The pedagogy of controversy in the field of China Studies
Teaching the Cultural Revolution

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ABSTRACT
How can we as educators address complex and controversial topics in the social sciences without encouraging simplistic responses and self-reproducing binary oppositions? Drawing upon an ethnographic analysis of a first-year writing seminar on the history of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, this article proposes novel approaches to overcome instinctive reactions to contentious topics. Arguing that the experience of controversy produces self-reinforcing binary oppositions that become autopoetically abstracted from the actual topic of discussion, I build upon specific seminar experiences to propose two novel and practical concepts for the pedagogy of controversy: (1) deidentification, which refers to a process of disengagement from the binaries and thus identities that structure and reproduce controversy, and (2) humanisation, which refers to a process of moving beyond abstractions to reidentify with the fundamentally human experience of contentious historical moments. The pedagogy of controversy, I argue, must teach against our conventional identificatory responses to controversy to promote a more nuanced understanding of inherently complex issues.

KEYWORDS
anthropology, China Studies, controversy, history, identity, pedagogy

Introduction
Based on the ethnographic analysis of a first-year writing seminar at Cornell University on the history and historiography of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, this article examines the challenges and the potential inherent within the pedagogy of contentious historical and political issues in the
field of China Studies. The intersection of a politicised field of study, recent demographic shifts in the American university, and uncertainty and gaps in the pedagogy of controversy combine to produce a challenge for scholars engaged in teaching controversial topics in China Studies. This article thus asks how instructors might overcome this politicisation and the often simplistic binary thinking that it produces in order to address controversial topics in ways that enhance rather than block discussion. In response to this question, I propose two new concepts for the pedagogy of controversy: (1) deidentification, which refers to a process of disengagement from the binaries that structure and reproduce controversy, and (2) humanisation, which refers to a process of moving beyond abstractions to reidentify with the fundamentally human experience of contentious historical moments. In conclusion, I argue that the pedagogy of controversy is best served by teaching against humans’ conventional binary-identificatory reactions to controversy, providing concrete lessons for instructors handling controversial topics across disciplines.

The pedagogy of controversy

Controversial and sensitive topics are, by their very nature, uncomfortable and even at times difficult to discuss. Despite these inherent challenges, however, the scholarship on teaching and learning is largely in agreement that such topics have an important place in the classroom. If education is to have a tangible and concrete purpose, one of its central roles should be preparing students for their lives after graduation: lives in which avoiding difficult issues and decisions will unfortunately not be an option.1 A quick glance at the recent news cycle provides a snapshot of not only the inevitability but indeed the centrality of such issues in the daily life of the world today: in recent months, there have been lengthy debates about resolving the increasingly irresolvable Syria conflict, growing tensions between China and Japan as a result of the former’s declaration of a new Air Defence Identification Zone and global discussion of Russia’s anachronistic official stance on homosexuality. In a global society in which a perceived state of emergency ‘is not the exception but the rule’ (Taussig 1992) such topics are inescapable. And because a democratic society relies upon the ability of citizens to engage in discussion with fellow citizens that is ideally thoughtful and relatively rational, including those with whom they disagree, the skills to address such topics with careful thought and sustained deliberation should be central to the educational process, particularly in institutions of higher education.
Yet if there is widespread agreement about the importance of confronting difficult topics and the ‘educative power of intellectual conflict’ (Johnson, Johnson and Smith 2000) the question of how to confront such topics remains open for discussion. Researchers in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning have examined strategies for presentation, discussion, debate and reflection in the study of controversy from a variety of different angles. Three essential topics raised by previous studies are discussed below.

**Demystifying the ideal of the ‘neutral’ instructor**

Against the standard idealisation of false neutrality in the classroom setting, O’Brien and Howard (1996) argue that a teacher as a model of responsible authority cannot be value neutral. Acknowledging one’s values and adopting a critical and reflective posture towards these values and their effects upon one’s teaching, the authors argue, models ‘responsible authority’. By the same token, attempting to separate oneself from said values under the guise of neutrality is fundamentally ‘irresponsible’. Concretely demonstrating this principle in practice, Diana Hess’s analysis (2005) of instructors’ political views and pedagogy recounts a class debate from the 1960s on the United States’ Equal Rights Amendment, in which she as instructor went to great lengths to ensure that both sides of the argument were presented, and that her own viewpoint did not sway the course of discussion. After class, Hess heard two students trying to figure out ‘what the teacher’s opinion was’ (Hess 2005: 47), which initially led her to congratulate herself as an exemplary neutral teacher. Yet she was surprised to find that, in discussion over lunch with fellow instructors, her neutral approach to controversy generated a great deal of controversy: one colleague memorably characterised her as a ‘political eunuch’ (Hess 2005: 48) who overlooked real moral issues and engagement in the name of supposed ‘neutrality’. Looking back on this now decidedly less controversial controversy with the benefit of four decades’ distance, Hess concludes that feigning neutrality on a controversial subject is not only impractical, but also irresponsible. Yet Hess still emphasises the importance of not overpowering the discussion, seeking an elusive balance between neutrality and opinion.

