

Report on OYCF Teaching Fellowship Program

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The first of all, I would like to thank OYCF Teaching Fellowship Committee again for awarding me this fellowship. I appreciate for the OYCF's financial support, which made this teaching trip at Nankai University more successful and joyful.

The course I taught at Nankai was "Theories, Methodologies, and Practice of Studying Modern Chinese Popular Culture," which was taught with interdisciplinary perspective. The topic was to meet the needs of Nankai University, which has a strong program of Chinese social history, but it lacks a course that can teach graduate students of new theories and methodologies and how to use them in their research. The course was a graduate reading seminar designed as advanced studies of the history of modern Chinese popular culture. The basic goal of this course was to help students understand various theories, methodologies, and writings related to folk traditions and culture, which are important parts of Chinese history. The students were also trained with interdisciplinary approaches, such as anthropology and sociology. The course led students to read important studies done by Western scholars.

In this course, students were required to read the following materials: Wang Di: "Dazhong wenhua yanjiu yu jindai Zhongguo shehui: dui jinnian Meiguo youguan yanjiu de shuping" [Popular culture and modern Chinese society: A review article on recent studies in the US] (*Lishi yanjiu* [Historical research], No. 5, 1999: 174-186); Wang Di, "Jietou wenhua, xiaceng minzhong ji gonggong shenghuo yanjiu de xianzhuang, ziliao he lilun fangfa wenti--yi Chengdu wei li" [Scholarship, sources, theories, and methodologies on study of street culture, lower-class people, and public life--Chengdu case] (Yang Nianqun et al. eds. *Xin Shixue: Duoxueke duihua de tujing* [New history: an interdisciplinary dialogue], vol. I, pp. 419-441, Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2003); Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford University Press, 1994. Chinese translation published by Jiangsu remin chubanshe); Philip Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Harvard University Press, 1990. Chinese translation published by Shanghai sanlian); and Joseph Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (University of California Press, 1987. Chinese translation published by Jiangsu remin chubanshe).

According to my experience and observation in Nankai, I feel the graduate students have a high quality, who study very hard and love their field. They are enthusiastic to learn more about theories, methodologies, and the state of the field. They were positive to ask questions during my teaching, which reflected their thoughtful insights. From the questions they asked, I could recognize that their reading and interest are broad. Although the course was urban and cultural history, it still attracted many students who studies political history, economic history, or rural history.

This course tried to reach the following goals: First, I tried to present a general history of Chinese popular culture and to show that Chinese culture has undergone a revolutionary change since the seventeenth century, reflecting social and economic transformation. Beginning with the collapse of the Ming dynasty and the Manchu conquest in

the seventeenth century, China experienced rapid social, economic, and cultural development, as well as urbanization and population expansion. This was followed by the challenge of the Western powers, reforms and revolutions, communist victory, the construction of socialist society, and more recent reforms in the post-Mao era.

Second, I made an effort to let students understand better the recent scholarship on studies of popular culture in the West. After students took the course, they had more knowledge to understand how the historians explained the cultural transformation and how political and economic changes had impact popular culture and daily life. In the existing studies of modern Chinese politics, we have seen mostly elite activists, who held a prominent position and reputation in the reformist and revolutionary movements, while role of ordinary people in politics has scarcely explored. The new emphasis on the study of Chinese urban history, such as inland cities, the bottom rungs of society, the street and neighborhood, lower-class people, small units of social life, and public politics, can help us understand modern Chinese cities, social transformation, and cultural continuity.

Third, my teaching also emphasized the methodologies. I taught students the methodologies of collecting sources, using the materials, and analysis. How to handle written sources is a thorny issue in the study of popular culture. When we deal with popular culture, we should understand that the thoughts, the beliefs, and the aspirations of the peasants and artisans of the past reach us almost always through distorting viewpoints and intermediaries.” This has led some scholars to raise the question, “Can the subaltern speak?” I believe it can, although this is highly dependent on how such sources are used. In general, one must recognize the nature and limitations of using written accounts to study popular culture and the lower classes.

During the teaching, I also shared my own research with students, which became one of the topics students felt interest and useful, shown at least from their feedback sheets. Most of studies of Chinese urban history have concentrated on political events, commerce and the economy, society and the state, or urban development and administration. We still lack an understanding of the lowest level of urban society and community life. My research shifts the focus of urban history from coastal to inland cities, from elites to ordinary people, from significant events to everyday life—especially public life—and from the top rungs of society to the lowest. I examine urban everyday life by investigating public space and popular culture to find out how Chengdu’s commoners, social reformers, and local authorities brought about and reacted to changes in popular culture through their use of public space. These shifts can help us understand Chinese cities from a different angle and can open a new window to look at the cities in modern China.

During my teaching, I specially discussed popular culture, daily life, and lower-class people in inland cities. Students saw that life in public spaces—the site of the most visible cultural displays—was radically transformed in the early 20th Century, which resulted in the reconstruction of urban public space, recreation of people’s public roles, and the redefinition of the relationship among ordinary people, local elites, and the state.

