period, such "Confucian democracies" as Japan and South Korea have adopted constitutional government. As the students prepare for their simulation, they will study the economic freedoms, legal reforms, and electoral reforms of the Deng Xiaoping era and beyond. While China's leaders see her economic and political strength increase, they become increasingly dependent on external partners and non-governmental actors. It will be important for our students to weigh the pressures for CCP leaders to democratize against the perceived internal and external threats that threaten repression. ■

## NOTES

1. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China* (New York: McGraw Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 1988), 51.
2. Quoted in Ebrey, ed., *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 21.

3. Quoted in De Bary and Lufrano, *Sources of Chinese Tradition from 1600 Through the Twentieth Century, Volume II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 458.
4. *Ibid.*, 461.
5. *Ibid.*, 513-514.
6. Web site: <http://www.afe.easia.columbia.edu>. Search "May Fourth Movement" or "History, 1800-Present" (proceed to Chinese Teaching Units and then to May Fourth Movement).
7. Lu, Xianyi, and Yang, trans. *The Complete Stories of Lu Xun*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Beijing Foreign Language Press, 1981, ix.
8. Ebrey, 341.
9. Web site: <http://www.afe.easia.columbia.edu>.
10. Nathan, "The Tiananmen Papers," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February, 2001), 2-11.
11. Dai, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 3.
12. *Ibid.*, 6.
13. *Ibid.*, 7.
14. Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 354.
15. Quoted in MacFarquhar's *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Volume II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 40.
16. MacFarquhar, 41.
17. Dai, 74.
18. Dai, 12.
19. Meisner, 357.
20. Dai, 51.

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