

ASIANetwork Conference 2000

Lisle, Illinois

The Dangers and Pleasures of Teaching Orientalist Classic Books Charles Hayford, Northwestern University; Daniel Meissner, Marquette University

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The Dangers and Pleasures of Teaching Orientalist Classic Books

American Orientalist Classics on the Chinese Revolution: Adventures in the "Revolution Paradigm"
Charles W. Hayford

Others on this panel deal with works recognized as "Orientalist" in the sense of the word which has become usual. The books I would like to talk about are not so clearly in that category, but I think they bring up some of the problems which Anand Yang describes in his piece on Orientalism in *ASIANetwork Exchange* Vol. VII, No. 3 (Spring 2000), and they certainly need to be subjected to the type of scrutiny so well indicated in Sam Yamashita's piece in that issue. That is, Western reporters in wartime or revolutionary China such as Edgar Snow, Theodore White and Annalee Jacobee, and Jack Belden, were smart, informed, and sincere, but their writings and analysis, long taken as canonical, are now problematic; we no longer take them as raw, transparent observation (if we ever really did) but must, in a metaphor lifted from Tim Cheek, "filet" them. On the other hand, our students should not ignore or dismiss these classics if we are to confront China's modern experiences and America's peculiar attempt to understand them—besides, they're still challenging fun to read! We now need to contemplate the form and worldview of their presentations as much as their contents. My thoughts here were developed while teaching courses and working on a manuscript tentatively called *America's Chinas: From the*

Opium Wars to Tiananmen, which deals with Americans who lived in China and wrote about it for the audience back home.

Before Richard Nixon pulled his Marco Polo act in 1972, mainstream Americans largely based their understandings of China on "China Revolution Classics" written by journalists who had lived and developed careers in China in the 1930s and 1940s. *Red Star Over China* (1937) was categorized as a "classic" and the "China scoop of the century." Theodore White and Annalee Jacoby's *Thunder Out of China* (1946) was widely assigned in college courses, along with Graham Peck's *Two Kinds of Time* (1950), and Jack Belden's *China Shakes the World* (1949). In addition to books by Agnes Smedley, Anna Louise Strong, Nym Wales (Helen Foster Snow), and Israel Epstein, we might include John Fairbank's *United States and China* (1948), whose first edition was written hot off the griddle on his return from wartime China (and is much more commanding reading than the more academic later editions).

The "China Story" in these classics was perceived and told in term of Revolution, and we can now more clearly see how the constituent narratives, metaphors, and "key-words" told the story of the Liberation from Feudalism and Imperialism; the story was also that of the Chinese Nation, assuming that the Chinese State represented it, and Revolution produced it. I have outlined in my book *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (1990) how Chinese of the New Culture Movement (1916-1923) came to see the village and the "peasant" not as the basis of glorious tradition but as dark, backward, and shameful; young China searched for a new force powerful enough to destroy traditional culture and to repel Imperialism. This destruction and regeneration is what many young Chinese meant by "revolution"—building a powerful political institution. The search for their own historical Big Story led them to construe China as "feudal," to cast China as the innocent victim of imperialist enormity—"poor little China"—and to nominate the "peasant" as the most oppressed class of the oppressed nation.

This construction of history was not simple observation. Historians outside China do not generally see China as "feudal": from at least the sixteenth century the Chinese rural economy had been basically commercialized, with rela-

tively free markets in land and labor, a superficial but civilian controlled bureaucratic government, and politics centralized and national—anything but feudal. True, by the mid-1920s, the Chinese village and rural economy had been shaken by political disarray, deflation, inflation, drought, flood, famine, warlords, taxes, pestilence, opium, and sociologists. But the solution proposed depended on the terms in which these realities were construed as *problems*. To put it baldly, reconstruing China as “feudal” made “feudalism” a curable structural malady, made the revolutionary destruction of the landlord class the solution, and made the man with the hoe into a “peasant.” (I have discoursed elsewhere on the change in English language usage from “farmer” to “peasant.”) Linking feudalism to Imperialism made perfect political and cultural sense at the time of Japanese invasion.

