

## **Border Pedagogy in American Schooling: Reflections on China Pedagogy in Cultural Studies**

Xinmin Liu  
University of Pittsburgh

### **Abstract**

When debating whether cultural studies has exhausted its use, we tend to overlook its pivotal role in critical pedagogies for teaching difference at school. Chinese Studies in American colleges and schools offers a case of reading personal memoirs of China's traumatic pasts as if they were authentications of Chinese history. Disregarding the hidden teleological end of these personalized narratives, some educators in the U.S. use instructional games and films adapted from such a narrative mode to teach other cultures, but represent the latter's difference as deficient, deviating or lacking, which in turn alludes to itself as the "penultimate form" of democracy. By espousing a critical "border pedagogy," humanist educators can resist the end-of-history mindset and move toward more dialectic and reciprocating strategies for teaching difference.

### **Keywords**

border pedagogy, cultural studies, difference, dissent, narrative end,  
cross-cultural simulation, teleology

The quarrel between literature (much as history, sociology and feminist studies) on the one hand and cultural studies on the other over claims to privileged turf in the academy is wearing the patience of most of us thin; yet, the debate as to where the one discipline ends and the other begins seems going hardly anywhere any time soon. For literary scholars, it is I believe all but senseless and unrewarding to mount a self-defense by way of a withdrawal into traditional poetics and aesthetics—the realm of “intrinsic” literary values—that was once their rigidly defined enclave. For practitioners of cultural studies, likewise, it is just as baseless and falsifying to accuse literary scholars sweepingly of wanting to regress to a purist’s connoisseurship of literary values behind the walls of the ivory tower, and of failing to engage squarely with issues of social and economic urgency, or to get involved in ongoing political and cultural movements against social ills that beset our era. In order for both academic fields to align with each other and co-inhabit a wide reach of unmapped grounds and untried possibilities, we should each avoid accusing the other of coming to the defense of extreme positions on either end of the pedagogical spectrum, barricading in such viewpoints as the elitism of the literary scholars or the radicalism of the cultural practitioners we encountered above. We should each seek out in the other shared concerns, interests and solutions rather than forging discriminatory positions of “cliquing” or “policing” disciplinary borders.

If there is common ground between teaching China in U.S. schools and cultural studies at the college level, it is primarily in the pedagogical challenge brought on by the current global economic and cultural conditions and their shared concern to respond to it. Most of us teaching Chinese Studies in the American academy are under as much pressure for how to teach as how *not* to teach China.<sup>1</sup> In the subject matter alone, for instance, so many personal memoirs of China’s political era under Mao’s leadership have been made available in the U.S. (a trend spurred in part by the commercial gains in marketing one’s personal past) and have been used, rightly or wrongly, as proven testimonies to the history of modern China under the Chinese Communist Party. This practice is so pervasive that a student or any interested reader for that matter would be led to think that little else happened in China during those decades except brainwashing, repression and persecution, all ending in tragic loss of human lives. Given that context, to use or not to use personal memoirs as historical records for a Chinese Studies course must hinge

---

<sup>1</sup> For writings on “how not to teach China,” read, among others, the section on “How Not to Understand China: Area Studies” in Ban Wang’s “The Cold War, Imperial Aesthetics, and Area Studies.”

heavily on how one defines the educational value of such writings, which, in turn, is determined by how one defines his/her pedagogical beliefs. To approach them from the standpoint of cultural studies seems at a glance to underpin one of its vantages: since one has to traverse the boundaries of at least two disciplines, i.e., history and literature, to work on these memoirs, it would be logical and insightful for cultural studies to engage in teaching such writings in the name of “interdisciplinarity.” Yet what exactly constitutes the “border-crossing” strategy in cultural studies tends to cast us in a fuzzy and tenuous realm of meanings, and its elusive nature cannot but urge us to be on constant and critical lookout for its cultural and sociological influences. I shall return to the subject later.

What role can cultural studies play to assist a correct pedagogical choice, a choice made especially at a time when Chinese Studies stands at a crossroads of reorientation against the odds of the global consumer culture? Ironically, it is one unintended outcome of the dispute between literary and cultural studies over what I would call “the pedagogical mandate” that sheds new light on the synergism of this fractured academic alliance. To put it plainly, the two disciplines are faced with the unequivocal need of each other in order to survive their current pedagogical crises. There is a very compelling pedagogical reason for such a collaborative strategy: both academic disciplines nowadays have to face grave pedagogical odds—students today live in a world permeated with values of global capitalism and consumer culture, a culture so hegemonic and all-encompassing that, whether leaning Left or Right, they are already deeply invested in it. This has created an inescapable situation in which, no matter where his/her disciplinary loyalty lies, the humanist educator must, as Kenneth Morstern argues, always be a critical pedagogue:

The critical pedagogue is always someone who teaches from where the student is at, rather than from where the teacher is at. This does not mean that the teacher denies his/her pedagogical intention or specific expertise, but merely that s/he respects the myriad “expertise” of the students that s/he does not share. (256)

The humanist educator is thus driven by a pedagogical imperative that requires a broadened intellectual vision to encompass the students’ myriad lived experiences, an academic mobility to transgress “fixed” borders and fathom the hidden cultural and ideological linkage that governs the enticing but deceitful, multifaceted global era. In this context, the humanist educator must engage in cultural studies as pedagogical practice and with a proactive “border crossing” spirit.