**Instructors’ presentation**

Oxfam’s 2006 guide ‘Teaching Controversial Issues’ proposes a series of potential ‘styles’ for teachers in confronting controversies. The largely self-explanatory
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approaches include committed, academic, devil’s advocate, advocate, impartial chairperson and declared interest. Implementation, however, is considerably less self-explanatory: no particular approach is suggested over and above the others, and the guide somewhat vaguely recommends, in the midst of these various approaches, approximating a ‘balanced’ approach to controversy. Similarly indeterminate is Carolyn Gallaher’s examination of the pedagogy of political violence (2004), which raises the important question of how extreme experiences can best be represented in the classroom, particularly in light of the passions that surround any attempt to represent and understand often incomprehensible acts of violence. Yet Gallaher’s compelling analysis is lacking in concrete, specific recommendations for pedagogical practice. Susan Schramm-Pate and Richard Lussier’s study based on the implementation of a critical pedagogical approach to the confederate flag controversy in South Carolina highlights far more clearly the importance of diversifying media to promote new perspectives in a rural, working-class, white and conservative community (Schramm-Pate and Lussier 2003). Moving beyond state-mandated textbooks with their ‘traditional narrative of progress, peace, freedom, democracy, and prosperity with things just getting better all the time’ and their reliably conservative interpretation of the notion of ‘Southern heritage’ (Schramm-Pate and Lussier 2003: 61), these instructors incorporated novel reading materials on the 2000 controversy surrounding the display of the Confederate Flag on the grounds of the South Carolina State House, including newspaper articles from the local and national press and statements from the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Such diversity of materials provides a useful albeit quite general guideline for instructors, advice to which I will return later in my analysis.

Discussion and debate

Schramm-Pate and Lussier’s article (2003) further highlights their moving beyond conventional lecturing by involving students in a far-reaching programme of journaling, debating, researching, writing reflective essays and role-playing on the Confederate Flag controversy. On a similar theme, Barton and McCully (2007) directly confront the challenges of presenting and discussing controversial historical issues within the even more politically charged educational context of Northern Ireland. In this educational atmosphere, in which the controversies addressed are both immensely powerful and personal, the authors provide useful recommendations that instructors
(1) be prepared for emotional responses and deal openly with emotions, (2) avoid hiding their own positions on these controversies, and (3) explore the full diversity of viewpoints that exist amongst students.

The current scholarship in each of these areas, from the role of the instructor, to the presentation of the topic, to the facilitation of discussion thus provides essential background knowledge and useful guidance for instructors hoping to address controversial topics in the classroom. At the same time, however, current scholarship leaves many questions unresolved: how can we move beyond the myth of the neutral instructor without dominating or disrupting the balance in the classroom discussion of controversial topics? What sorts of media are most useful in addressing controversial topics? How might we acknowledge emotional investments and identifications without their blocking discussion and the exchange and development of ideas? Just as there are no easy answers to the controversial historical and political issues addressed by each of the articles cited above, so there are no easy answers to these questions of pedagogy. And while I also cannot feign to provide a final answer, my experiences teaching a highly emotionally charged and controversial historical topic – the Cultural Revolution in China – might contribute a new perspective to thinking through these issues.

Disciplinary, political and demographic context

The complications and uncertainties raised by the pedagogy of controversy are only further compounded in this case by their location within the field of China Studies. This case study thus provides two unique contributions to the study of controversy. First, China Studies as a whole is an immensely politically charged discipline, as a result of (1) the political investments of scholars, (2) extensive state monitoring of scholarship both within China and abroad, and (3) recent trends in academia. In a process of disciplinary self-selection, researchers and instructors in the field of China Studies have often held a largely optimistic if not necessarily overly positive perspective on the modern history of China, investing themselves more often in the task of countering perceived misunderstandings and bias amongst the ‘general public’ than in confronting the often harsh realities of history and politics. One cannot fully ascertain whether these ideological propensities are a product of, or only further reinforced by, the Chinese state’s visa policies, which from 1949 to the present have rewarded scholars with ‘politically correct’
viewpoints and never shied away from denying entry to scholars who confronted tough issues that, at least from the state’s perspective, are considered part of the ‘plot to demonise China’\(^2\) would be better left unstudied (De Vise 2011; Link 2005).\(^3\) There are, one must remember, quite a number of such topics: the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and Tiananmen; Taiwan, Xinjiang, Mongolia, and of course Tibet; ethnic tensions, media control, religious repression, political persecution and now, particularly in light of recent media profiles of state leaders and off-shore accounts, state corruption (Barboza 2012; Forsythe 2012; Guevera et al. 2014). Yet whatever the cause of these ideological propensities may be, these trends have been further compounded by the ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences and rise of a culturally relativistic postmodernism, which promotes a simplistic and homogenising celebration of an idealised ‘subaltern’ and rationalises turning away from critical approaches to sensitive topics outside of ‘the West’ (Bayart 2010; Zechetner 1997). These currents have come together to produce a politically charged field of studies, filled with brewing controversies, whose instructors are often eager, for reasons both comprehensible and incomprehensible, to avoid discussion of said controversies.

In a memorable anecdote highlighting the often ironic products of these intersecting currents, we know that Chinese scholar and recent Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo arrived at Columbia University in the spring of 1989 as a visiting scholar, hoping finally to find an open space in which to assess critically the modern history and contemporary dilemmas facing his home country, China. Yet Liu’s time at Columbia coincided with the emergence of postcolonial theory in academia, a trend that was less than concerned with his own concerns, while ironically claiming to speak in his ‘voice’. A recent profile of Liu’s experience recounts, ‘people expected him, as a visitor from China, to fit in by representing “the subaltern”, by resisting the “discursive hegemony” of “the metropole”, and so on’ (Link, Martin-Liao and Liu 2011: xvi). Liu was purportedly amazed by the naivety of many Western scholars in taking government statements at face value, as well as the great lengths to which such scholars would go to justify and rationalise these tendencies through complicated theories fundamentally detached from real experience (also cf. Zhang 1992). Institutional, disciplinary and discursive self-reproduction suggests that the environment which Liu encountered twenty-some years ago has not changed greatly.

