**Introduction and Objectives**

- The study of modern China is intertwined with contentious and sensitive historical issues.
- The politicization of the field of China Studies makes certain politically sensitive topics (e.g., the Maoist era, ethnic relations, human rights issues) highly controversial and emotionally charged.
- Broad agreement exists on the importance of addressing controversial topics in higher education, but less agreement exists on how exactly to do so.
- How, then, can instructors in China Studies and other fields address sensitive historical topics without promoting demonization or defensiveness? How can controversy and contention serve as an object of discussion rather than a hindrance to discussion?

**Methods**

- Students (n=18) came from:
  - China, where the history of the Cultural Revolution is generally avoided in historical instruction.
  - Chinese families in the US, some of whom had experienced the Cultural Revolution.
  - Non-Chinese backgrounds, with varying degrees of familiarity with modern Chinese history.
- Rather than finding, testing, and verifying a final answer, this project’s focus has been upon creating new concepts to generate novel perspectives and approaches.

**Typical Responses to Controversy**

- Controversy: A discussion marked especially by the expression of opposing views (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).
- Binary opposition: discussion divided into teams of “us” and “them”.
- Abstraction: binary division distracts from concrete topic at hand.
- Reidentification: as anyone who has watched a cable news talk show knows, the discussion of controversial topics and the resulting opposition and abstraction tends to only reinforce people’s already-held opinions.
- How can these standard responses be avoided?

**From Reidentification to Deidentification**

- Reidentification in the discussion of controversy is based in simplistic oppositions and identitary assumptions of stable, unchanging attitudes.
- The primary oppositions in the field of China Studies are “Chinese”: “Non-Chinese,” “East”: “West”.
- Such imagined national/regional oppositions and identificatory assumptions undermine learning as a process of development.
- Diversity of opinions and authors: not only include “Western” and “Eastern” histories of the Cultural Revolution, but also detotalize these categories, highlighting debates and disagreements internal to each.
- Detach viewpoints from presumed ties to identity, revealing the non-existence of a uniquely “Chinese” or “Western” view of history.
- Promote learning as a process of reflection and growth rather than reinforcing beliefs modeled through my retracing of my own shifting viewpoint on Mao-era China.

**Conclusion**

- The pedagogy of controversy should teach against our easy, instinctive responses to controversy.
- The binaries and abstraction surrounding controversial topics tend to promote reidentification and hinder learning.
- Blurring conventional binaries and engaging with concrete human realities may promote identification with the fundamental humanity of the topic at hand, challenging both romanticized projections and comfortably distanced denunciations.

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**From Abstraction to Humanization**

- Conventional print histories fail to fully communicate the experience of the Cultural Revolution, leaving room for romanticized projections or distanced denunciation.
- Source diversity: combining historical readings with extensive documentaries and photographs.
- Documentary viewing (such as Michelangelo Antonioni’s “Chung-kuo”) provides the closest approximation of fieldwork in a history class.
- Not only easier to capture student attention, but also more effective at capturing the human reality of events.
- From abstraction to the human experience of this era—this experiences combining aesthetic intoxication (left image) and pointless suffering (above and right images)