Yet I can remember in my first years as a teaching assistant in the late 1960s and at Oberlin College in the early 1970s that students responded immediately and directly to these revolutionary classics as intuitively obvious. I met resistance when I suggested that perhaps Mao could only swim *in* water, not walk *on* it. The agenda was to see alternatives to Western Society; China was the Other, anti-US, and Mao was its prophet. Only later did it begin to dawn on me that “China” was not a topic or a subject; I was trained in “China studies,” but had no idea what a “China study” was. Even Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and the National Security Council turned to many of the China Revolution Classics which had stirred the American counter-culture radicals of the 1960s, and on which scholars explicitly relied. Lucien Bianco wrote his deservedly respected classic *Origins of the Chinese Revolution* (1967; translated 1971) partly to counter the loony Maoism of 1960s Paris; he specifically cites the China Revolution Classics as touchstones for the nature of revolution in China (p. 217).

THE CLASSICS DISSED

Soon after Nixon’s Presidential party returned from China, a number of things happened. First, the Mao jacket replaced Nehru’s as chic in a huge China fashion binge. From Wall St. to the Great Wall, Americans wanted to take up where they left off when the Korean War sealed shut the Open Door. Second, however, an independent and well-qualified new generation of American reporters, students, and travelers started to stay in China for longer periods. These new Marco Polos explored a China which during the 1980s appeared to be making impressive progress, but which was still a poor country, run clumsily and often oppressively by bureaucrats, not revolutionaries. There was some but not much to be seen of the socialist ideals which the China books had vaunted as the justification for Mao’s violent revolution. Fox Butterfield, Richard Bernstein, and Jay and Linda Matthews went from graduate programs to Beijing, and were the first American journalists since 1949 to cover China from China, and their books made appropriate splashes.

American students and journalists woke up, and what they smelled was not coffee: “China stinks,” wrote one. Harry Harding has described with authority and wit how creep-

ing realism, even cynicism, affected the attitudes of students and scholars once they got to China. (“From China With Disdain: New Trends in the Study of China,” reprinted in Jonathan Goldstein, et al. eds., *America Views China: American Images of China Then and Now* (1991)). Some recovering Maoists, perhaps as part of twelve-step programs, were especially sharp, even bitter, in their attacks, but many thoughtful observers charged that the China field was naive and had pandered to revolution. Ramon H. Myers and Thomas A. Metzger, long critical of Mao’s China, produced a detailed critique of what they called the “revolution paradigm,” a network of assumptions, practices, and habits biased against conservatives and tradition. (“Sinological Shadows: The State of Modern Chinese Studies in the United States,” *Washington Quarterly* Spring 1980).

Steven Mosher turned his experience in Guangdong and his expulsion from the Stanford Anthropology Ph.D. program into a best-selling China book, *Broken Earth: The Rural Chinese* (1983). He wrote that when he went to China, he “was still captive of the paramount myth of the Chinese revolution . . . the promise of peasant salvation.” Mosher took John K. Fairbank to task for once remarking that “valued in the Chinese peasant’s terms, the revolution has been a magnificent achievement, a victory not only for Mao Zedong, but for several hundreds of millions of the Chinese people.” Mosher argued that in fact peasant life was better in the 1940s, before the Revolution, than in the 1980s (pp. 299-300, excerpting (without ellipses to show his excision of qualification) from Fairbank, *China Perceived* (1974), p. xvii). One can’t help but feel that Mosher consciously set out to write a controversial book which would make his reputation; students can have a good time sorting out the nature of Mosher’s charges and comparing them with the evidence cited in his cogent and colorful writings. (For a fair-minded review of the Stanford controversy, see Martin Whyte, “The Rural Chinese and Steven Mosher,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 11.2 (Winter 1984): 111-18.)

On a more disinterested level, early in the 1980s, Stephen MacKinnon organized a conference *cum* reunion for some forty surviving wartime China correspondents and diplomats to assess their experience and achievements. The proceedings are reported in Stephen R. MacKinnon and Oris Friesen, *China Reporting: An Oral History of American Journalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (1987). John Fairbank, when asked to address the conference and the success of wartime reporting, challenged the self-congratulatory mood:

From the point of view of history, this reunion should be a wake. The American experience in China [during the 1940s] was a first-class disaster for the American people . . . It’s perfectly plain that we all tried, but we failed . . . We could not educate or illuminate or inform the American people or the American leadership in such a way that we could modify the outcome . . . we struggled but we didn’t succeed.

