

---

## 6. Teaching Modern United States History at Wuhan University

---

(Hongshan LI)

As a recipient of the OYCF Teaching Fellowship, I offered a short course on modern United States history at Wuhan University from late May to mid-June, 2004. The course was specially designed for students in experimental classes in world history, and operated by the Department of History and the Advanced Research Center at Wuhan University. Objectives of the course included providing a systematic examination of the social transition taking place in the United States within a century after the Civil War, stimulating discussion on the nature, characteristics, and results of the transformation of the United States from a largely agrarian economy and traditional society into an industrial economy and modern society, and disseminating historical knowledge and skills necessary for students to draw lessons from the experience of another people that might be valuable for China in dealing with its own social, economic, and political challenges brought by the industrialization and modernization processes. With a sharp focus on the role played by the middle class in the transformation of American society since the 1890s, this short course has aroused strong interest and heated discussion among students as well as teachers.

An invitation for future offering of this and other courses on United States history and other fields has been extended and the door for long-term cooperation between OYCF and Wuhan University remains wide open.

### **I. The Course**

With an invitation from the Institute of World History, I applied for the OYCF Teaching Fellowship in 2002 in order to offer a short course titled "Society in Transition: Themes in Modern United States History" at Wuhan University. Having successfully won the Teaching Fellowship in the same year, I originally planned to teach the course at Wuhan University in summer 2003. However, my trip to Wuhan was first delayed and then cancelled because of the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in China last year. Deeply concerned about the safety of their Teaching Fellows, OYCF graciously agreed to allow me to complete my teaching project by the end of summer 2004. Anxious to complete my teaching commitment, I left for China right after wrapping up my teaching and service obligations at Kent State University in May 2004. Arriving in Wuhan on May 25, I spent the first couple of days getting the syllabus and reading materials printed and the right classrooms assigned for the class. With help from Professors Xiang Rong, Pan Yinchun, and other staff members at the Institute of World History, I was able to deliver the first lecture to about sixty graduate and undergraduate students on May 29.

Although modern United States history is not a new teaching subject for me, I still had to devote a lot of time and energy to prepare new lectures specially developed for this project. With limited meeting time and a different student body, I set up different goals and adopted different approaches. Given the fact that China is in the middle of its own historical social transformation, I deliberately chose the transition of American society as the focus for the course. Unlike the traditional approach, which focuses on political activities mostly at the national level, this course emphasized the social, structural, and cultural forces at all levels that helped shape modern American society. With this new emphasis, the ultimate goal was to provide not only an insightful survey of modern American history, but also a solid foundation from which to draw useful lessons for China. In order to achieve that goal, I composed six three-hour units to cover various aspects of societal transition in the United States around the turn of the last century. In each unit, I included a lecture on a specific topic, reading materials chosen from original

historical documents and scholarly studies on the subject, and historical pictures, maps, and video clips to be shown in class with the use of a computer projector. In order to make the course more interesting and effective, I prepared numerous questions and planned many in-class discussions.

The first lecture offered a brief survey of the United States' rise as an industrial giant from the tension and ruins of the Civil War. Within three decades, the United States transformed itself from an oblivious agricultural economy to the greatest industrial power in the world. By the mid-20th century, most Americans lived in cities and suburbs making their living with non-agricultural jobs. While enjoying the benefits brought by the unprecedented economic growth and technological revolution, the American people had to face the side effects brought by industrialization and urbanization. American society was plagued by corruption at all levels of government, declining economic and social status of numerous small farmers, poor working and living conditions for industrial workers, and a lack of protection and help for the poor and less fortunate in society at the end of the 19th century. In other words, industrialization and modernization in the United States, like any other nation, was anything but painless.

The second and third lectures dealt with the early fruitless efforts made by workers and farmers to alleviate the pains caused by industrialization. Growing rapidly in number, industrial workers suffered the most from all kinds of side effects from industrialization. Unions became the most popular tools for workers fighting to improve their conditions. Although unions from the 1870s abandoned their earlier cries for revolutionary change in American society and began to focus their fight on higher pay, shorter working days, and safer working environments, their demands for better working and living conditions were generally ignored by employers. Frequent strikes organized by national unions like Knights of Labor and American Federation of Labor usually ended with failure since the employers always had the government on their side. As a result, most workers still had to work more than ten hours a day for extremely low pay and without any safety protection at work even at the end of 1890s.

The farmers' experience was not much better. Despite the settlement of the far west and sharp increase of agricultural production in the second half of the 19th century, farmers saw the prices for their products lower, their income decline, and their debts skyrocket. At the same time, farmers paid about three-fourths of all taxes that local and state government collected. Unable to pay their debts or taxes, many farmers lost their farms to banks. Like the workers, farmers set up their own organizations such as the Granges and the Farmers Alliances to address their problems. The organized farmers established cooperatives and petitioned state and federal governments to regulate the big corporations and banks which charged extremely high prices for farm machines with outrageous interest for loans. Although some federal and state laws were passed to alleviate the problems for farmers, the help generally was too little and too late. Millions had to give up their farms and look for industrial jobs in cities and towns. The decline of agriculture as an economic sector and withering of farmers as the dominating sector of the population thus became an irreversible trend at the end of the 19th century.