Second, beyond the field of Chinese Studies as a whole, the Cultural Revolution itself is a topic surrounded by both emotions and uncertainties. It
was once hailed as the first step towards the creation of a ‘new world’ by Mao’s Comrade-in-Arms, Lin Biao, a viewpoint still reliably found amongst the monotonous mountains of documents produced throughout the decade from 1966 to 1976. Yet just a few years later, the Cultural Revolution was simply labelled ‘a decade of catastrophe’ in a Party resolution (CCP Central Committee 1981) and barred from open discussion and research in China (CCP 1996). Such conflicting views are also present in what might be called ‘Western academia’, varying from unabashed romanticism (Feigon 2006; Gao 2008) to open and unsparing criticism (Leys 1981). A possible source of these polarised sentiments is the contradictory fact that the Cultural Revolution was on the one hand initiated under the auspices of truly inspiring ideals (equality, innovation, anti-bureaucratisation) while on the other hand being implemented to the most disastrous of effects (ideological fanaticism, senseless violence, irreversible suffering and death). Such intellectual and emotional conflict, caught between the promise of idealism and the sad record of its implementation, is addressed by Williams Donahue (2008) in his discussion of a course on the 1968 Red Terror in West Germany. Donahue recommends directly confronting political movements’ awe-inspiring ideals as well as the unfortunate consequences of these ideals, leaving room for multiple lessons, both hopeful and cautionary, to be taken away from this moment. Unfortunately, in the case of the Cultural Revolution, both scholars and students far too often tend to take away whichever lessons they find most amenable to their own ideological stances: the polemical battle that began with the spring 1966 debate on Wu Han’s play ‘Hai Rui Dismissed From Office’ ironically continues to live on in the attempt to sort through the events that followed.

The difficulties surrounding China Studies and the topic of the Cultural Revolution in particular are further complicated by a recent demographic shift in education in the United States, namely the influx of undergraduate students from China to institutions of higher education. Having tripled in population over the past three years, students from China now constitute the largest group of international students in the United States (Gao 2011). The roots of this growing trend can be found in, on the one hand, rapidly growing wealth in China and widespread demand for the type of high-quality educational experience that is not generally available in domestic higher education. In addition, widespread demand in the United States for a more diverse student body and, amidst the economic difficulties and budget cuts of the past few years, for students who can pay full tuition has
also contributed to the increasing numbers of students from China (Bartlett and Fisher 2011). This is fundamentally a win-win situation: diversifying student bodies, promoting cultural exchange and helping colleges make ends meet. My own observations and discussion with fellow scholars and teachers indicate that many students from China in United States institutions of higher education have also elected to take courses on the topic of China, another win-win situation. These students enrich classroom discussions, while also having an opportunity to see and consider new perspectives on their home country.

However, students coming from China have, in the first two decades of their lives, been raised within an extremely constrained narrative of modern Chinese history and politics (Friedman 2008). To briefly summarise this narrative in relation to the Cultural Revolution, this decade is characterised solely as ‘a mistake’ implemented by a few bad apples, known as the Gang of Four, who somehow weaselled their way to the top of an otherwise pure and always correct party. Similarly incomplete and fundamentally inaccurate yet ‘politically correct’ narratives exist for many important moments in modern Chinese history. As such, this ideological background can pose a new challenge for instructors in the field of Chinese Studies. For example, a recent article in *The Atlantic* entitled ‘Clash of Civilizations: the Confusion of Being a Chinese Student in America’ (Gao 2011) written by a former undergraduate student from China, cites self-censorship, defensive reactions and an ‘instinctive compulsion to take China’s side’ when controversies related to one’s homeland emerge. The widespread state-friendly activism amongst Chinese student groups in the spring of 2008 on the topic of Tibet–China relations and the demonisation and harassment of students who ran afoul of the overly constraining official discourse on this topic is one case with which many fellow scholars will be familiar. Barton and McCully’s (2007) article examining the pedagogy of controversy in Northern Ireland addresses similar issues of emotional investment and defensive reactions in a different context. Yet both Barton and McCully, along with their students, pursued these questions as insiders: this article builds upon and expands their research by examining how an ‘outsider’ can successfully pursue controversial topics with ‘insiders’ in an external, open classroom context. Or rather, how does a so-called ‘Western’ instructor, once concerned with righting misperceptions or perceived bias amongst non-Chinese students of contemporary China, confront this new conundrum of addressing and discussing controversial topics in Chinese history.
in a way that does not automatically provoke defensive reactions amongst students from China?

This article thus analyses the process of teaching a difficult topic within a complex field of study in light of diverse student backgrounds and demographic shifts. Within these intersecting yet conflicting currents, how can we pursue taboo topics in modern Chinese history without immediately turning students off as ‘anti-China propagandists’? Can the inherent complexity and sensitivity of historical events serve as an object of discussion rather than a hindrance to discussion? How can we grapple with the full weight of modern Chinese history, from the Cultural Revolution to Tiananmen to Tibet, without ourselves or our students of any national and ideological background becoming trapped in a binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’? Although the combination of controversial topics and diverse student backgrounds raises new questions and new challenges for approaches to teaching, it also provides new opportunities. What scholar of contemporary China, after all, would pass up the exciting opportunity to discuss openly the history of the Cultural Revolution and post-Maoism with students coming from contemporary China? This article, based on just such an opportunity and challenge in the form of a seminar on the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) with a primarily Mainland Chinese student body, examines the pedagogy of controversy within a demanding yet always exhilarating field of study, confronting these challenges and the lessons learned in this process, to suggest methods for future instructors to confront these issues.

Methodology

This article contemplates the questions above based upon my experiences teaching a first-year writing seminar at Cornell University. My seminar addressed the history of the Cultural Revolution and the ways in which this history has been processed both domestically and internationally since the initiation of this movement in 1966 and its conclusion in 1976. Participants in this course came from a diverse array of backgrounds: six were recently arrived international students from the People’s Republic of China, another eight were of Chinese descent, and another four were ‘Caucasian’. Writing seminars at Cornell University are required courses for all first-year students, and are designed to introduce these students to the nuances of academic
writing and thinking through in-depth engagement with and reflection upon a particular topic in the disciplines.