He or she should, as Henry Giroux asserts, “[...] become border-crossers through their ability to not only make different narratives available to themselves and other students but also by legitimating difference as a basic condition for understanding the limits of one’s own voice” (“Resisting Difference” 206).

At issue here is Giroux’s thinking on the humanistic educator’s mandate to teach difference in a way that does not make difference invisible and ineffective under an assimilating rubric (e.g., democracy), and to constantly scrutinize the very seminal concept that propagates embracing differences in the first place; in other words, there is a need to insist on a sense of difference that contests and critiques the Eurocentric nature of democracy. Taking to task the notion of difference, Giroux sees border-crossing as a key to contesting theories of difference widely adopted and practiced in the American school system in order to introduce what he calls a “Border Pedagogy.” Giroux is indeed supportive of the diverse projects and discourses of *other* ethnicities that American schooling has encouraged and included in its curriculum in the name of multiculturalism. While seeing that as significant, however, Giroux is wary of the possibility of misusing difference to coerce and diffuse differences which retard or sidestep efforts to deepen the critical democratic project of schooling in the U.S. Back in 1992, he alerted us to the close ties between political and pedagogical campaigns on issue-oriented tactics for election maneuvers and warned the public of the fact that “as a number of countries in Eastern Europe move toward greater forms of democratization, the United States presents itself as the prototype for such reforms and leads the American people to believe that democracy in the United States has reached its penultimate form” (Grossberg 206).<sup>2</sup>

What Giroux found most unnerving at the time was the “penultimate form” of liberty and democracy that America had so far achieved and upheld for all humanity to emulate, and difference in this context was often understood to mean that all other nations or ethnicities are deficient, deviating or completely lacking as remaining in a *past* or *undeveloped* stage in a linear course of progress leading upward to where American democracy stands. The then recent events following the fall of the Berlin Wall in Eastern Europe seemed to testify to the triumph of American-style democracy over the tattered, dysfunctional socialist states the world over. The end of the Cold War era seemed to attest to American democracy as the ultimate, culminating *télos* for all other projects and theories of social betterment. To be expected, the self-fulfilling teleology of the American discourse of de-

---

<sup>2</sup> For details on the early history of cultural studies under the leadership of Raymond Williams and Stewart Hall, please consult Giroux.

mocracy soon stamped its mark on pedagogical theories. Over the past decade or so, even as American schooling expanded to include diverse narratives of other ethnicities and cultures in the name of multiculturalism, the notion of critical dialogues among diverse ethnic and cultural discourses has gradually given way to a steadily tolerated sense of a hierarchy of differences. Contrary to the core idea of democracy, a “compromised” democracy has occurred in the wake of uncontested “spreading” of liberty and development based on an infatuation with capitalistic enterprise and individual gains to the detriment of communal or public interests. This to me is what led to the opening of the floodgates for the numerous personal memoirs of political trauma and repression out of China’s Post-Mao era that have flooded the American book markets and begun to make inroads in curricula in American schools.<sup>3</sup> Expectedly, we learn that such books are usually placed high on the reading lists for “cultural studies” or “social studies” on American campuses; nonetheless we may not be aware that misuse of these texts in a class or a discussion often takes place in sites that lie beyond the borders of traditional disciplines, and it can do grave disservice to the overall perception of difference for the general public.

### Simulating Cultural Differences?

To pick up my earlier point, my interest in Giroux’s “border pedagogy” is prompted by my concern as to how *not* to teach such narratives in the disguise of teaching “difference” in the American K-12 system. In what follows, I want to discuss and contest Giroux’s pedagogical strategies by way of reflecting on my experiences during my stint as the Director of Outreach Programs in East Asian Studies in a leading American university.<sup>4</sup> At a time when the prospect of keeping the lines open for America’s own political and social dissent appears to grow dimmer by each passing day, the “mainstream” public grew benumbed to human rights issues at home and overseas by security anxiety, and the U.S. government began curtailing civil rights in the interest of homeland security since 9/11. Under these circumstances, many educational projects on ethnic awareness or multi-

---

<sup>3</sup> I hasten to add that my remark was aimed at only a few of these personal memoirs, and to avoid misinterpretation, I intend to not list all the book titles, but will focus on one or two individual works.