Correspondents disagreed; as one said, “we did a pretty goddamn good job.”

In the scholarly world, a generation of scholars coming out of the 1960s, not only went to China to see for themselves, but also began the spadework in libraries and archives, and talked with scholars in Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, and the PRC. Joseph Esherick culled the sobering lessons of this crop of Ph.D. dissertations in his article “10 Theses on the Chinese Revolution” (*Modern China* 21.1 1995), the most useful single essay on this question, and well worth assigning to bright undergraduates. He deftly synthesizes the new work which pictured the revolution as only one stage and one part of modern China, and Mao as the leader of a statist movement, not (in Mao’s 1927 phrase) “the forcible overthrow of one social class by another.” Likewise, Andrew Walder, “Actually Existing Maoism,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Studies* 18 (July 1987) crisply compares “Western view of Maoism” with the “Chinese experience of Maoism.”

In addition to these studies which undermine the sense of revolutionary inevitability and infallibility, recent revisionist studies provide background for the contention that China’s uncompromising nationalism under the Nationalists provoked Japan and handcuffed American policy. This is especially disturbing to students who have read the recent works on the Rape of Nanking, and many are struck by the parallels with the debate over American intervention from the Gulf War to Kosovo. Classes find a fascinating new moral dimension to the argument in Arthur Waldron’s introduction and notes to John Van Antwerp MacMurray, *How the Peace Was Lost: The 1935 Memorandum, “Developments Affecting America Policy in the Far East* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1992), a long suppressed State Department memorandum which challenged Roosevelt and the public’s view of the rights and wrongs of the Sino-Japanese conflict. Steven Vlastos of the University of Iowa also suggested to me Hasegawa Michiko’s 1983 article, “Postwar View of the Greater East Asia War,” translated in *Japan Echo* XI (1984): 29-37, which presents the personal thoughts and revisionist observations of a younger Japanese scholar, who speaks of a “100-Year East Asia War,” and asks “was ‘liberation of Asia’ mere demagoguery”? Most American students will not be converted by these arguments, but the exercise is useful in challenging their initial reactions to such books as *Red Star*.

An even deeper challenge comes in the works such as Thomas Rawski, *Economic Growth in Pre-war China* (1989), which undermines the idea that the Chinese “traditional” economy was stagnant (and thus that only revolution could revive it) or Sherman Cochran, *Big Business in China: Sino-foreign Rivalry in the Cigarette Industry, 1890-1930* (1980), which shows how Chinese businesses competed with some success. In the present atmosphere of debate over the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) and over China’s entry into WTO, students (and perhaps some teachers?) need to be reminded of Ye Olde Law of Comparative Advantage in order for the debate to be properly complex.

THROUGH THE REVOLUTION PARADIGM WITH ROD AND GUN: THE SEARCH FOR KEYWORD, METAPHOR, AND THE BIG STORY

These challenges to the China classics leave a question as to what to do in the classroom. Eleanor Zelliot suggests in her paper for this panel that students reading through *Kim* jot down examples of racism, vivid characters, and such. Likewise, going through these China revolution classics, it’s a good exercise to look for embedded views of history, and how these views of history changed during the decades leading up to the war with Japan and then in the years since Nixon. History changes, depending on where you are when you look at it.

First, let’s look at the nature of the reporting on China before this paradigm revolution. The paradigm for seeing China changed in the 1930s when the conflict between China and Japan replaced the White Man’s Burden and the spread of Civilization as the reference point. The texts and reporter’s books of 1910s and 1920s mainly echoed the political themes of imperialism in seeing China as a backward place in need of Western ideas and political influence. Shanghai Orientalism is brilliantly analyzed by Rodney Bickers’ recent *Britain in China: Community, Culture, and Colonialism, 1900-1949* (2000). One example is Rodney Gilbert’s *What’s Wrong With China* (1926), which is flagrant but not out of the ballpark in its condescension and spite. Quite different, but showing many of the same themes is Carl Crow’s *400 Million Customers* (1937). Still more different from treaty port Orientalism, and actually an attack on it, is Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1931). Lin Yutang’s *My Country and My People* (1937) while silkily favorable to China’s traditional culture (i.e., not “feudal”), was no more acceptable to the newly arrived Americans like Snow, White, or Belden. James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* (1931) was set in Shangri-la, a place not unlike the land of Oz at the end of the Yellow Brick Road, inspired by the actual Tibet, but often confused with China.

