*Social Education* 74(1), pp 12–16


# What I Wish My College Students Already Knew about PRC History

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Different generations of Americans understand China quite differently. This, of course, is true of many topics. However, the turbulence of Chinese history and U.S.-China relations in the 60 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 has deepened the gaps in generational thinking about China.[1] If you came of age in the America of the 1950s and 1960s, you remember when China seemed like North Korea does today—isolated, aggressive, the land of "brain washing." If you first learned about China in the 1970s, then perhaps, like me, you had teachers who were inspired by Maoist rhetoric and believed young people could break out of the old culture of self-interest and lead the world to a more compassionate future. The disillusion that came with more accurate understanding of the tragedies of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution led some of us to try to understand China more fully. Many of my college-age students, though, seem to have dismissed most PRC history as just another part of the bizarre failed story of world Communism. For current secondary students, the spectacle of the 2008 Olympics and the skyline of bustling Shanghai may make both Mao and the 1989 Tiananmen Square violence seem irrelevant to today's China.

These students will encounter disparate views of China among various generations of Chinese and American observers. That poses a challenge to teachers. To help students integrate the disparate accounts, we must teach them to understand the radical transformations that have marked the 60-year history of the PRC. I know that, with a crowded curriculum, secondary teachers will not have time to delve into the fascinating details of post-1949 Chinese history, as I do. But, setting aside its intrinsic interest to students of the "human condition," China is increasingly important in the lives of Americans and deserves considerably more attention in K-12 education than it usually receives. If I could shape the secondary curriculum on PRC history, I would stress the following five main themes. I've marked in bold the key events, people, and terms I would want students to know about.

(1) *The significance of Maoism.* Maoist ideas, no matter how firmly they appear to have landed in the dustbin of history, had a tremendous appeal to many people in China and abroad.

In 2005, Knopf published *Mao: The Unknown Story* by Jung Chang (author of the bestseller *Wild Swans*, Simon & Schuster, 1991) and her husband, Jon Halliday. The authors argue that **Mao Zedong** (1893-1976) was an evil man and his regime was as bad or worse than Hitler's Germany or Stalin's USSR. While that is an interesting topic for debate, the book makes no attempt to explain why the Maoist message was so powerful. Ironically, *Wild Swans* demonstrates the attraction of Maoist ideology very well in the case of Chang's parents, who joined the **Chinese Communist Party** before 1949 because they believed its message of discipline and "power to the people" could unify the country, defeat the Japanese invaders, and sweep out the weak, corrupt **Nationalist** government.

Like *Wild Swans*, other memoirs of the **Red Guard** generation explore why children born after the Communist **"Liberation"** of China in 1949 put such faith in Mao and his ideas.[2] Certainly the **cult of personality** played a major role. The education system relentlessly drove home the message that Chairman Mao was the source of all China's blessings. But through vivid stories like "The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountain," Maoism also inspired people with a sense that they could change the world, an irresistibly attractive idea to young people.[3] Even as it seemed to empower people, however, Maoism elevated self-sacrifice on behalf of the masses to the position of supreme virtue. That message enabled Mao and the **Gang of Four** to induce 12 million Red Guards to volunteer to leave the cities for hard labor in the countryside, once these young people had helped overthrow Mao's political adversaries in the **Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.** The usefulness of the message of sacrifice for the people is one reason why, in 1981, the Communist Party officially determined that Mao's policies after 1949 had been 70 percent correct and 30 percent incorrect, maintaining **Mao Zedong Thought** as a pillar of Party rule even as it repudiated the Cultural Revolution.

The 70-30 judgment remains the official PRC verdict on Mao's contributions as leader. Openly challenging it is forbidden. The bloody crackdown that ended the **1989 Tiananmen Square** protests underlined the Party's determination to resist political liberalization. However, the number of people from all over China who visit Mao's mausoleum in **Tiananmen Square** suggests that many continue to respect and admire Mao and the Communist revolution he led. Few of Mao's writings are required reading anymore, but rising income inequality in post-Mao China is leading some people to lament the displacement of Mao's egalitarian vision.[4]

(2) *Experiments in governance.* Since 1949, PRC leaders have experimented with different ways of organizing the government and giving ordinary people a role in it. Most striking, recently, have been the growth in the size of the Communist Party and the security apparatus since 1989, and the growing sophistication with which the state controls dissent.