<sup>4</sup> I assumed this position in January 2003, a year or so after the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City.

culturalism have run aground due to cutbacks of funding and rapidly-spreading sentiments against immigrants. It seems a most favorable climate to let the self-aggrandizing notion of American democracy take over, and yield to the heady undercurrents of “ironing out” ethnic or cultural differences in favor of a one-size-fits-all democracy. It inevitably poses ever-stiffer challenge to humanist educators whose liberal pedagogy of difference now falls short of the most pivotal intervention it is expected to exercise: how to interact critically with a pedagogical politics that absorbs and disables difference, and how to construct new pedagogical borders where dissenting voices, rather than coerced solidarity, should become the intersection of ethnic and cultural differences.

Let me illustrate this point. A while ago, an American colleague emailed me about attending a Chinese poet’s inauguration of the “Poet’s House.” This is a program hosted by a local chapter of *Cities of Asylum* in America, through which poets from various countries who have sought U.S. political asylum are provided an allowance and a home for the duration of 12 months so that they can continue to write poetry.<sup>5</sup> Referring to the obvious and not-so-obvious functions of such an institution, my colleague remarked: “we are apt to provide shelter for dissidents from other countries.” The remark was made with an inimitable sense of self-mockery, but seemed to have intentionally left the real point unfinished: do Americans care much about their own dissident views? Any skeptical reply to it would likely have been deemed by many Americans and indeed many more non-Americans as unsound and baseless: how can a liberal-democratic nation like the U.S. not care to hear its own political dissidence? Yet in this changed political climate, what she meant is right on target: if Americans do care about their own dissidence, what lesson can they draw about the present state of democracy in the U.S.? The fact is we are losing focus on the presumed tolerance of dissent we have all along aspired to as the core ideal of American freedom and democracy. As I reflected on this remark, a question became clear and inevitable: if tolerance of dissent or difference is eroded in spite of all we have done with projects of ethnic awareness and multiculturalism, what fundamental flaws in our pedagogy have made this erosion possible? And which parts of our pedagogy of difference are responsible for failing to prevent it? In a flash, my thoughts homed in on an educational game, called *Heelotia*, which I had played with groups of high school students while directing the college outreach program.

---

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the same institution issued invitations to Cuban artists to participate in an art exhibit, but the Cuban artists were denied entry visas by the U.S. government, although their art works were allowed to be shipped in and displayed at the venue.

*Heelotia* is an educational game which consists of role-play suitable for school children from Grade 5 up to adults.<sup>6</sup> Designed for cross-cultural simulation, *Heelotia* presents a few close-to-life occasions in which two different cultural groups meet for the first time to find out about each other. Equipped with pre-designed rules, the two groups are able to send emissaries to each other for visits through which, it is the developers' hope, that the two groups resolve problems in and experience feelings about cross-cultural contacts. To be sure, the developers never took the designing or the subsequent playing of such simulation games *lightly*. As they indicate in the manual, good simulations, if played according to rules, "have the capacity to generate very strong thoughts and feelings in their participants" (*Heelotia* 1). I believe that they are honest and conscionable when declaring that "many of the cultural guidelines and rules for the simulation are intentionally vague so there is room for individual interpretation by the players" (*Heelotia* 7). I also find to my liking their preparedness for the complex nature of human contact, granted that these are after all simulated meetings, which prompts them to urge simulation facilitators to be prepared for the possibility that strong reactions occur during the role-play game, and that these might lead individual players to misconceptions about the other culture. However, in the two sessions I personally led, what surprised me was precisely the predictable outcome of each simulation: the behavior of the student players was often playful and even caricatured, and the lesson learned was invariably nothing more than a mere *game*.

What caused the simulation to go amiss? Before I say what I think is the cause, I should first point out that the behavioral rules for the two cultures, "the Heelots" and "the Hokies" are pre-designed, but are cogently explicated by the developers; they include a few cultural laws that are likely to be considered irregular and disparaging, even though a disclaimer is given in "Debriefing" manual that states "there is nothing in Heelotian cultural rules that substantiates such conclusions" (*Heelotia* 8). To me they are at least dubious and misleading as shown below:

Never touch another person, nor allow yourself to be touched.  
There exists a strong taboo against eye contact in conversation.  
Heelots [...] approach the person and converse with the right side of their faces.  
Hokies still adhere to the rules of this non-verbal communication.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Heelotia: A Cross-Cultural Simulation* was developed by Wider Horizons, revised and published by Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE).

The sexes are segregated in Hokia, and permission to speak to a specific member of the opposite sex must be obtained from the High Hokie. (*Heelotia* 11, 13)

When observed in the simulation, these rules tended to trigger negative feelings on the part of the students who in their turn were apt to associate these restricting rules with a culture other than their own. In a curious way, the simulation didn't deliver the effect of a real cross-cultural experience; rather the feelings they experienced were complacency and self-satisfaction: by playing the game they get to observe the weird rules other cultures impose on their peoples. That impression in turn served to firm up their internalized belief that the culture that they live in is superior to all other cultures, thus it was only a logical next step for them to perceive the differences of other cultures in terms of gaps and lacks when gauged against the standard modeled on the U.S. In light of this, it finally dawned on me why the students were so playful and mocking in their simulation: it was indeed a game whose aim was to act out the deplorable facts of alien cultures without challenging one's own knowledge or identity.