Students were placed in this course by completing a request form for the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines in which they listed their top three selections for a fall writing seminar. These students selected and engaged with a course that was intertwined with controversial and sensitive subjects: the role of the still-revered leaders of the Maoist era in inciting violence, popular participation in persecution, the enactment and experience of political violence, student violence against teachers and children’s violence against parents, cannibalism, the politicisation of culture and human relationships to the ideas of tradition and culture, ethnic relations and ethnic persecution, state constructions of history and the burdens of national identity and national guilt. This combination of a series of difficult topics and a student body with vastly divergent relationships to and understandings of the events and identities under discussion posed a challenge to everyone involved. Yet my focus throughout this seminar was to use these difficulties as catalysts for, rather than hindrances to, reflection and discussion.

This article is an ethnographic study of this process. Ethnographic reflection, in this author’s opinion, provides an opportunity to confront and analyse the details of classroom dynamics and the unexpected developments that make both the teaching and the research process not only interesting but also instructive, mining the details of the learning process to produce arguably more resonant although undeniably less experimentally reproducible results. The end goal of my qualitative analysis is then not statistically verifiable results but rather the ‘creation of concepts’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1996: 10) to generate new perspectives, suggestions, and approaches in the navigation of this inevitably unwieldy process known as teaching, so as to inform and improve my own teaching and hopefully that of others who can relate to the issues addressed herein. As is always the case, the real verification of these results can only be found in their implementation in future teaching contexts and subsequent development.

**Concepts**

The whole country’s got a fucked up mentality. We all got a gang mentality. Republicans are fucking idiots. Democrats are fucking idiots. Conservatives are idiots and liberals are idiots. Anyone who makes up their mind before
they hear the issue is a fucking fool! Everybody is so busy wanting to be down with a gang! I'm a conservative! I'm a liberal! I'm a conservative! It's bullshit!

Be a fucking person.


*From reidentifying binaries to deidentification*

When I visited China during my undergraduate education and told Chinese acquaintances that my main research interest was the Cultural Revolution, the response that I received was nearly unanimous: ‘why would you study that?’ Friendlier acquaintances recommended that I pursue the study of a topic that might be more redeeming: ‘you know, China’s economy has been developing particularly rapidly in recent decades. Why don’t you do some research on the economic growth of the past thirty years?’ Other acquaintances, less inclined to friendly advice, suggested that my choice of topic was a deliberate attempt to demonise China, and that my research was part of the vast ‘anti-China conspiracy’ that had been seemingly meticulously documented in a series of paranoid-nationalist bestsellers in the late 1990s (cf. Gries 2004; Li and Liu 1996). Beyond revealing the troubled relationship in contemporary Chinese society to quite recent history, these responses, when examined from a microsociological perspective, reveal the all-too-easy binaries into which individuals tend to drift when discussing historical controversies in a cross-cultural context.

In raising the topic of the Cultural Revolution as a research interest, a binary schema was immediately produced in my listeners’ minds between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The Cultural Revolution was tied to ‘us’, my acquaintances, and the research in this area was being conducted by ‘them’, with the results that personal relations and conversations are alienated through national imaginaries. This pattern is not, however, solely a product of the unique political context in China: my experiences discussing this topic in the United States have often similarly resulted in comfortable condemnation of the events known as the Cultural Revolution as a totalitarian problem ‘over there’, or equally misplaced ‘revolutionary’ enthusiasm, seeking out some pure and fantastic political experience which is lacking in our own society. Within such a framework, history is not treated as an object of study for the purpose of reflection, but rather as a projection board for one’s own assumptions
and investments: whether as a dirty national secret to be kept under wraps by recommending the study of more redeeming topics of which ‘we’ can be proud;¹ or from another perspective as a historical stain safely belonging to an ‘other’, which we can condemn before returning to other more redeeming topics of which ‘we’ can be proud. As should be obvious to anyone who has ever viewed a cable news show, the discussion of controversial topics, often structured around simplistic binaries and identities, primarily has the effect of reproducing and reinforcing these binaries.

In response to this tendency, throughout my teaching in this seminar, I attempted to implement an approach that I have now, in retrospect, labelled deidentification: a concept whose meaning I clarify below.

First, and most obviously, controversies are controversial precisely because they have the potential to shake us out of the complacency that surrounds our longstanding personal assumptions and sense of selfhood. Reflecting upon the most emotionally charged controversies in American culture today, one might note that they circulate around matters of life, death, sexuality and national and racial identity: matters about which people have strong opinions, and thus in relation to which they develop a strong sense of identification. The Cultural Revolution and other examples of controversial historical moments similarly impinge upon the will to a positive national identity and related matters of national and imaginarily personal dignity (Habermas 1988). As such, once a stance has been chosen, or a ‘team’ selected (or more often designated by birth), immense resistance develops towards acknowledging other viewpoints, along with the facts which support those viewpoints. And even in situations in which in-group favouritism and out-group bias are overcome, the end result is often a critical approach to one’s own in-group and an unthinking romanticisation of an out-group, which is presumed, again within a simplistic binary framework, to possess all of the strengths perceived to be lacking in one’s own in-group: to provide examples beyond the field of China Studies, Noam Chomsky’s now clearly misplaced enthusiasm for the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s (Chomsky and Herman 1979) represents such a tendency, as does Michel Foucault’s incomprehensible celebration of the fundamentalist-theocratic 1979 revolution in Iran as a correspondent for Le Nouvel Observateur (Afary and Anderson 2005).