In this setting, *Red Star Over China* is quite a different book from the one we read in post-1976 China. It is almost too well known: as with many classics, familiarity and controversy cloud our sight. We know it by reputation more than from mindful reading. Compared to the journalists’ books emerging from China after Mao’s death in 1976, *Red Star* does indeed seem naive and blinkered; but compared to earlier work, it represents a stride forward in complexity and breadth. Snow recognizes the revolutionary nationalism and portrays the grimy politics of nation building to an American public which had previously seen a willow-ware exoticism or mere formless unpleasantness.

White and Jacoby complain in their introduction that many Western and Chinese students have looked at China “through the eyes of her classics” (probably referring to Lin) and have “regarded China as ‘quaint’ and found a timeless patina of age hanging over the villages and people . . .” (surely referring to Miss Buck). They condemned these pictures as “both false and vicious.” (p. 32) Their picture of revolutionary China was not particularly Marxist,

however, and owed more to Mark Twain, Woodrow Wilson, or FDR than to Lenin. Looking at the Chinese village, they argued that "less than a thousand years ago Europe lived this way; then Europe revolted . . ." (p. xix) The Chinese government was run by "feudal minded men" who ran it in the interests of "feudal landlords." (pp. 310-313) Failing the development of a middle class, the only other organized group was the Communists, who represented a new French Revolution: "We revere the memory of that Revolution, but we regard such uprisings in our own time with horror and loathing." (p. 20) Chapter One, "The Peasant," begins: "The Chinese who fought this war were peasants born in the Middle Ages to die in the twentieth century." The question from the nineteenth century had been "how do we make China more like Us?" The question for the wartime reporters was "how do we understand and convey the change from Feudal China to Revolutionary China?"

Another example of how a book changes when different readers read it in different times is Belden's *China Shakes the World*. The book was largely ignored when it first appeared in 1949, but became a classic when reprinted in 1970 by the Monthly Review Press with an admiring preface by Owen Lattimore, who was once delusionally reviled as an agent of Stalin and Mao. Readers then mistook it for a Maoist book; actually it is acutely skeptical of Mao and directly addressed the contradiction between Mao's populist pretensions and his despotism: "many supporters of the Chinese Communists," states Belden in his concluding pages, "have made what Montesquieu called the mistake of confusing the power of the people with the liberty of the people."

CONCLUSIONS AND SPECULATIONS: WHAT COLOR IS YOUR PARADIGM?

We'll leave for another time the question of where we go from here, paradigm-wise, but I can't quit without making at least a gesture in that direction. For a generation, the iconic view of Mao presented him as hero of Liberation and of the Cultural Revolution, with the crowds in Tiananmen in weeping adoration, waving Little Red Books. 1989 replaced that image with the equally iconic picture of the lone demonstrator confronting the tank, armed only with a briefcase; the embedded view changed from the mass/Mao icon to the individual defying the state, from civil obedience to civil disobedience.

This new icon no more shows the complex fix in which China finds itself than did the "revolution paradigm," but the teaching situation is still lively. Depending on how much time there is in a course, one appealing group of arguments is (literally) visible in the video *Gate of Heavenly Peace* (1995), narrated by Carma Hinton. *Son of the Revolution* (1983)—one student called it *Some of the Revolution*—and *Wild Swans* (1991) use analyzable strategies to present and sometimes obscure political analysis which can lead to many happy hours of wrangling. (Peter Zarrow, "Meanings of China's Cultural Revolution," *positions* 7.1 (Spring 1991): 165-191 questions the memoir literature; Ralph A. Litzinger, "Screening the Political: Pedagogy and Dissent in *The Gate*

of Heavenly Peace," *positions* 7.3 (Winter 1999): 827-850 talks about teaching the video.) The colorful Fifth Generation Films, such as *Red Sorghum*, *Blue Kite*, and *Yellow Earth* display a stifling, rural, patriarchal feudalism, and raise many of the same questions about China as *Red Star*, *Thunder Out of China*, *China Shakes the World*, and *The Good Earth*; their particular Orientalism is ironic, in that it goes back to May Fourth/New Culture attitudes which were taken up by Snow, White, and Belden, and now turned against the Party which came to power on its power.

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