But the problem didn't stop there. During the post-game Q & A sessions, there were always one or two questions from the students that might have pointed us to the need of questioning the nature of the simulation concept, but they were invariably brushed aside because, as we are told in the manual, "the facilitator should avoid comments or answers that suggest strategies or infer outcomes" (*Heelotia* 1). But the nagging questions remain and deserve to be answered: when enacting cultural differences, why are we more apt to think of taboos and repressions as indispensable to cultures different from ours? Why are we disallowed from looking beyond the pre-designed framework in these simulation games? And why are the developers unaware, innately or otherwise, of the need to interrogate their own inclinations to cultural supremacy? It seems that the authority of the educator endows him/her with a certain invisibility to pedagogical practice, and a viable way to forgo that invisibility is to engage in what Giroux calls a "cultural remapping" to cross over into the position of other cultures to study and analyze the power relationships from others' standpoints. This incidentally brings Giroux's border pedagogy right back into our discussion.

Giroux argues that a critical pedagogy must see that students be "given the opportunity to engage in systematic analyses of the ways in which the dominant culture creates borders saturated in terror, inequality, and forced exclusions" ("Resisting Differences" 209). Giroux further explains:

Students should be allowed to rewrite difference through the process of crossing over into cultural borders that offer narratives, languages, and experience that provide a resource for rethinking the relationship between the center and margins of power as well as between themselves and others. (“Resisting Differences” 209)

The insight Giroux offers us is that learners should be allowed to cross over, not just into what subjects they are to learn, but to how the educators select, organize and present knowledge to them. In other words, learners are thus in a position, like the educators, to see the entire process of pre-designing and pre-conditioning of the actual subject before they are introduced to it. In the context of *Heelotia*, players of the simulation game must be given a chance, after the game is played, to learn about the developers’ selection, organization and presentation of their knowledge and ideas that have gone into the designing of the simulation game. Here lies precisely the vantage of Giroux’s border pedagogy: it seeks to make accessible and debatable the inception of the simulation, with all its insights or oversights. Only then can *Heelotia* begin to work toward a genuine cross-cultural simulation. Therefore, in the realm of critiquing such a structured invisibility, the border-crossing strategy proves to be better fitted thanks to the pedagogical interest it shares with cultural studies. With its inherent distrust of totality and universality, cultural studies would seek to place the simulation game in a historical context in which the process of cultural simulation is revealed, not as an impartial exercise in mastering know-how, but as a politicized move to sustain its ethnocentric invisibility.

### Dislodging Narrative Ends

To bring our critique closer home, when teachers of Chinese Studies in the U.S. schools and colleges are faced with the issue of what to teach and what *not*, it should be imperative and worthwhile to guard against a similar type of ethnocentric invisibility and bring the politics behind it under the scrutiny of the border-crossing critique as Giroux has espoused. While it is true that Chinese Studies are gaining an ever-firmer foothold in American education, it still remains to be seen whether the surging interest in teaching China is driven by a genuine belief in her fertile and enduring cultural legacies or by a market-driven thirst for cultural capital to be used

as “patches” to upgrade one’s exploitative ventures. On a concrete level, it is likewise imperative to scrutinize the decision whether to use films on China as visual aids to gloss one’s selected texts or to focus on the visual as an alternative mode for observing and conceptualizing China. In the remainder of this essay, I intend to use the visual mode as an alternative for teaching China in an outreach program, and query its unsettling impact on China pedagogy. Even though I embrace the visual mode’s energizing role, I also feel concerned and at times discontent with the pedagogical belief embedded in certain films and their cultural implications.

It is almost a given nowadays that, when written memoirs of China’s political past, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, need a generic makeover, film is always there as the most favored agent. In teaching China through films, educators are attracted to film’s immediacy and transparency, which seems to lend the medium to displaying ethnic and cultural differences that educators tend to forgo their critical alertness in favor of unflinching self-assurance in watching *others’* personal sufferings under *their* repressive regimes. These films are thus used as the equivalent of ready-to-eat package foods in the China curriculum. Here is a small but telling instance: when I attended the local premier of Zhang Yimou’s martial arts blockbuster, *Hero*, in a suburban town, I was called upon to brief the audience on the film’s historical context after the screening. After my briefing, a woman stood up and asked: “What does this film tell us about China? [...] that China is no longer about the repression of women?”<sup>7</sup> To be fair, she was not hostile to me at all, but her agitated look made me feel almost guilty of failing to give the audience what they were accustomed to seeing: another soul-wrenching tale of a repressed Chinese woman! Much in the same way as Chinese characters are nowadays seen tattooed on the biceps of professional athletes on TV, many of these films have become easily applicable labels for many Americans’ notions of modern China in disregard of China’s historical specificities. Hardly do we need to be reminded whether such notions are pedagogically sound. The problem, however, does not cease to exist even when we restore these films to their original historical contexts. Adapting their scripts from personal memoirs by Chinese political exiles, some film directors, be they Chinese or Western, have been attracted by the affinities between textual narratives and filmic narration, but also grew insensible to the danger of blindly following the narrative design of progress, which eventually co-opts out any chance of working out alternative ways for their own causes.

