

TEACHING “TESTIMONY, MEMORY AND ALLEGORY: THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CHINESE CULTURAL REVOLUTION”

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In the spring of the 2008-2009 academic year, I will be teaching a new core course entitled “Testimony Memory and Allegory: the Representations of the Chinese Cultural Revolution.” The theme of this course falls into the category of Change and Continuity, and the goal of it is to help students to critically understand the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as a crucial historical link in revolutionary China (Mao’s China, 1949-1966) and post-revolutionary China (post-Mao, or Deng’s China 1976-the present). For many historians, the Cultural Revolution is one of the biggest disasters in twentieth-century world history because of the astronomic casualty and economic damage caused by this long socio-political upheaval, commonly known as “the ten years of chaos.” The new scholarship in the field of Chinese Studies, however, further suggests viewing the Cultural Revolution as a critical turning point of more than half a century of devastating nationalist and socialist revolutions in China and the post-revolutionary era that has had a riveting impact on the world economy and global geopolitical reconfigurations since the end of the Cultural Revolution. In this light, the Cultural Revolution that serves as a historical cite of “change and continuity” is best described, to borrow historians Macfarquhar and Schoenhals’ insightful statement: “To understand what happened during the Cultural Revolution, one has to understand how it come to be launched. To understand the ‘why’ of China today, one has to understand the ‘what’ of the Cultural Revolution.”

Indeed, as an ever increasing number of our students are striving to know more about China’s culture traditions, social structures, and economic development; they can hardly move far without an in-depth understanding of the many intriguing and complex aspects of the Cultural

Revolution. To help students gain a comprehensive understanding of the complicated and sometimes even contradictory, aspects of the Cultural Revolution in terms of the reasons it was launched, the socio-economic structures during and after it, as well as its impact on the collective psychology of the Chinese people over a few generations, this class aims at engaging students in closely reading and critically examining a highly diverse body of representations of the Cultural Revolution, including official and unofficial historical accounts, memoirs produced by writers of the Chinese diaspora and those who still live in China, realist and avant-garde short stories/novellas, poems, films, and visual arts. Though the Cultural Revolution is a historical event, this course, will primarily approach various representations of it from the perspective of cultural and literary studies. As the course syllabus indicates “This course investigates the complicated and often interwoven relationships between testimony; memory; signs; meanings of both writing and reading about traumatic events; ethical (personal and collective) commitment to memory; and historical, literary and artistic representations of the past expressed in different mediums. We will pay special attention to how each kind of representative account functions as a link between the past and the present by looking into how it copes with its producer’s distinctive memories of the Cultural Revolution and responses to the producer’s own times, as well as that producer’s political and artistic conventions.”

The challenge in achieving the complex objectives of this course, I predict, lies not in the fact that our students have little knowledge about the Chinese Cultural Revolution, but in the danger of only seeing it as a Chinese “holocaust” in an over-simplified fashion. It is crucial to provide a repertory of hybrid representations and

to allow students to closely read and thoroughly discuss the many complicated aspects and layered meanings embedded in these texts. To this end, a writing-intensive course that enables students to rigorously explore the studying material via small group discussion and regular writings provides the most ideal learning environment. This is the reason that I intend to have this course be a writing-intensive one.

This identification of the course objectives with this format of the class seems to coincidentally respond to the natural tie between doing, knowing, and writing that Michael Carter emphasizes in his ambitious essay “Ways of knowing,” an essay I read while attending the Writing-Intensive Core workshop last week. Despite its disputable over-arching argument about writing as “the meta genre,” I found Carter’s claim that “doing enacts the knowing through students writing, and the writing gives shape to the ways of knowing and doing in the disciplines” is theoretically illuminating and practically useful. Indeed, to facilitate effective learning (“knowing” in his term), the instructor needs to carefully assess their disciplinary objectives and the processes toward those objectives through structuring diverse writing assignments that not only match, facilitate and reflect student’s learning at each stage, but also help them step by step to make progress toward the final goal of the course, and even able to emulate the discourse of the ongoing scholarship. All said, writings, together with student’s oral performances are the primary means that demonstrate the progresses and results of students’ learning in the class.

I found the Writing Intensive Core workshop to be of great help in many regards, especially in terms of how to use writing as a way for students to learn the specific subject matter that I’ll be teaching. Though I designed all the writing assignments when I wrote the course proposal, it is the workshop that really forced me to reassess the specifics of, and my expectations for, each and every assignment in relations to the general objectives of the course. I’ll briefly discuss the developmental phases of the course and the correspondent assignment for each phase that I revised and further developed while attending the workshop.