Maoist **mass campaigns** such as the **Great Leap Forward** (1958-61) and Cultural Revolution (1966-76) were inspired, in part, by an awareness of the dangers of entrenched and unresponsive bureaucracy, a concern that had been part of Chinese political thought ever since centralized bureaucracy was invented in the Qin period (221-206 BCE). Mao's speeches include many warnings against "bureaucratism" and calls for the Party to learn from the people and develop policy in accord with the **mass line**. Urging officials to get "close to the people" and rewarding those who did was considered preferable to the "bourgeois democracy" of the U.S., where—Chinese were taught—a small group of wealthy men controlled who got elected.

Political leaders in the post-Mao era still struggle with how to control the bureaucracy and keep the people (all 1.3 billion of them) relatively satisfied. In an era of economic decentralization and volatility, appointed officials at all levels of government have a great deal of power, and many are accused of corruption.[5]


This statue of Mao Zedong in Lijiang, Yunnan province, built in 1993 to commemorate Mao's 100th birthday, is one of a few still left in the country. (Tedd Levy, 2008)

Experiments with **village elections** have not convinced the Party that more formal democratic practice will serve its main goals: maintenance of stability and its own hold on power. Some journalists and lawyers have begun publicizing cases of official abuse and corruption, but the legal system does not guarantee their safety if their targets are sufficiently well connected.

The frequency of popular protest against local governments both on the ground and on the Internet has risen rapidly since the late 1990s, but so too has the state's capacity to monitor protest and nip it in the bud by identifying and denouncing convenient scapegoats, arresting "ringleaders," and subjecting participants to intimidating police interviews.[6] The Communist Party has loosened its membership criteria to take in potential rivals. Membership in the Party no longer requires a commitment to Marxism or Maoism; instead, it promises access to economic and political opportunities. Current membership is over 70 million. In a move that should have made Mao roll over in his crystal sarcophagus, the government has revived **Confucian discourse**, in

which Chinese are encouraged, not to carry out **class struggle**, but to build a **harmonious society** that it promises will be superior to litigious, contentious "Western" society.[7]

(3) *Economic development.* The economic boom of the past 30 years has been built on a combination of supportive government policy and entrepreneurship among millions of Chinese. How long it can continue at its recent pace is an open question. Some think the size of China's domestic market will insulate it from global economic downturns. Others stress China's integration in and vulnerability to world markets. Still others point to fundamental problems in an economy in which political connections play a large role and income inequality is growing.

When the Communist Party came to power in 1949, the Chinese economy had been crippled by years of warfare and a severely inflated currency. The **Land Reform** it immediately carried out was effective although often very brutal. Following Soviet practice, the Party began the **collectivization** of agriculture and **nationalization** of industry and trade in the 1950s. The Great Leap Forward saw the Party parting ways with the **USSR**. Mao called for the creation of large-scale **communes** in which private property was largely abolished and labor allocated by plan. This, he believed, would release the energies of the masses and allow the Chinese economy to zoom ahead. Instead, poor planning caused in part by excessive exuberance and politically influenced statistics led to a **great famine** and the deaths of tens of millions.

The economy recovered in the 1960s as authority within the communes was decentralized and targets for growth became more realistic. By the 1970s, many farmers had opted out of collectivized farming altogether, striking bargains with the commune leadership that left them free to manage land as they wished. After Mao died in 1976, his successor **Deng Xiaoping** (1904-1997) promulgated the **"responsibility system"** that legalized the sort of contractual arrangements already in use in the countryside. In industry, township and village enterprises (**TVEs**) also shifted from collective to contractual management, and China's industrial boom was launched.[8] The percentage of GDP credited to state-owned enterprises (**SOEs**) has declined ever since. In the 1990s, **joint ventures** with foreign companies became numerous, and in 2001 China joined the World Trade Organization (**WTO**). The adoption in 1979 of the