---

<sup>7</sup> The woman’s comments were made in connection to the female knights-errant in the film, whose roles are more fearless, brave, and independent in realms like love and sex than those in Chinese films prior to *Hero*.

In attempting to recapture China's recent past, many of these memoirs have allowed themselves to be tailored to fit in plots that embrace the narrative *doxa* of "progress" often embodied by the liberal, capitalistic West. They willingly align personal or communal testimonies of political atrocities committed during the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution with the "then" vs. "now" mode whose narrative ends aspire to a global acceptance of liberal bourgeois values (i.e., freedom, equality, and happiness of life) as the culminating point of historical advance. Thus, remembrances of personal sorrow, misery and loss incurred under repressive political regimes during those traumatic years have been stamped, rather sweepingly, with a seal of "that was *then*." In contrast, the narrators' discursive present, even when left vague and indefinite, is firmly anchored in "this is *now*." Thus they echo Francis Fukuyama's neo-liberal dictum, "The *End* of History," which argues that we have reached "[...] the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (4).<sup>8</sup> Inspired by the dictum, "Now" is unabashedly associated with the global triumph of the capitalistic West, whose leaders assert that liberal bourgeois beliefs have led to the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent spread of Western liberalism. In contrast, non-western nations, characterized by "Then," will all be hauled into the global system of Capital, which has become a culminating *End* to which all previous historical developments advance.

It is not surprising therefore to note that many of the Chinese exiles cast their narrative memoirs in the mode of the libratory movement from "Then" to "Now." Consciously or not, they find it necessary to posit their narrative stance in the *present*, typically somewhere in Europe or North America, as if it were the culminating point for all human injustice and sufferings. A case in point is the film *Wild Swans* adapted from Jung Chang's autobiography of the same title. Chang's book has been a favored choice of textbooks for Chinese Studies' curriculum in both colleges and schools, and it owes much of its popularity to an interdisciplinary, creative **use** of Chang's chronicle of her grandmother, her mother and herself against the backdrops of social and cultural changes in modern China. In the many lesson plans I have examined,<sup>9</sup> one does not have to look hard to discover that the pedagogical use of *Wild Swans* often intersects with subjects like World History,

---

<sup>8</sup> I have benefited from the view of Slavoj Žižek expressed in his "Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism."

<sup>9</sup> Lesson Plans are the high school equivalent to the syllabus in a college course or seminar. I have studied many such plans when directing the outreach program in the aforementioned institution.

Art and Society, and Independent Studies, and the film version of Chang's book gets used in curriculum frequently due to the fact that today's school students are nearly all brought up in a highly visual and Internet-savvy cultural setting. Most lesson plans for teaching *Wild Swans* have thus included the film with the same title and other related media, but without an exception their overarching objective is to use the film to introduce the history of modern China.

For all its effectiveness and immediacy as a teaching aid, film or other forms of media have consistently proved to be prone to one critical drawback: it is likely the educator will associate the visual mode matter-of-factly with a transparent and objective standpoint in presenting history. For the same reason, even when aware of the diegetic nature of the camera eye, the educator tends to treat it with an unsuspecting faith that usually diverts his attention to the more technical aspects of the filmic diegetics. Let me use one lesson plan to illustrate this point ("Welcome to 'Wild Swans'"). The lesson plan available at "Teacher Zone" at ArtsZone online is designed on the basis of Chang's book. It states a lucid and decisive goal for its users at the outset: *To introduce students to recent Chinese history, especially the Cultural Revolution*. As a more specific objective, the author makes it equally coherent: "To help students consider how an author converts information about her family history into a revealing personal memoir" ("Welcome to 'Wild Swans'").

