

TEACHING ABOUT ASIA

Introduction: Incorporating Minorities and Women in the Teaching of China

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At last spring's annual conference of ASIANetwork and the Asian Studies Development Program two panels—"Incorporating Minorities in the Teaching of China" and "Incorporating Women in the Teaching of China"—were dedicated to addressing the new challenges in teaching of China in four different academic disciplines. Six teaching faculty from ASIANetwork member institutions discussed the theoretical and pedagogical issues in teaching history, religion, sociology, and literature of China. Like the overwhelming majority of the teaching faculty at liberal arts institutions, none of the six presenters was trained in their degree programs as a specialist in Chinese minority studies and women's studies. They have, however, become involved in these scholarly fields, conducting research projects and improving their pedagogy.

The traditional way of teaching China has centered on the Han majority and the male population—those who often held the dominant positions in society and were culturally and politically assumed to do so. Minorities and women, often the dominated, have been largely left out of the picture of Chinese life and society. But a growing awareness of minorities and women in shaping the social, economic, cultural, and political life of China has been an important development in Chinese Studies. By viewing minorities and women as significant players in Chinese society through all historical eras, the current scholarship has re-evaluated previous theories and conclusions, introduced new understandings and interpretations, and offered a good number of new teaching resources. This body of scholarship has challenged our current teaching of China in terms of defining "Chinese civilization," "Chinese culture," and "Chinese society." It argues that the reconstruction of historical China

and the understanding of contemporary China should not exclude minorities and women. The picture of Chinese life, from the dynamics of politics and philosophical development to daily family management, should not deny women as indispensable participants, even if they were, or still are, relegated to an inferior position in various aspects. Following this trend of scholarly development, introducing minorities and women into the popularly taught undergraduate courses about China including courses on Asian Civilization, Asian religion, Asian literature, and Asian sociology, demands pedagogical effort in order to integrate the new interpretations into our teaching facts, events, processes, and critical analysis.

The six presentations at these two panels suggested pedagogical methods to correct the traditional way of teaching China by stating that minorities and women were and are history makers, society builders, cultural contributors, and life partakers. The story focusing only on

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the Han majority and the male side of the majority population does not reflect the reality of life in any historical period. That focus excludes the many assumed "others" who not only lived their own existence, but also strongly influenced the Hans. Excluding minorities and women from Chinese history creates inaccuracies as severe as would a teaching of U.S. history that focused only on men of European heritage.

The two panels arrived at the following conclusions in regards to our teaching. First, the study of minority nationalities can tell us more about the overwhelming majority, the Han Chinese, and the diverse life inside China. Second, the discovery and understanding of women's roles can lead us to a deeper grasp of China in which mind, life, and society have been shaped in an intertwined gender interaction. Third, the teaching about minority nationalities (fifty-five groups with nearly ten percent of China's population) and women (roughly half of the China's population) can tell us a more complete story of the experience of China. The quality of the teaching and learning of China will be profoundly improved if the educators are able to bring scholarly knowledge of a diverse rather than uniform China, and a gender-inclusive rather than gender-exclusive interpretation of Chinese life.

At the crossroad between the traditional and new ways of teaching China, the collective efforts of the six presenters is helping lead undergraduate education into a new stage in Chinese studies. It is my sincere hope that their presentations help us all open new doors in our scholarly and pedagogical exploration of China.

The following three papers are examples of scholarship on minorities. Marsha Smith, a sociologist, started her teaching career as a non-Asianist but has developed a strong interest in China, particularly in issues surrounding identity. In this paper she examines issues of identity, focusing on the Naxi, Mosuo, Bai, and Yi nationalities in the People's Republic of China. Lihua Ying, trained in comparative literature, discusses China's recent literary movement, focusing on the writings about China's Hui and Tibetan populations. Finally, Brian Dott, a Qing historian, demonstrates how to integrate non-Chinese peoples, powers, and their dynasties into the teaching of Chinese history in both introductory and upper level courses.