## Tensions in U.S.-PRC Relations: Human Rights and Taiwan

Given China's tremendous economic clout, when Chinese leaders talk to their counterparts around the world these days, such topics as trade imbalances, currency valuation, labor standards, product safety, intellectual property rights, and industrial pollution are often on the top of the agenda. Particularly in the case of U.S.-PRC relations, however, two other issues have always been significant sources of friction: China's human rights record and the status of Taiwan. Students may be aware that the U.S. and Chinese governments differ on these issues, but are often not familiar with the facts.

Americans' sensitivity to human rights around the world derives in part from the belief that the United States has set a world standard for rule of law that ought to be promoted everywhere. In addition, many Americans take a keen interest in the welfare of people in countries to which they trace their heritage, as well as that of fellow religious believers around the world. In the case of China, before normalization of relations in the 1970s, the oppression of Christians in the Maoist era and practice of "thought reform" (a technique for re-educating offenders that was dubbed "brainwashing" by the American media) shaped Americans' conception of China as a totalitarian regime. Deng Xiaoping's reforms of the 1980s created a more open society, but the 1989 crackdown on protesters in Beijing and other cities put human rights back in the spotlight. Many prominent Chinese dissidents moved to the United States and, in conjunction with human rights NGOs (non-governmental organizations), lobbied the Congress to impose sanctions on the Chinese government until it accepts international human rights standards.

In the early 1990s, extension of Most Favored Nation trading status by the United States to China was tied to improvement in China's human rights record, resulting in rancorous annual debates about the direction of political reform in China. President Clinton delinked the two issues in 1994, but the U.S. State Department continues to issue annual reports that highlight human rights abuses in China. Since 1998, the Chinese government has issued its own reports on U.S. human rights abuses, citing poverty, racial tensions, high crime and incarceration rates, and the invasion of Iraq, among other problems.

The Chinese government continues to maintain tight control over the media and has increased its monitoring of the Internet. It suppresses any attempts at political or religious organization outside of Communist Party channels. In December 2008, more than 300 Chinese academics and professionals issued a statement on the need for political reform that they called Charter 08, in reference to Czechoslovakia's Charter 77. Over the next few weeks, thousands more citizens from all walks of life expressed their support for the document over the Internet. One of the drafters of the statement, Liu Xiaobo, was arrested soon after, and has been indicted on charges of inciting subversion of state power.

Such prominent political cases will continue to cause tension in relations between the United States and China. Less visible cooperation in human rights work is also ongoing, however. The American Bar Association runs training sessions for lawyers in Beijing, for example, and exchanges between police departments in China and the United States to study "best practices" in law enforcement are common. Still, it is clear that strong disagree-

**one child policy**, an attempt to curb population growth, reminds us that **central planning** continues in China and extends into areas that Americans consider within the realm of private decision making.

(4) *Conformity and diversity.* Up through the 1970s, one of the government's main goals was to unify—even to homogenize—the People of the People's Republic (otherwise known as **"the masses"**). Gender and cultural differences were seen as obstacles in the path of the revolution. Now, most expressions of gender and cultural difference are no longer politically dangerous. Indeed, cultural diversity is often celebrated by the state, in part to demonstrate its tolerance as China rejoins the world, but also for commercial ends.

Since 1949, gender equality has been a central tenet of Communist policy. The **1950 Marriage Law** gave women and men equal rights in marriage and divorce. Old customs that subordinated women to men were not eradicated immediately, but, by the 1960s, many urban girls had embraced the message that they could be just as revolutionary as boys. The Cultural Revolution's attacks on **feudal** (old-style Chinese) and bourgeois (Euro-American influenced) cultures led people to adopt a uniform "revolutionary" style that minimized gender difference.