To assist its users in attaining that objective, the author lays out a gradual, step-by-step program which includes the following sessions: (1) Consider the Issues; (2) Watching the Program (film); (3) Reading the Media; (4) Getting the Answers. Of these two are worth our special attention. In Session 1, we note, the author of the Lesson Plan stresses a crucial moment at the end of the film when Jung Chang says: "I didn't really understand my mother until I wrote the book." According to the author, Chang's writing came about in 1988 when her mother visited Chang's home in England and told the daughter all about her life as a revolutionary, as a young wife and a mother. The viewer would naturally be curious to know why the mother's visit in London triggered the outpouring of the memories of her life. In Session Three, we observe, the author makes available some background notes in which it is noted:

Throughout much of this film, Jung talks to an interviewer off-camera, retelling some of her mother's tales or describing the effect her mother's words had upon her. But the filmmakers have constructed the film of many kinds of visual information, including Jung speaking to the interviewer off-camera, Jung and her mother talking, still photographs,

historical footage in China, and the modern footage from China and England. (“Welcome to ‘Wild Swans’”)

With all this vital information unveiled, a clearer picture emerges: whatever triggered her mother’s remembrance not only leads Jung Chang on with the telling of her life stories, but prompts the film director to interlace old photos, documentary footages of traditional China and recent footage shot in modern China and England to bring the bulk of data into a readily comprehensible narrative—a visual tale of Jung Chang’s life. At this point, one can hardly help asking the question: who were the off-camera interviewers? What were the questions they asked? In the film, we soon discover, Chang’s narrative is intersected by footage of interviews shot in Chang’s home in London during her mother’s visit, while Chang’s husband, a British scholar of Chinese history, is often seen in the film to host them at a meal or a tea at home or a stroll in the park, make small conversations with the two women, and then go off-camera.<sup>10</sup> But it is not hard to imagine that his guidance, even when he is off screen, makes itself felt by all; his role as the back-stage tutor is most noticeable when he acts as the impromptu instigator by asking a question or two to trigger the monologue of Chang and her mother. He then lets the camera take over the retelling of their personal histories, but his presence is always re-inserted when the retelling shifts to a different setting as if he were the narrative book-ends for the women’s memoirs. The pattern continues until the end of the film, thus mapping out order and closure for the entire narrative. Such a role is precisely what contributes to the film narrative as its diegetic, and as such should be introduced in the Lesson Plan to the students.

Manifestly, the author of the Lesson Plan has also deemed it necessary to involve students in learning about the diegetic function of the film, and for that an activity termed “Data Retrieval Sheet” has been designed. This is a fact sheet intended for students to record, with the help of a stopwatch, the varying visual information shown during a three-minute sequence of the film. The sheet provides students with three categories: “Segment,” “Duration” and “Effect,” accompanied by three questions addressing directly the three categories. First, *what do you see on the screen?* Second, *how long is it on the screen?* Third, *what effect does the segment have on the viewer? On the segment that came before or after?* It seems that, prompted with the first and third questions especially, students will be urged to focus on how visual images and information are arranged in a short but meaningful

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Wild Swans—Jung Chang*.

sequence; they will then go on to discover that by assembling many such sequences, a person's life can be presented in a linear, coherent and progressive fashion to make a point or just to tell a story. It can be anticipated that completing such an activity requires more than students' common sense and willingness to participate; it calls for analytical skills normally required as the bread-and-butter of literature and film studies.

Before we examine what pedagogical value(s) there is with an activity like this, let us view a sequence from the film closely and answer the questions provided in the fact sheet. The sequence of shots I have selected is from early in the film and lasts about five minutes. It begins with a shot of Jung Chang herself standing by a London street waiting for a taxi; a taxi arrives, and Chang gets in and sits gazing into the distance. Presently, the voice off-screen tells us:

I came to study in London on a scholarship in 1978 and have since made London my home. For years, I avoided thinking about the China I had left behind. Then in 1988, my mother came to England to visit me and told me the story of her life and that of my grandmother. I decided to write *Wild Swans*. The past was no longer too painful to recall because I had found love and fulfillment and therefore tranquility.

The next footage brings the scene of a street in a Chinese city, probably Chengdu in central China, where people are riding bicycles or walking, all looking busy and intent on what they are doing for the day. The narrator comments on the improved living standards for the ordinary Chinese thanks to the economic reforms of the 1980s which brought in foreign trade and investment. The following shot sequence presents a few photos as the off-screen narrator speaks about her grandmother, who was forced to have her feet bound and married to a warlord as a concubine. The camera shifts from an old photo of her grandmother to an archived photo of a well-dressed old lady with bound feet waited on by her servant. All the while the narrator describes in explicit detail how the bone frames were twisted and mostly crushed when the feet of Chinese girls were bound tightly in cloth from early on. The narrator emphatically states how the bound feet were meant to arouse men sexually when they fondled them like fetish objects. Abruptly the camera jumps back to the street in Chengdu and zooms in on a pair of small, tottering feet inching forward evidently in pain. Tentatively but without stopping, the camera pans upward to reveal the face of a wobbly old Chinese lady moving with a walking stick.

She looks convincingly of Chang's grandmother's generation, now the walking specimen of traditional China's disfigured legacies.