In the first two weeks of this class, the students will view two films. The first, *China: A Century of Revolution*, serial 2, is a PBS production that lays out the general socio-political environment by sketching out the major political campaigns launched by the Communist party before the Cultural Revolution. In the meantime, students will read a few book chapters about the Cultural Revolution, one from *The Search of Modern China* by Jonathan Spence, a renowned American historian of Chinese history; and the other from *Ten Years of Turbulence* by Yan Jiaqi, a leading Chinese scholar who lived through the CR. While these first three materials provide the authors’ unidirectional investigations following the chronological order of the historiography of the Cultural Revolution, the fourth one, the documentary film *Morning Sun*, mainly consists of scenes of a variety of historical events, interviews with participants in, and witnesses of, the Cultural Revolution. The hybrid narrative of this documentary film probably provides many of our students the very first opportunity to look into this complicated historical event from different angles.

Upon the completion of all the reading/screening assignments and class discussions at the end of the second week, the students are required to start their first writing assignment: writing an informative essay of five pages for an imagined reader who knows little about the Cultural Revolution. The essay should primarily be based on the texts we will have studied in the class. As the students are encouraged to find the most effective narrative strategy and style to convey ideas to their readers, they will be asked to include the following information in their writing:

- Time frame and major developmental stages of the Cultural Revolution;
- Indication of the rationale under which Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution, paying special attention to the details of the material that they have come across and including different explanations from different groups of people, such as the Red Guards of the time, the intellectuals and Communist officials of different factions, and Chinese and American historians;

- The full name of the Cultural Revolution is “the Great Chinese Proletarian Cultural Revolution.” Students are asked to describe this term in the context of the Chinese socialist revolution and political campaigns that happened prior to the CR. Why “proletarian”? Why “cultural revolution”? Whose revolution was it, and who against whom?
- The general socio-economic situation prior to, during, and immediately after the Cultural Revolution.

This writing exercise means to teach students how to synthesize information from different—even contradictory—sources in an inclusive manner and in an objective third person narrative. Furthermore, since this will be the first assignment of the class, I will also make clear that while quality of content is essential, that content should be properly showcased with correct grammar and style, and attractive typography and formatting as fitting an academic work; and that all of these elements will be evaluated. All the written work for the course should follow the specifications listed below:

1. Assignments shall be typed, double-spaced, and the body of the essay should use a 12-point font (Times Roman, Times New Roman, Helvetica, or Arial are suggested);
2. Students are required to submit their writings electronically in Microsoft Word 2003 format so the instructor can supply feedback through the redlining feature of Word. You may use Word 2007 to prepare the work if you have it, but should save the final document in Word 2003 format. The resulting file may be attached to an e-mail sent to the instructor at li.peters@du.edu.
3. The papers should be written using the *Chicago Manual of Style* as a format guide, and citations should be prepared using that standard.
4. Endnotes, rather than footnotes, should be used. If you wish, you may prepare the notes as footnotes using Word’s Insert/Reference/Footnote... feature, then at the end use Word’s conversion

utility (see Help/Convert footnotes to endnotes and vice versa to find out how) to convert all the notes to endnotes.

5. Each type of text treatment should be consistently applied throughout the document. For example, body text, extended quotes, numbered lists, and so forth, should all be done the same way each time. You will find that the use of Word’s style feature is invaluable in easily achieving this. Some of the “canned” styles may need modification to conform to the treatments specified in the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Learn to use these features now, and it will serve you well in all your future writing productions, especially longer formal works such as theses and dissertations.

The readings of the third and fourth week comprise the second phase of this course. Students will be asked to select and read one memoir from a list of some twenty five titles that I will have passed to the class in the very beginning of the quarter. The authors of these memories have diverse backgrounds, but generally fall into four categories:

1. Those who were Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, but later left China and reside in Britain and the United States;
2. Those who were Red Guards but still live in China;
3. Those who were established intellectuals or with preeminent social status; immediately before the Cultural Revolution;
4. Scholars who grew up in the Cultural Revolution, yet didn’t directly involved in it during the time. In addition to the memoirs, students will also read elected passages from Jerome Bruner’s *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*.

