Telling Stories About Lives

The Uses of Biography in Teaching Chinese History

By John E. Wills Jr.

In every part of Asia and the rest of the world, we teach about transmitters and transformers of traditions, themes, customs, practices, and powers.[1] In the process, we have told stories, and many of them have been stories of individual human lives. Listeners have hung on their words, saying, "What happened next?"—thrilled with bold, clever heroes and heroines, while gnashing their teeth at villains and tyrants. Some of these stories were about gods and goddesses or others who had supernatural powers but might behave all too humanly. Listeners could identify with others who had ordinary origins, parents, spouses, and children.

We historians also tell such stories. We find that they catch the interest of students, give them powerful examples of general points we are making, and engage their moral imaginations. This is very easy to see in the teaching of Chinese history. I learned a lot from doing it for many years, especially a one-semester survey of all Chinese history—300 years per week—and that teaching led to a book of which I am very proud.[2]

A biographical approach is obviously more apt for Chinese history than for some other Asian and other national/cultural histories. Chinese understandings of ultimate reality, High Heaven, the Lord on High, and even Boddhisattvas and Daoist deities are seldom or never shown as having intentions and actions far beyond but still comparable to those of humans. One of the deepest Chinese metaphors for ultimate reality is the nameless, impersonal *dao* (Way). Ancestors of family, clan, and dynasty are entirely human. A central theme in traditional political values was the ruler-minister relation in which both appear as mortal and fallible humans in a complex moral interdependency.

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Confucius Monument in Rizal Park, Manila, Philippines.
Source: Photo by Elmer B. Domingo. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via *Wikimedia Commons* at http://tinyurl.com/q6slml5.

The ruler must strive to develop talent and integrity in young men, select them for office, give them real responsibilities, and listen to their proposals and protests even when it is painful to do so. Ministers must work for the good of the common people, keep the ruler and higher officials informed, and remonstrate against evil policies even at the risk of their lives.[3] These relations take up most of the premodern chapters of my *Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History*, which at least occasionally gets past the limitations of biographies of the famous and infamous by showing patterns that shaped large numbers of lives—gender roles, family ties, lifelong quests for political involvement against the terrible odds of the examination system—and by exploring the contexts of social and economic change within which rulers and ministers shaped government policies. In the remainder of this essay, I reflect on what some of the individuals included in *Mountain of Fame* taught me and can perhaps teach others, and offer two classroom assignments I created and used that were extensions of the book.

Several of my chapters (especially Confucuis) stand out in my experience for their human depth and moral power. Where else in the world's great teachings do we find a teacher/prophet recalling the stages of his progress since he set his heart on study at the age of fifteen, or mourning that "Great indeed is my decline! For a long time now I have not dreamed of the Duke of Zhou." Where else do we find so much striving for learning from history and for the ethical improvement of politics? We are all like the disciple Yan Hui, who noted that the Master was "good at leading one on step by step," but found that his Way "seems to rise sheer above me and I have no way of going after it, however much I may want to."

Portrait of Sima Qian.
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at http://tinyurl.com/ohon38u.

China's greatest historian**,** Sima Qian, was a teller of astonishingly vivid lives and stories, and also the first and greatest shaper of the form that became standard for Chinese dynastic histories, a form that does not impose a single narrative line but finds room for several perspectives on great changes in a way that led one of my distinguished colleagues to call him the first postmodern.

Portrait of Su Dongpo.
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at http://tinyurl.com/pfsp9ah.

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He also was, as a court historian, a participant in and victim of the last phase under Emperor Wu (reigned 141–87 BCE) of the Han Dynasty of a long transformation that produced the extremely long-lived and powerful structures of a single-centered Chinese empire. That periodization still is overshadowed in the teaching and writing of many historians, sometimes including this one, by the rise and fall of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), but isn't it wonderful to be able to discuss with our students both big changes and what it can mean to be a historian?

As I was working on the course and then on the book, my colleague Charlotte Furth reminded me that it would not be right to have the Empress Wu (r. 690–705), demonized by traditional historians and unquestionably a tough ruler, as the only female in the book. I am sure that others will be able to do better than I have in resisting the gender bias of the sources and the tradition. I learned a great deal from including the great court lady Ban Zhao (ca. 48–120) in my book, partly because I hadn't read and thought enough about her times. The ways she made the most of her role as senior court lady, teacher of the younger women, and adviser of rulers, and the sharp voice that comes through in her few surviving texts, are remarkably instructive and moving.

In Buddhist teaching, selfhood is an illusion to be overcome on the way to the dissolution and non-rebirth of Nirvana. So why does the great patriarch Huineng (638–713) in his final synthetic teaching to his disciples tell his own life story? Because he sensed that key moments when he heard a text chanted or saw someone else's writing on a wall were predestined, the workings of the undivided Buddha mind instructing him and leading him on.

Drawing of Ban Zhao. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at http://tinyurl.com/nr2qf5v.

I still want to have dinner with Song period official, calligrapher, and poet Su Dongpo (1037–1101), and ask him to dash off a four-line poem for me, as he did for so many friends. My chapter on him is my fullest introduction to the central role of literary production and memorization from before Confucius to the twentieth century. In his poems, we can see a landscape or wake up at night on a moored boat and hear a fish splashing away or know the fear of death when on the wrong side of politics. For, again, a life gives us a cross-section of a great transformation, as young men from distant provinces (Su was from Sichuan) are drawn into the Imperial service by examinations and then become part of the puzzle of what the shape and values of a newly reunited and enlarged Imperial realm might be. I'm not so sure about having dinner with Ming Dynasty Era general, statesman, and neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529)—the range of topics of conversation would be narrower and the moral intensity not soothing—but if I were in trouble and needing new strength, as he was, I would welcome him as a visitor to my prison cell.