What effect, we may inquire, does this segment have on the previous and subsequent segments of the film? Firstly, with London as her new-found home, Chang embarks on a home-bound journey to China that unfolds much like a throw-back in time: warlord, arranged marriage, concubines, bound feet, all elements of China's past, which eventually crystallize into the image of the pathetic and staggering old lady. For all her reconstruction and development of over half a century, modern China is seen still struggling to shake off her burdened past as embodied by the old lady with bound feet. China is thus associated with the historical "Then" whereas Britain and the West stand at the culminating "Now," with which China is catching up. Secondly, as the shot shifts effortlessly from her grandmother to a rich lady in the past, then to an anonymous old woman in the street, the drift of the narrative is clearly metonymic: from the fate of female individuals to the destiny of the entire nation which forms a kind of "repressive continuum." As a lump sum, the past of China was sweepingly wrought with servitude, repression and disfiguration as is evidenced in the bitter misery of Chinese women with bound feet. But there is no mention how foot-binding was abolished and how the class division in China was eliminated post-1949, although they seemed to be replaced with a different kind of social division nowadays. Thirdly, we may recall that at the outset of the film Chang's British husband cues Chang and her mother with questions, which must have been essential and decisive in swaying the narrative toward a certain end. In other words, the telling of Chang's life brings the viewer full circle to where it is first initiated: her embracing the values of Western liberal democracy, an end in her life experience that enables her not only to put the lives of three Chinese women in perspective, but to find her voice to express years of bottled-up fear and anguish under the Chinese authoritarian regime. This is rather like a pilgrimage for the final source of illumination. In finding her "love and tranquility," Chang has also found the present-day system of liberal democracy in the West most liberating and fulfilling, and her experience has been valorized as a common end for all Chinese political exiles.

If we consider the last session of the Lesson Plan (entitled "Responding in Writing") in the light of my analysis above, it will not be hard to see how the author sidelines the function of the film narrative (what's rightly intended by the questions the author solicits) in favor of a more formulaic pattern constantly used by history textbooks in the American schools in writing about the history of non-Western nations. The author requires a poem to be written about the events on Tiananmen

Square in June 1989 by students while viewing photos taken of the incident and assembled in a straight-line, lock-step order as follows:

The Quest for Freedom  
The Confrontation  
The Repression  
The Massacre  
The Worldwide Protest<sup>11</sup>

Needless to say, the pattern is rigid and formulaic, but it does make a point emphatically: in the history of other nations there is routinely repression, protest and emancipation (Then); and it is inevitable that others will be enlightened by the Euro-American model and progress toward liberalization and capitalistic market economy (Now).

What is ironic about this be-all and end-all power of “Now” is its absurdity when gauged against the current conditions of China. Indeed, if the end of narrative closures is to be anchored in what some call the “collapsed space” of global capitalism, one finds that official China today is trying frantically to get market-driven values on the throne of supreme reign, and earn its membership in the club of the wealth/power alliance. But this is not done without paying a costly price. Of sobering interest to us are the many costs: rising new social division between the rich and the poor; massive lay-offs in urban areas; resurgence of prostitution; loss of medical care and old-age pensions for the ordinary Chinese; acute pollution and ecological disaster; and the volatile ups and downs of market-driven economy. Added to these are paradoxically China’s share of the long-term crises related to global terrorism, revivals of religious fanaticism and unilateral bio-politics. These are dire issues that any of us teaching in Chinese Studies must dwell on. In such a volatile and conflict-ridden era, the ideas of end of history and laws of historical inevitability are awfully out of context and illusory.

In reality, ironically, it is a time for us educators to face the grim reality, to learn about alternative models of modernizing nations with their diverse cultures and assess our blind spots caused by the ethnocentric view of world histories as reflected in the U.S. being the “penultimate form” of human history. Remedying such a blinding view of human development cannot but be one of rethinking, re-evaluating and reconstructing histories, a task to be engaged in a dialectic, open-

---

<sup>11</sup> The photos are assembled by Christus Rex Redemptor Mundi, a private non-profit organization. Consult the photos at “Welcome to ‘Wild Swans.’”

ended and non-linear fashion. Disparate and contentious as they are, alternative models and their representations in the pedagogical debate on difference will first and foremost unseat any pedagogical thinking presumed to be objective and uncontested. They will stress the educators' responsibility to interrogate and contest the presumed impartiality of education as an institution which is prone to representing differences of other cultures from the perspective of historical teleology. Pedagogical specialists should take note of how many other personal (and local) histories (available in film and autobiographical fiction) have challenged, unseated the embedded *télos* of institutional memory and dissipated the centrality of official historiography. In such works, one shared salient feature is the critical scrutiny that has always been aimed at the visual medium itself, at the built-in "optics" of empowerment;<sup>12</sup> writers and filmmakers intently dislodge the centrality of a perspectival grid which tends to cast memories of different cultures into harsh, repressive and uncivilized blocks of the shadowy past. They memorize "against the grains" by knowingly positing local and communal views to undercut the teleological encoding in linear narratives that valorize the all-embracing end of Euro-American liberal democracy. They prove forcefully that non-Western cultures are fully capable of recapturing their own traumatic pasts without internalizing the coercive subjectivity of their former ruling ideologies. Furthermore, the personal ordeals they previously experienced under authoritarian regimes of their own native lands do not mean that they are now unsuspecting converts to the one-size-fits-all form of liberty that has been extolled by Neo-conservative ideology in the U.S. To the contrary, by eliding the teleology of capitalistic law, they are creating a wide range of alternative perceptual modes to negotiate with the collective unconscious and engage in new powerful critical projects against official histories and domestic repression.