Each student is required to give a ten-minute in-class oral presentation on the memoir chosen. The presentations should be accompanied by an informal handout of a brief introduction of the memoirist for the whole class and a three-page outline that will be posted on the blackboard. The

outline will be counted as part of the writing assignment; it should demonstrate an adequate coverage of the basic story line and important aspects of the story of the memoirist, such as the adversity faced because of the advent of the Cultural Revolution, the dilemma when caught between their concerns for family and political demands, the triumph of personal growth and psychological transformation during the course of the Cultural Revolution, etc. The outlines also need to provide the following specific information about the memoir and memoirist:

1. What were the social identity, education and family background of the memoirist before and during the Cultural Revolution? Does the author's social status and family background affect the memoirist's life during the Cultural Revolution? What was the memoirist's identity during the time she/he composed the memoir about the Cultural Revolution? Do you think the change of status affected the way that the memoirist wrote about her/his past?
2. Who is the intended readership of the memoir that you read? Do you think that the authorial concern about the target readership affects the author's presentation of past and memory, and if yes, in which ways? Please consider the insights that Jerome Bruner brought out.
3. The narrative of each memoirist's own life contains details of reported feelings and other personal touches. How does the personal narrative approach facilitate the telling of this particular memoirist's story and storytelling in general? In relation to the historical work you read earlier, describe anything especially striking to you because of the personal narrative approach.

The purpose of this assignment is twofold. As an individual project, it urges students to scrutinize in their own eyes how an author's social status, political identity and individualized expectations for readership contribute to the features of the memoir as a genre. Or, in Bruner's words, how are stories made instead of found, and why does "their slant and believability [depend] on the circumstances of their telling." The aspect of

oral reporting on various memoirs also makes it a collective project that enables students to share not only the stories that their peers presented orally, but also a wide-range of writing analysis. One of the important things that differentiates a writing-intensive course from a regular course is probably that the former requires the instructor's frequent intervention in students writing to affirm that students' "knowing" of the meaning-making modeled in the learned texts can be precisely conveyed in writings. After this assignment, I'll intervene by offering an open discussion about the strengths and weakness of a couple of selected student works.

At the third stage of this course, roughly from Week 5-8, students will read a few poems and four fictional representations of the Cultural Revolution: the short stories "On the Other Side of the Stream" and "Reencounter," the film screenplay "King of the Children" and the novella *To live*. I also plan to project two films: "In the Heat of the Sun" and "To Live" an internationally well acclaimed film adopted from the novel of the same title. Although the authors of these fictional works and films are contemporaries of most of the memoirists and spent their childhood or adolescence in the Cultural Revolution, the representations of the Cultural Revolution in those works are significantly complex, ambivalent, and even ironic from time to time. By the end of Week 8, students will submit their third formal writing: a five-page paper containing a close reading of one of the stories or films. Students need to articulate an analytical discussion about the differences between fictional writings and biographic writings in terms of narrative perspectives, authorial voices, tones, the employment of symbol, trope and irony, presentation of moral values, the way that the respective story was ended, and so forth.

I always believe it is more productive to have face-to-face discussions about a student's writing than simply put comments or corrections on the margin of the paper. An individual discussion opens an opportunity for the instructor to understand a student's unique ways of thinking, of processing information and interpreting the texts. After this assignment, I plan to invite students to meet with me individually to go through the suggestions and comments that I will have offered when I read their papers. The students could

choose to rewrite their papers to achieve a better grade. At this point, we should have covered most of the weighty readings on the list, I'll also discuss with students individually their initial ideas about the final writing project or help them to develop practical topics in the context of the course.

Week Nine will be devoted to the visual representations of the Cultural Revolution. As students will continue to read a couple of interesting articles about revolutionary posters and modes of visual testimony in contemporary Chinese popular arts, they will start to write the drafts of their last formal writing: a 7-10 page paper. Students at this stage should be able to come up with a wide range of topics of inquiry. They may choose to focus on one theme of the presentation of the Cultural Revolution, such as the function of body and violence, or betrayal and loyalty; to conduct a comparative study of two or more texts of the same genre, or different genres, such as the film and the fiction that the film is

based on; to discuss the different forms and meaning of certain representative revolutionary icons or images that are repeatedly used by various medias of representation; to explore how a certain themes or imageries were represented in memoirs and fictional works, etc. Students will have all class preparation time during Week Nine to complete their drafts and will be invited to discuss them with me during the week and share their drafts with their classmates during the class meetings in Week Ten. By doing so, students presenting their drafts could get constructive comments and suggestions not only from me, but also from their peers; and in the meantime, students who will be listening to the presentations will find inspiration and new perspectives from the presentation. Given that this last assignment is by nature a comprehensive analytical paper, students are allowed to incorporate aspects, arguments, analysis that they discussed and composed in their previous writings.