The last three lectures concentrated on the transition of American society, which was made smoother and less costly through numerous reforms led mostly by the middle class during and after the 1890s. The first effective effort to address the side effects of industrialization and modernization was made by middle-class reformers between the 1890s and World War I. Characterized by good education, normally at college level, decent income in professional jobs, and respectable social status, the swelling modern middle class was the product of

industrialization itself. Despite success in their careers and comfort in their lives, the middle class firmly rejected social Darwinism and fought to ameliorate social, moral, economic, and political problems caused by industrialization. With support from workers and farmers, the Progressives succeeded in drastically reforming government at all levels, establishing minimum government regulation on big business, installing graduated federal income tax for individuals as well as corporations, and broadening political participation through women's suffrage, direct primary, initiative, referendum, and recall. As a result, a new American society reflecting the values of the middle class and offering minimum protection for the less fortunate began to take shape.

The Great Depression proved that the reforms carried out by the Progressives were not sufficient in helping the nation cope with severe economic recessions. Like the progressive reformers, President Franklin Roosevelt and his advisors turned to government for immediate relief and long-term security. Through the adoption of numerous new laws, a new social security system was established, providing pensions for the elderly, unemployment benefits, and public assistance to the disabled, children, and women. While substantial federal subsidies were offered to farmers, maximum hours and minimum wages were adopted for industrial workers. Labor unions finally gained legal status to bargain collectively with employers. As a result, the government was given more responsibility to promote economic growth and provide security and stability for the needy in the society.

Middle class reforms continued after World War II. The rank and file of the middle class expanded sharply with G.I. bills that offered federal assistance for higher education and purchase of homes. As more and more Americans became middle class, many chose to leave urban centers and live in suburbs. Living in suburbs allowed the middle class to enjoy not only a more comfortable lifestyle, but also more favorable conditions, such as good schools, affordable housing, and direct political and social participation, for their own benefit. As the majority of the population turned from farmers into middle-class suburban dwellers, the economy evolved from an agricultural stage into industrial and then post-industrial stages, and political participation was broadened and deepened, the transformation of the American society was completed.

## **II. The Teaching**

As requested by the Department of History, "Society in Transition: Themes in Modern United States History" was offered as a one-credit-hour required course to sophomores and juniors in the World History experimental class. As part of its effort to further strengthen the World History program at Wuhan University, the Department of History had been enrolling twenty students in the World History experimental class every year since 1999. With the adoption of Western-style curricula and the use of textbooks in English, the World History experimental class became the hot pick for students in humanities, liberal arts, and social sciences. Having attracted many high scorers with strong English backgrounds, the Department took steps to expose the students to top professors from various departments within the university and visiting scholars from top universities in China and around the world. Right before my arrival at Wuhan, a professor from the University of Toronto offered lectures on Canadian history. As a unique element of the program, the Department encouraged professors to use English textbooks and teach their courses in English. I was told that lecturers would get double pay if foreign language textbooks were used and triple pay if the course was taught in English. Because I was based in the United States, I was asked to prepare my lectures in English and assign English books and

articles as required readings.

Teaching modern United States history in English to a group of talented students at Wuhan University was quite an experience for me. With the help from the PowerPoint slides, I tried to present all materials slowly and clearly. By the end of the first period of the class, I found out that most students were able to follow the lectures closely and some could ask and answer questions in English. However, in order to make all students feel free to speak in class, I made it clear that Chinese could be used in classroom discussion. Taking advantage of this rule, many students actively participated in classroom discussion, and in many cases, discussions continued long after the class was over. A similar rule was applied to the final examination. All questions were written in English, but students could use either English or Chinese or both in writing their answers. At the end, half of the forty students from the 2001 and 2002 classes used English in completing their final examination. Their English writing was generally clear and accurate. Although some graduate students from history and other departments sat in the class for most of the time, I was instructed not to allow them to take the examination so that only students from the World History experimental classes could get the credit.

### **III. The Results**

The results of the teaching were extremely positive. Many students showed strong interest in the subject and the approach adopted by the instructor. Despite their busy and oftentimes conflicting schedules during the last weeks of the semester, most students attended all the lectures, including those on Saturday or Sunday mornings. Besides attending all the lectures and completing the required reading assignments, almost all students requested the two long articles that I had set aside as optional readings. Many did read the articles and cited them in the final examination. Most students did very well in the examination composed mostly of open-ended identification and essay questions. They were able to make clear arguments and support them with strong evidence drawn from readings, lectures, and other sources available to them. In general, students showed a strong understanding of the leading role played by middle class in the transformation of American society and offered convincing analysis on the social, political, economic, and cultural impacts of the middle class reforms. With more training in both history and English, students in class 2001 did slightly better than class 2002 in the final examination.

Although no official student evaluation was given due to the time constraint, many students told me that they had learned a lot in the class. The Department was happy with the results, too. The Department of History and the Institute of World History invited me to return next year or the year after so that all students in the World History experimental program would have the opportunity to take some courses in United States history from me. Having heard about my teaching from their students or the news report published by the Wuhan University Weekly on June 16, 2004, the Masters in Public Administration program in the School of Public Administration and the Department of English also extended their invitation to me for lectures and courses on American government and society in 2005. Deeply impressed by their invitation, I promised that I would return to Wuhan University again in the near future. During all our conversations, I made brief introductions about the teaching program sponsored by OYCF, including the generous support provided by them and the diverse courses offered by the Teaching Fellows. All the department and college leaders showed strong interest in OYCF teaching programs and looked forward to having more OYCF fellows teaching at Wuhan University.

(The author is an associate professor in history at Kent State University-Tuscarawas Campus.)