Similar pressures for unity and homogeneity affected religious believers in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the PRC Constitution proclaimed that all Chinese enjoyed the right to practice their religions and ethnic customs, Christianity and Buddhism had become subject to severe regulation by the early 1950s. In 1959, the **Dalai Lama** decided to flee to India because of Communist intervention in **Tibetan** communities. During the late 1960s, Red Guards destroyed houses of worship and attacked people who clung to their religion and other "feudal" cultural practices.

Religious practice has revived since 1976, but remains a sensitive issue. In the 1990s, the Buddhist-inspired **Falun Gong** movement grew to the point that the state perceived it as a threat and banned it. Islamic communities of ethnic **Uyghurs** in the northwest region of **Xinjiang** are closely monitored for possible separatist activity. Other ethnic groups, however, are encouraged to use their distinctive cultures to stimulate economic development. Southwest **Yunnan** province, home to 25 of the officially designated 55 **national minority** cultures, is a magnet for Chinese and foreign tourists.

ments about the definition of "human rights" exist between China and the United States, and are not likely to go away soon.[1]

The same is true of tensions over the status of Taiwan. When Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Republic of China, retreated to the island of Taiwan in the face of the Communist victory on mainland China in 1949, he claimed it would only be a matter of time before his government returned to rule over a unified China. Until the 1970s, the United States recognized Chiang's regime as the legitimate government of all of China, despite the reality of an increasingly entrenched People's Republic of China on the mainland. When Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter negotiated the terms of U.S. recognition of the PRC, the status of Taiwan was the major sticking point. Ultimately, in the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, the U.S. side produced a formulation of its position that still stands: the United States recognizes that there is only one China and that the status of Taiwan is undetermined but must be resolved via peaceful means.[2]

While the PRC continues to maintain that Taiwan is an integral part of China, political liberalization in Taiwan since the 1980s has led to the rise of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which at times has called for Taiwan's independence. While its leader was president of Taiwan, between 2000 and 2008, the DPP moderated its stance relative to the PRC, but in spring 2008 its candidate lost the presidency to Ma Ying-jeou, the leader of the Kuomintang (KMT or Nationalist) party. The KMT, like its former leader Chiang Kai-shek, does not want to sever the connection with China. This makes it more acceptable to the PRC. However, the relationship between a KMT-ruled Taiwan and a Communist-ruled PRC is still extremely complicated and, due to its history of support for Taiwan, the United States is intimately involved in it. The PRC is quick to condemn what it sees as "outside interference" whenever the United States sells weapons to Taiwan or Taiwanese leaders are invited to participate in international organizations.

As with so many other facets of China's position in the wider world, economic growth has changed the relationship with Taiwan. Taiwanese businesses are encouraged to invest in the mainland, and their common language and culture give them certain advantages over other outside investors. The economic ties between the two entities are strong and growing, with the result that many people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait have no desire to upset the status quo. Regular direct flights between Taiwanese and mainland cities were established in 2008 for the first time since 1949. In volatile times, however, the anomalous status of Taiwan in the international order may once again create a crisis in PRC-U.S. relations.

**Notes**

1. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China maintains a rich website on U.S.-China relations, including much material on human rights and rule of law issues: www.cecc.gov/. For Chinese views on the relationship with the United States, see the website of the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C.: www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgx/.
2. Shirley A. Kan, of the Congressional Research Service, has produced a detailed summary of the evolution of relations between the United States, Taiwan, and the PRC: www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30341.pdf.

## Class Activity

Students should consider the questions: Throughout history, have strong leaders done more harm than good? What characteristics of strong leaders most influence their followers?

Both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping are mentioned in this article. Which was the more transformative figure in the twentieth century? Using evidence from the article and other sources, students can develop their own perspectives and debate the question in class.