I used my own studies as examples how to apply the theories and methodologies discussed in the course. My studies reveal that commoners’ everyday life typically was tightly connected to streets and teahouses, and that the people of Chengdu created and enjoyed a rich street and teahouse culture. Urban residents, especially the poor, used the

street as their shared space for everyday commercial, recreational, and ceremonial events. With the onset of social change, reformers who had been influenced by Western culture sought to regulate the use of public space, and commoners had to struggle to maintain their claim to the street. While during the 1911 Revolution commoners used the streets for political protest, they organized for self-protection when warlords and armed soldiers occupied public spaces in the 1910s and 1920s. Throughout this process, Chengdu's streets underwent significant physical and cultural changes while continuing to play a critical role in urban life.

From this course, students also found that as Chinese cities were politically transformed in the early 20th Century, the inland cities developed an unprecedented connection to national politics. I examine how the reformist and revolutionary movements drew the street, teahouse, and commoners into their political orbit; how street culture and teahouse culture were transformed into street and teahouse politics; and how both elites and commoners redefined their public role mainly through addressing conflicts between the state and commoners and between the state and elites. We have seen that during this period—although street and teahouse culture and public life continued—the street and teahouse were no longer just a place for livelihood, everyday life, and amusement, but became an arena for political conflict as well. Commoners' activities on the street and in the teahouse were exploited to further local political struggles.

In the field of Chinese history, the focus has been primarily on how elite thought influenced politics, and how the relationship between popular culture and local politics could provide an opportunity to observe social transformation from another angle. Political uncertainty deteriorated public order and gradually damaged the stability of the neighborhood and community; conflicts increased between sexes, classes, and ethnic groups throughout the city. However, we should also realize that political changes opened up the relatively isolated society and brought new social, economic, and cultural elements as well. Inland cities provide an excellent examples of how politics can influence everyday life and underscores the importance of including politics in the study of popular culture.

I also discussed the problems when we study popular culture. But when we try to enter the bottom levels of the society, we face many difficulties. One major obstacle in the study of street culture and teahouse life is the difficulty in collecting and interpreting data. As we know, Chinese history was transmitted by members of the elite class; information on the everyday lives of commoners is virtually absent from standard historical accounts both locally and nationally. Overcoming this obstacle means sifting useful information from tremendous amounts of primary and secondary data sources. More challenging, however, is the interpretation of the data, almost all of which was generated by members of the elite class. In other words, the descriptions of commoners and their culture originated from elites, although the primary subject is the commoner.

Therefore, the second issue logically emerges: Any study of street culture and teahouses confronts the issue of how to distinguish popular culture from elite culture. Although historians are virtually unanimous in acknowledging a distinction between the two, the definition of each has long been the subject of scholarly debate. Scholars of China suggest that popular culture embodies a broad meaning, extending “from domestic architecture to millenarian cults, from irrigation techniques to shadow plays.” The popular culture discussed in my studies of street culture and teahouses is that created by and for commoners. In a premodern society, regional and local aspects of culture were strikingly different because

there was relatively less cultural exchange. Therefore, popular culture was often linked with “folk culture.” According to Antonio Gramsci, there are three categories of popular songs in folk culture: songs “composed by the people and for the people;” those “composed for the people but not by the people;” and those written “neither by the people nor for the people, but which the people adopt because they conform to their way of thinking and feeling.” My main focus is the first category, although, as Herbert Gans points out, “many popular culture creators are better educated than their audiences” and thus one sometimes must consider cultural artifacts that fall under Gramsci’s second and third categories.

The third issue we should emphasize is whether or not regional or local studies could provide a universal pattern of our understanding of the city and urban life in China. Microhistory is significant because it can raise case studies to a level that could provide a generalization of urban history and enrich our understanding not only of Chengdu, but also of other Chinese cities. As I have mentioned, because of the complexity of China’s geographical, economic, political, cultural, and social characteristics, phenomenon both of commonality and exception should be put under consideration. Finally, studying the most basic units of society and entering deep inside the city should not prevent us from examining general and significant events. On the one hand, studies of lower-level society lead us to the bottom of the city to observe phenomena that have been little explored. On the other hand, studies of significant events enhance our understanding of the relationship between politics and daily life. Therefore, when I focus on urban commoners, streets, or teahouses, the elite class, the state, and political movements are inevitably brought into my discussion. Such a combination makes us pay attention to macro-historical questions when we study events from a perspective of microhistory.

I evaluated students’ work in the course according to the following weightings: 1) Students were required timely, thorough and careful reading of the assigned materials and regular attendance at and active participation in class discussions, including some preparing of questions and reporting on reading. 2) Students were asked to report on their readings, which usually ran from 10-15 minutes and were related as closely as possible to the general topic under consideration. Students were prepared to handle any questions generated by their reports. 3) Students completed a review paper (typed, double spaced and each approximately 8-10 pages in length). Students were evaluated on class participation and contributions and on written assignments. Final grades were based on the following evaluations: participation in class 50% and review paper 50%.

Of course, this course had some needed improved. Students should be given more opportunities to express their ideas and to discuss the topics. Students should also be given a chance to finish a research paper so they would have used what they learned from class to practice their research and writing skills. Also, I felt I might talk too much the theories in the West, which students might have a problem to handle. I should have understood that if we gave students overwhelming information without enough explanation and discussion, they might have difficulties to digest what they were given. However, I still feel this teaching experience was worthy and awarding, benefiting not only students but also myself.