Portrait of the young Qianlong Emperor by Guiseppe Castiglione.
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at http://tinyurl.com/oc6bo4x.

As we get closer to modern times, we have more and more sources and approaches. One of my chapters may be a useful piece of a course reader, in combination with other approaches to a period or theme. I sometimes made more of the times than of the life, especially for the Qianlong Emperor (1711–1799). If you're teaching about the People's Republic, my chapter on Mao Zedong (1893–1976) will have its uses, especially in reminding readers of the number of themes and stories from earlier in the book that were vital clues to the attitudes of Mao and many of his generation, but the quotes from "Serve the People" and the too-well-known basic chronology of big changes will be available to students from other texts as well. The afterword to the new printing of *Mountain of Fame* is no substitute for a broad range of readings about China today, but links it back—in the person of Chinese historian and environmental activist Liang Congjie, grandson of scholar and reformer Liang Qichao (1873–1929)—to

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great themes of the love of nature and the earnestness of young men from the provinces seeking to be part of a proper moral government. It is also a remarkable interlude in the 1930s when Liang Congjie's father, architectural historian Liang Sicheng, and his mother were great friends of China historian John Fairbank, who would be my doctoral mentor at Harvard, and his wife, Wilma.[4]

I continued to teach the biography-centered Chinese history survey course in many semesters until I retired in 2004. Some writing assignments called for close reading and comparison on a particular theme and were not very closely tied to stories of lives. One form of written final assignment required comparison of three of the lives we had discussed. These could be very lively, especially when students from USC's world-class cinema school got involved. Sometimes we took a class hour to witness a dramatized confrontation; from one hour, it was of course Empress Wu who emerged from the locked room with the smoking gun. But in a few of the last offerings of the class, I tried the following different, and maybe even better, final assignment:

> **Not over 1,500 words.** This is an assignment in historical synthesis and imagination, not research. Use what you've learned from readings and class sessions. Don't go looking for other readings. Your assignment is to write an imaginary letter or transcript of a conversation in which an aging Chinese adult tells a grandchild, other young relative, student, or disciple some of the most important things about his or her life in the previous eighty years. You may imagine this taking place at any time in Chinese history. Main themes may include how the person earned a living, a revolution or other upheaval experienced, relations within the family and between the sexes, religious convictions and experiences, and much more.
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> **So what are we looking for?**
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> 1) Real **imaginative engagement** with what it was like to think certain thoughts, hold certain values, and live through certain changes
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> 2) Attention to **continuity and change** through a couple of generations (about eighty years)
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> 3) Attention to **contexts** of wider changes, institutions
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> 4) Evidence that once you found a project that engaged you, you **went back to your readings and class notes** and looked for specific quotes, facts, and ideas that would enrich your picture of an imagined life
>
> 5) Do **not** use a figure who is the subject of a chapter or a part of a chapter in Wills, *Mountain of Fame*. But you might use one as a takeoff point for imagining the life of a poor monk, a struggling student, an elite wife and mother, or whatever.

A real strength of this assignment was that it made it much easier for the student to choose a non-elite life. Colleagues with better social history reading lists than I ever had could make even better use of it. Whatever Asia you teach, think about the power of biography for understanding and interacting with an Asia where everyone is talking about Xi, Abe, Modi, Jokowi, and more, and for keeping our ears open for stories of the enormous life transformations experienced by ordinary people in every Asian society. ■

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NOTES

1. This is a brief essay about a powerful kind of teaching for a journal with "education" in its title. No longer regularly in the classroom, I find that teaching taught me a lot. Teaching always is value-laden. We want to engage the moral imaginations of our students. Trying to explain this to ourselves, our colleagues, and the apprentice teachers many of us mentor can lead into discussions that seem a long way from the survey classroom. Not too long before *Mountain of Fame* was published, I summarized some of the relevant literature in an article, "Lives and Other Stories: Neglected Aspects of the Teacher's Art," *The History Teacher* 26, no. 1 (1992): 33–49. Later, I found much of value for the understanding of our work as writers and teachers of history in the work of some important and lucid modern philosophers; see my "Putnam, Dennett, and Others: Philosophical Resources for the World Historian," *Journal of World History* 20, no. 4 (2009): 491–522, and my review article on John Searle, "Making the Social World," *Journal of World History* 22, no. 4 (2011): 811–816. In teaching and writing about other parts of Asia and even the world, I found that stories about lives are especially powerful in teaching about great transforming religious teachers—the Hindu Sri Krishna Caitanya, the Sikh founder Guru Nanak, and even Martin Luther; see Wills, chapter 3, *The World from 1450 to 1700* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Most of us hang out in history departments, and this might be a good conversation starter. Ask a US history colleague what he or she makes of the life of Benjamin Franklin or Harriet Tubman.
2. John E. Wills Jr., *Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012, first published in 1994).
3. Anita Andrews and Robert André LaFleur, "Remonstrance: The Moral Imperative of the Chinese Scholar-Official," *Education About Asia* 19, no. 2 (2014): 5–8.
4. The story is better and richer than my few pages; I had forgotten about Wilma Fairbank's wonderful memoir, *Liang and Lin: Partners in Exploring China's Architectural Past* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).