The discussion of controversy is thus a process which thrives upon identification, and through which identification thrives. A deidentifying approach, by contrast, seeks to move beyond such a self-affirming and thus self-reinforcing reification of history, considering the matters at hand rather than our pre-existing investments in these matters.
I attempted to model precisely such a deidentifying approach from the first day of classroom discussions. Recounting to my students the origins of my interest in the Cultural Revolution and thus tracing the history of my personal viewpoints on Maoism, I shared the somewhat embarrassing fact that, at their age, I had felt a certain degree of enthusiasm towards this movement. Convinced that education about communist countries in the United States concealed more than it revealed, I envisioned Maoism as an alternative to the path of governance and development currently implemented in what we term the ‘Western world’: a path seemingly more radical and thus potentially more liberating. Such thinking was the product of precisely the type of simple, identity-based binary described above: that which was lacking in our own political and economic experience was presumed to be automatically present in ‘the other’. Yet upon reading in more detail about the realities of the Cultural Revolution and people’s experiences and memories of this period, I soon learned that despite the apparent shortcomings of our own systems of governance and economic development, the model implemented in the Cultural Revolution, while undoubtedly different, was not a solution, and arguably posed an even larger and more burdensome problem.

Should I have laid my cards on the table like this on the first day of class? As noted above, recent studies in the pedagogy of controversy (Barton and McCully 2007; Hess 2005) have criticised the longstanding illusion of the detached teacher standing in an imaginary objective middle space beyond opinions, arguing instead for the importance of instructors being forthcoming about their own viewpoints. On the one hand, students who spend an entire semester discussing a particular topic with you will undoubtedly be able to figure out your opinions over the course of the semester, no matter to what lengths you may go to disguise them. On the other hand, as a ‘responsible authority figure’ (O’Brien and Howard 1996), it is important to show one’s willingness to take a clear stand on issues, and to avoid modeling an irresolute, wavering and opaque approach to matters of fundamental human importance in the name of the myth of the neutral instructor. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the usefulness of such disclosure, it is equally important to avoid portraying one’s viewpoint as rigid and unchanging, as a firm identity that arose spontaneously as knowledge and has remained fixed over the years: the sole correct perspective, illusorily held from one’s first exposure to the topic through to the present. Instead, by acknowledging one’s viewpoints and their transformations on the basis of learning, one can...
effectively model a way of looking at difficult topics without simply clinging to one’s assumptions and opinions.

The transformation in my opinion of the Cultural Revolution over the past decade, shared with my students on the first day of class, attempted to achieve precisely this by modelling deidentification in two primary senses. First, as mentioned above, my early assumptions about Maoist China and the Cultural Revolution had been based upon a simplistic and identity-based binary thinking: that which was lacking in my own political and economic experience was presumed to be automatically present in that of the Cultural Revolution. A more distanced and nuanced reflection that moves beyond simplistic binaries would acknowledge that in fact both models could be lacking to varying degrees: problems on one side of a binary do not automatically imply strengths on the other side of the binary. Second, in addition to moving beyond the type of simplistic binaries and accompanying assumptions that mapped the world throughout the Cold War, my tracing of my own opinion regarding the Cultural Revolution as an exploratory process rather than a firmly consistent and unwavering identity provided a model of the type of deidentificatory learning that I aim to promote. I took a similar approach in classroom discussions throughout the semester, questioning stances in which I believed, raising unexpected quandaries, bringing opposing viewpoints into dialogue, and of course every once in a while playing devil’s advocate to enact the goals of setting aside our assumptions, continually questioning our opinions, taking in and processing rather than simply categorising and accepting or dismissing new information, and viewing knowledge as a process rather than a completed goal. Such an approach could help to ensure that our discussion of the topic of the Cultural Revolution would be a learning experience (Semetsky 2006) rather than a simplistic identification with opinions and subsequent opposition to others.

The arguably inherent human tendencies of in-group favouritism and out-group bias (Abrams and Hogg 1988) are magnified in the idea of the nation and the burdens of its inevitably troubled history. The resulting simplistic binaries, such as those described at the beginning of this section, then hinder discussion by constructing an imagined opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and viewing the discussion as a competition. Controversy, structured around identities, primarily has the effect of reinforcing these identities. The pedagogy of controversy within the field of national history should not only ensure exposure to the full range of viewpoints on any topic at hand, but also detach those viewpoints from any presumptive ties to identity, founded
upon the appealing yet limiting notions of patriotism and national pride. Deidentification is central to this process.

From abstraction to humanisation

A controversy is, according to one dictionary definition, ‘a discussion marked especially by the expression of opposing views’ (Merriam Webster). This concise definition revealingly focuses upon the opposing viewpoints that develop around the matter at hand, rather than the nature of the matter at hand itself, unintentionally yet quite fittingly highlighting the identificatory and re-identificatory processes in the discussion of controversy. These processes are founded, as shall be discussed in this section, upon the abstraction of the topics or events into objects of identification rather than actual events, reproducing identifications, as well as, by extension, the original controversies around which they are structured and abstracted. My original understanding of the Cultural Revolution, discussed in the previous section, was founded upon precisely such an identifying binary. The deidentifying processes noted above and the development of my understanding of the Cultural Revolution were not the product of a sudden and spontaneous change, but rather emerged over the years through exposure to a diverse array of viewpoints about and most importantly personal narratives of this event. Such exposure made this event more than an abstract idea about which one has an opinion, but rather an actual concrete event which millions of human beings just like myself actually underwent over the span of a decade. Such recognition of the reality and humanity of a historical event or other controversy is intertwined with the notion of deidentification noted above, and constitutes the second main approach applied in my teaching: humanisation.