In an increasingly regressive political climate, it is necessary for humanist educators in the U.S. to make available such learning resources in classrooms and challenge teachers and students alike to expose the coercive and homogenizing biases where they are the least suspected. The afore-mentioned reference to the Then/Now mode of teaching political histories of other cultures brings into focus pedagogy's vital role in educating difference in the global era we find ourselves in. My stint in directing the outreach program granted me a rare chance to observe what pitfalls and risks educators in American colleges and schools are faced with. Teaching personalized narratives, it has been discovered, offers the most effective model for validating the anxieties and trepidations of human memory of all ethnic

---

<sup>12</sup> To better understand this concept, please see Jay.

and cultural communities.<sup>13</sup> Visuality especially is identified by many as the lynchpin, so to speak, that holds or unlocks a rigid binary of self/other, West/East, subject/object and a coercive nexus for metaphysics, empirical sciences and capitalist logic. Amidst our cultural and social subconscious lies this binary thinking that tends to mirror its ideological and political foe in antithesis and opposition. Not to be wary of such an engrained penchant for an ahistorical and disembodied subject and its ubiquitous *Now* proves a costly pedagogical folly. But in perusing the pedagogical venues available to us, cultural studies and its untried potentials are one of the few realms where humanist educators can take all these to the students in a critical, provocative and enlightening way.

### Works Cited

- Chang, Jung. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. New York: Anchor Books, 1997.
- Chow, Rey. "Seeing Modern China: Toward a Theory of Ethnic Spectatorship." *Woman and Chinese Modernity*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991. 3-33.
- . "Where Have All the Natives Gone?" *Writing Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. 27-54.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Avon Books, 1992.
- Giroux, Henry A. "Resisting Difference: Cultural Studies and the Discourse of Critical Pedagogy." *Cultural Studies*. Ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler. London: Routledge, 1992. 199-212.
- and Peter McLaren, eds. *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Grossberg, Lawrence. *Bringing It All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1997.
- Heelotia: A Cross-Cultural Simulation*. By Wider Horizons. Stanford: Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE), 1991.
- Jay, Martin. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." *Vision and Visuality*. Ed. Hal Foster. New York: The New P, 1988. 3-27.

---

<sup>13</sup> Rey Chow and Michael Taussig, to whose research I am indebted for my points to follow, have explored in depth how filmic representation reflects the ways human consciousness operates, especially, the manner in which the human mind configures the position of the self. See Chow and Taussig.

- Morstern, Kenneth. "Decolonization as Learning: Practice and Pedagogy in Frantz Fanon's Revolutionary Narrative." Giroux and McLaren 253-271.
- Taussig, Michael. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Wang, Ban. "The Cold War, Imperial Aesthetics, and Area Studies." *Social Text* 20.3 (Fall 2002): 45-65.
- "Welcome to 'Wild Swans.'" ArtsZone. Ovation: The Arts Network. 1998. 21 June 2005 <<http://www.ovationtv.com/artszone/teachers/swans.html>>.
- Wild Swans—Jung Chang*. Dir. Mischa Scorer. New York: Filmmakers Library, 1992.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism." *New Left Review* 225 (September-October 1997): 28-51.

### About the Author

Professor Xinmin Liu received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Yale in 1997. Having taught in Trinity and Wesleyan Colleges, he joined the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at University of Pittsburgh in fall 2004. His research is mostly in modern Chinese literature and culture with emphasis on two areas: (1) forms of biography and autobiography in terms of teleological progress: he investigates Chinese novels of self-development and Western *Bildungsroman* of the modern era for a better understanding of the correlation between narrative progression, self fulfillment and social Darwinism; (2) visual narratives of modern Chinese cinema: he studies filmic representations of historicity, memory and ethnic and cultural identities in the Chinese context to explore the vast changes the visual has brought on to at once enlighten and complicate human perception under the modern condition. He is the author of several journal articles on the dynamics of narratives in Chinese literature and culture in *Contemporary China*, *Asian Cinema* and *American Journal of Chinese Studies*. He is currently teaching courses on Hong Kong and mainland Chinese cinema and cultures at the University of Pittsburgh.

[Received 25 January 2004; accepted 19 May 2005; revised 29 May 2005]