*—Patience Berkman*

Tourism has boomed in the 30 years since Deng Xiaoping opened China to foreign investment and encouraged people to "get rich." The period of opening and reform has also seen a sea change in ideas about gender and sexuality. Although Deng certainly did not intend it, a sexual revolution has accompanied the economic boom. Liberated youth feel free to display their sexuality as they choose and even to capitalize on it. Tell-all memoirs and blogs, many written by unmarried young women, have gained a wide audience.[9]

(5) *China's foreign relations and global impact.* Most Chinese, like most Americans, don't spend much time considering their nation's role in the world. The end of the international isolation of the 1960s and 1970s was welcomed, particularly by those who saw study abroad or foreign investment as a way to develop their talents and enterprises. However, many young Chinese have embraced the idea that China has been a victim of the international system since the **Opium War** of 1840. They resent any foreign criticism of Chinese policy on such issues as Tibet and Darfur.

The PRC's foreign policy began with "**leaning to one side**" to join the **Socialist Bloc** in 1949 and sending a million "volunteer" soldiers against what it saw as American imperialism in the **Korean War** (1950-53). Foreign Minister **Zhou Enlai** (1898-1976) declared China's sympathy with the **Non-Aligned Movement** of the mid-1950s. However, the **Sino-Soviet split**, a border war with **India**, and the Cultural Revolution isolated China in the 1960s. In the early 1970s, Mao decided to begin a rapprochement with the Americans, who were desperate to end the war in **Vietnam** and hoped a relationship with China could help. Deng Xiaoping greatly expanded Mao's opening to the outside world for purposes of economic development. The PRC leadership since Deng has explored new ways to involve China in international affairs, including becoming more active in the **United Nations** and other international bodies. The PRC's involvement in world events is complicated, however, by the nationalist sentiments it has encouraged among its citizens, particularly in regard to **Japan**, which is demonized in Chinese media for its actions in World War II.

The PRC's influence in the world can be felt in many ways besides politics. China's rapid industrialization has resulted in **environmental problems** on an unprecedented scale. Many extend well beyond China's borders. On the other hand, **green technologies** being developed in China are spreading throughout the world, as well. China's dynamism and talent have attracted the attention of the world's entrepreneurs, art investors, architects, basketball coaches, and fashion designers. Global activists are also increasingly attentive to China's potential impact on **international law** and **human rights** standards. Through hundreds of new **Confucius Institutes**, the Chinese government is bringing the Chinese language and culture to people across the globe.

These five themes—the significance of Maoism, experiments in governance, economic development, conformity and diversity, and China's foreign relations and global impact—can form the basis of a stimulating week-long or year-long (life-long?) lesson plan. Take up the challenge! For good or for ill, China is shaking our world, and American students should be learning about it.[10]

### Notes

1. For a marvelous assessment of impressions of China among earlier generations of Americans see Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (New York: John Day Co., 1958; new editions in 1972 and 1980).
2. Excellent material on the Cultural Revolution is available at a website that accompanies the documentary film *Morning Sun* (Carma Hinton, *et al*, dir., 2003): www.morningsun.org.
3. One of the best scholarly analyses of the appeal of the Maoist message is Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
4. A convenient edition of Mao texts that includes discussions of their reception at various times in the history of the PRC is Timothy Cheek, *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).
5. Many horrifying stories of official abuse are related in Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, *Will the Boat Sink the Water?: The Life of China's Peasants* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).
6. The website chinadigitaltimes.net/, a project of the University of California at Berkeley, is a good source for information on popular protest and the authorities' handling of it, along with other issues in contemporary China.
7. On the Confucian revival, see Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).
8. On the early reform period see Cheng Li, *Rediscovering China: Dynamics and Dilemmas of Reform* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).
9. A glimpse into both the commercialization of ethnic culture and the freeing up of sexual mores is provided in the memoir of Yang Erche Namu, a pop star from the Mosuo ethnic group. See *Leaving Mother Lake: A Girlhood at the Edge of the World* (written with Christine Mathieu; Boston: Back Bay Books, 2004).
10. In addition to sources listed in the notes above, excellent material on the history of the PRC can be found in the Association for Asian Studies journal *Education About Asia*, on the website Asia for Educators (afe.easia.columbia.edu), in the China Beat blog (thechinabeat.blogspot.com), and in Edward Vernoff and Peter J. Seybolt, eds. *Through Chinese Eyes: Tradition, Revolution and Transformation* (New York: Center for International Training & Education, 2007).

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