There is a vast array of media for introducing and discussing the Cultural Revolution: a diversity which, if handled properly, can greatly enrich not only discussion but also understanding of this moment in history. My seminar employed one conventional narrative history of the Cultural Revolution, Mao’s Last Revolution by Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals (2008), as a main textbook. Although this work contains countless powerful stories alongside meticulous documentation of the details of politics and society in this tumultuous decade, the distance provided in such a straightforward narrative of history creates an atmosphere in which it is far too easy to maintain simplistic projections. As such, I also incorporated primary materials directly from this era featured in Michael Schoenhals’ collection China’s Cultural Revolution: Not
"a Dinner Party" (1996). These brought the simultaneously surreal yet all-too-real discursive environment of the times to light for students through readings of media outlets and Red Guard journals from this period. Beyond these two primary texts, I further aimed within my course design to include the full range of analytical perspectives and viewpoints that have been aired on the topic, from philosophical treatises celebrating the Cultural Revolution as ‘an event’ (e.g. Alain Badiou 2001) to state critiques of the movement as a decade of disaster (CCP Central Committee 1981), and of course every opinion in between.

Even if one presented all of the possible opinions about a historical event, so long as this presentation is framed within a national viewpoint, binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ remain present, and the temptation to fall into the simple ‘expression of opposing views’ from fixed positions is far too strong. As noted above, my students came from diverse backgrounds. Yet no matter their background, in the discussion of these events and the opinions surrounding them, there always remained the risk of viewing the Cultural Revolution as a uniquely ‘Chinese’ event – for some an object of embarrassment or defence as ‘us’, and for others an object of demonisation and denunciation as ‘them’. In response to this potential pitfall, a tempting reidentification in the midst of my search for deidentification, I strove throughout the discussion of the Cultural Revolution to move beyond the portrayal of this event as a national issue, encouraging its interpretation instead as a fundamentally human issue. It is essential not only to move beyond a singular and simple narrative of what were inherently complex events through exposure and discussion of multiple perspectives, but also to break through the equally simplistic binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’ or ‘good and ‘bad’ that can often characterise thinking in China Studies and about historical controversies in general.

Modelling the breakdown of this binary, I included readings from Chinese authors celebrating the Cultural Revolution (certainly not difficult to find in primary documents from this period), readings from Chinese authors which take a critical approach to the Cultural Revolution (Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao’s *Turbulent Decade*, 1996), readings from non-Chinese authors which also take a critical approach to the Cultural Revolution (Roderick Farquhar and Michael Schoenhals’ *Mao Last Revolution*, 2008), and readings from non-Chinese authors that take a celebratory approach to the Cultural Revolution (such as Alain Badiou’s (2001) meditations on the Cultural Revolution as an ‘event’ alongside Richard Wolin’s historical study on the aspiring Red Guards of Paris (2010)). This design broke through the ever resilient block of identity (Sementsky 2008), demonstrating that there was not only a wide range of opinions
on and assessments of the Cultural Revolution, but also that viewpoints were not tied to nationality: that there was not, as is commonly presumed and even openly claimed, a uniquely ‘Chinese’ or uniquely ‘Western’ viewpoint on these events. In fact, some of the most thoughtful and engaging work on uncovering and thinking through the history of the Cultural Revolution in recent decades has been conducted by Chinese scholars and filmmakers, despite the ban on the topic. And some of the most unrealistically optimistic and fawning work on the history of the Cultural Revolution in recent decades has been conducted by ‘Western’ authors, despite open discussion and widespread knowledge of the disastrous effects of this movement. By highlighting these inherently complex intellectual currents, my goal was to move beyond simplistic labels of self–other or good–bad so as to engage students in the real debates emerging about this historical event both within China and beyond: the types of debates that first caught my interest in this topic.

Students were brought one step closer to the real issues and experiences surrounding this historical event through another diversification of sources: namely the diversification of media and the resulting humanisation of the Cultural Revolution through exposure to the experiences of this period. Beyond the back-and-forth of textual sources which invariably, as detached black and white lines on pieces of paper, fail to represent the reality of this event fully, I incorporated documentaries into our learning experience (A Century of Revolution, Although I am Gone, Morning Sun, Red Art, The Passion of the Mao and Chung-Kuo) as well as a number of photographic books. In incorporating these media, I of course do not intend to suggest that film or pictures are more ‘real’ than words, but rather that, in light of the infamous inexpressibility of pain and tragedy (Scarry 1985), as well as the often incomprehensible appeal of Maoist aesthetics, these images might bring learners closer to the full intoxication and horror of the events at hand. A Century of Revolution and Morning Sun are two Western-produced documentaries, composed primarily of archival images from the period and first-person interviews with participants, which colourfully narrate the history of this decade. Although I am Gone and Red Art are two Chinese-produced independent documentaries, similarly relying on archival images and first-person interviews. They tell the stories of this era through two focal points: the first being the widespread beating of teachers by their students, and the second being the mobilisation of artists in this era to produce politically correct ‘art’ for the revolution. The Passion of the Mao, by contrast, is a Western documentary that makes light of the standard portrayal of the Cultural Revolution in the West and attempts to place a far more positive spin on the events of
this decade. *Chung-Kuo*, a four-hour documentary filmed by Michelangelo Antonioni in 1972 with the permission of the Chinese government, presents eerily memorable snapshots of everyday life in China at the high point of Maoism. Although documentaries undoubtedly took away from class discussion time, their ability to humanise the events that we were discussing made this time commitment worthwhile. By presenting images directly from the era of the Cultural Revolution, these documentaries brought students perhaps as close as they could possibly come to the full and often horrible reality of these events, making the Cultural Revolution immediate as a personal experience (Gregoriou 2008) with deeper significance beyond one’s own personal investments and projections. Rather than identifying with one side in a debate or another, or one side or another in the mythical showdown between capitalism and communism, viewers were exposed to images of humans, just like themselves, either enacting incomprehensible suffering upon one another or undergoing such incomprehensible suffering. These images brought students closer to experiences that stand above and beyond any sort of easy and reflexive ideological proclivities.

Standard procedure in the handling of a controversial or sensitive subject consists of (1) the construction of an opposing binary around the topic, (2) abstraction from the topic at hand towards a focus upon the opposing sides of the binary, and (3) a resulting reidentification in pre-established sides of the binary. This formula was clearly demonstrated in my naïve attempts to discuss the Cultural Revolution with friends and acquaintances within China a decade ago; yet it is also apparent in the standard handling of any form of controversy, noted memorably by Chris Rock in the quotation featured at the beginning of this section. The notions of deidentification and humanisation are designed to break through these binaries, abstractions and re-identifications, seeking instead a deidentification from abstract national or ideological investments and recognition of the fundamental humanity and reality of the topics at hand. The following section examines two examples of these processes in practice from my seminar, for readers’ consideration, evaluation and application.

**Practice: a documentary and a ‘debate’**

*Humanisation: Although I am Gone*

For all of the talk about controversy above, my seminar actually began on a very quiet note with a brief overview of the history and philosophical
foundations of the Cultural Revolution excerpted from Maurice Meisner’s *Mao’s China and After* (Meisner 1999), which served as the foundation for a first class discussion on the general history of this decade. Although the questions and concerns raised in this discussion were all relevant and provided an essential framework for thinking through this movement, they remained undeniably abstract: Mao’s political philosophy, the relationship between members of the senior leadership in the 1960s and the eventual repercussions of the movement known as the Cultural Revolution for the power struggle between leaders. These topics were part of a macro-history restricting the event to a particular range that seemed rational and easy to discuss.

We took a far different approach in the next class meeting, in which we watched independent filmmaker Hu Jie’s 2006 documentary *Although I Am Gone.* This film recounts the story of Bian Zhongyun, a longstanding Party member and teacher at a prestigious all-female high school tied to Peking University, the country’s premier university. When the Cultural Revolution began and China’s youth were instructed to rebel against all forms of supposedly ‘reactionary authority’, Bian’s fate unpredictably took a turn for the worse. Arbitrarily targeted as a ‘counter-revolutionary’, her house was ransacked by Red Guards, who pasted derogatory posters across the walls and doorway of her residence. She was removed from her teaching post, and forced to clean the school’s toilets. In between cleanings, she was repeatedly dragged out into the courtyard over a period of weeks to be publicly beaten by her own students. One day in the late spring of 1966, Bian died after her students added nails to the wooden clubs that they used to beat her. Her husband’s decision to use a camera to document their living environment at the time, as well as her deceased body, combined with his willingness to work with director Hu Jie forty years later in transforming these images into a documentary featuring interviews with family and friends, finally made this horrendous, once hidden, and quite revealing story public.

Needless to say, the response to this film and its portrayal of one woman’s experience of the Cultural Revolution was powerful. In a flurry of discussion after the closing credits, which memorably juxtapose radio broadcasts from the era heralding the creation of a new world with a seemingly endless list of documented victims of the Cultural Revolution in Beijing, seminar participants repeatedly wondered out loud what could lead Bian’s students to beat her to death. Although this question was repeated,
it did not appear to be a question to which there was a clear answer: perhaps this was why it was being asked so compulsively. It was more of a question raised in perplexity and puzzlement: and this was precisely the response that I was seeking. Standard historical textbooks of course mention the widespread beating of teachers by students, yet such presentations often get lost in the abstraction of incomprehensible numbers: one might of course wonder, after seeing these figures, why so many students beat their teachers to death. Yet the in-depth presentation of this one particular case, as representative of many thousands of other cases distributed across the country, humanised the massive and massively distressing violence that characterised the Cultural Revolution. Not only did the film show the details of this innocent victim’s daily life, including her family photos, class photos and personal belongings, all highlighting her fundamental humanity; it also showed the details of her torturous treatment at the hands of her captors and tormentors, thereby highlighting the fundamental inhumanity of her fate. The contrast generated between these two images, humanisation in the face of dehumanisation, left a powerful impression upon learners: even three months later, while completing their course evaluations, many continued to refer back to this film as an important introduction to the Cultural Revolution.

While humanisation moves the experience of history beyond distanced words in books, and thus beyond comfortable generalisations, abstractions and simplistic oppositions, it can also have emotional tolls. As Barton and McCully (2007) have noted in their discussion of teaching the Northern Ireland controversy in Northern Ireland, emotional reactions are inevitable. Yet if this film humanised the experience of the Cultural Revolution, it was not intended to make the burdens of the Cultural Revolution personal. In the discussion after the showing, one student from China, clearly surprised by the film, observed that ‘for the first time’ in her life she ‘felt ashamed to be Chinese’. Other students disagreed with this emotional conclusion, and pointed out that everyone in the film was Chinese: not only the perpetrators but also the victims as well as the interviewees and the director. There was indeed no singular role that a homogeneous ‘Chinese people’ played in the decade of the Cultural Revolution, or in its handling as history. I added to this reassuring interjection by pointing out that if we had to divide the world into nations, as we all are accustomed to do, no nation is immune from cruel historical tragedies and mishandling of memories. As such, to identify the problems raised by the Cultural
Revolution and the handling of its history as uniquely Chinese would be to again alienate this event from its fundamentally human pathos.

I thus posed a fundamentally human question to seminar participants: if you were students at the time, would you have joined in these beatings? Just as the images in the film brought learners closer to the reality of this movement’s violence, this question brought learners closer to a deeper reality in this movement’s violence: the fact that it was actively perpetrated by young people like themselves. After hesitation and reflection, one student noted that although everyone would like to think that they would have behaved differently and avoided participation in such violence, the results of psychological studies on the effects of authority figures and crowds showed that most of us were considerably more likely to join in this violence. Fellow students could not help but agree. Upon arriving at this uncomfortable consensus, I clarified that my goal in showing this film, and in teaching this course, was to emphasise the humanity of victims as well as perpetrators, rather than their particular ‘Chineseness’, and to highlight the common challenges of national history and national identity. My goal in this film showing and discussion was at once to humanise the events of the Cultural Revolution that my students would be examining over the course of the semester, as well as to humanise the group of people generally identified as related to the Cultural Revolution, namely ‘the Chinese’. This abstract label is far too casually tossed around by both insiders and outsiders to ascribe an illusory unity to over 1.3 billion people who are undergoing arguably unprecedentedly rapid sociocultural and economic change. Rather than focusing upon what ‘the Chinese’ did, the film’s humanisation of these events raised the thought-provoking and disturbing question of what each of us would have done within this context, as well as what we might do to avoid similar tragedies in the future.

**Deidentification: does ‘The Struggle for Tibet’ have to be a struggle?**

A second example highlighting deidentification was a discussion held on Tibet–China relations and the Cultural Revolution in the second half of this seminar. Scholars in the field of Asian Studies are undoubtedly aware of the challenges and risks involved in any attempt at discussion of Tibet, which often, despite everyone’s hopes, devolves into little more than a shouting match, or worse. For example, in the spring of 2008, a professor in the Anthropology Department at Cornell University received harassing emails and
threats on the University’s Chinese Student and Scholar Association website, simply for organising a film showing and discussion in light of the turmoil in Tibet that spring. Three and a half years later, I gathered with seminar participants one chilly November morning to have a surprisingly sane discussion on this still emotionally charged topic.

The reading in preparation for this discussion was the recently published *The Struggle for Tibet* (Wang and Tsering 2009). This volume features a series of essays establishing a dialogue between Chinese scholar Wang Lixiong and Tibetan scholar Tsering Shakya, examining the modern history of China–Tibet relations. Our reading concentrated on the first half of the book about the destruction and violence implemented in the Cultural Revolution in Lhasa. The dialogue begins from Wang’s justifiable observation that many Tibetans actively joined in the destruction of their own culture in the Cultural Revolution, suggesting that Tibetans were not only victims, but were also intoxicated by Maoism. Tsering responds to this provocative thesis with an essay suggesting that Wang is promoting the standard colonialist mindset of implicating the colonised in their colonisation, and thereby rationalising injustice. Beginning from these starkly opposed viewpoints, the authors engage in a dialogue and eventually reach significant agreements on the status and future of both Tibet and China. This book, the final addition to my reading list, modelled the goals of deidentification that I sought to promote in my teaching: featuring alternating dialogic essays by two authors on either side of the immensely politically charged China–Tibet binary, the starting point of predictably opposing viewpoints followed by dialogue and signs of changing and developing opinions deconstructed the simplistic oppositions and identifications that are often both the foundation as well as the product of discussions of Tibet.

Upon students’ completion of this reading, I had scheduled a ‘debate’, which, in retrospect, was an immensely poor choice of words for representing my goals. The readings themselves and their very structure of engagement highlighted the pointlessness of dividing participants into opposing teams and attempting to determine a victor. Instead, I hoped that students would be familiar with the arguments presented by each side in the readings, and in turn go beyond these arguments and beyond sides: the results were pleasantly reassuring. Certainly, in the course of the debate, there were divergent opinions, with some students sympathising with the past and current situation of Tibetans, and others empathising with the Chinese government’s official stance, and quite a few others still in the
process of deciding. Some participants recited standard lines from government discourses about a pre-1949 cannibalistic feudal aristocracy ruling over ‘simple’ Tibetan people who lived in caves and were in desperate need of ‘modernisation’ to counter the ‘conspiracy’ by the ‘Westerners’ and the ‘Dalai clique’. And from another perspective, there were also students reciting another standard vision of Tibetans as fundamentally innocent and inevitably peaceful perpetual victims. Yet both of these simplistic sentiments were pleasantly combined with doubts and complications from the readings. Beyond particular viewpoints, what was most important was that participants actually listened to one another, did not interrupt one another, and even occasionally acknowledged that those with whom they disagreed had made good points, rather than solely focusing upon arguing and dismissing opposing viewpoints.

In one dialogue, a student with a strongly sympathetic stance towards China’s involvement in Tibet over the past six decades established an elusive point of agreement with a student with an idealised vision of Tibetans. Exclaiming that the Chinese government was not occupying Tibet out of self-interest, this first student declared that Tibet was nothing but a drain upon financial resources, requiring substantial aid on account of the more ‘primitive’ status of its residents. A fellow student pointed out, however, that this had long been the standard mode of argument for any type of colonisation, and that Japan had proposed similar explanations for its invasion of China in the first half of the twentieth century: was Japan, with its considerably higher level of economic development, then the rightful owner of both China and Tibet? It certainly seemed as if sparks were about to fly. While such a mode of argumentation was unabashedly provocative, it was also indeed logically sound based upon the first student’s assessment of China–Tibet relations. To my surprise, the first student paused and acknowledged the haughty and discriminatory nature of standard official discourses on Tibet, while the second student acknowledged that perhaps the metaphor of Japan–China relations did not correspond precisely to China–Tibet relations. Later in the discussion, when one student asked whether pro-Tibetan discourses might be the product of a ‘Western anti-China conspiracy’, another interjected that according to the political philosophy of Mao Zedong the source of a criticism was irrelevant: so long as a criticism is valid, it must be accepted. The question, then, the two debaters agreed, was not who was saying what, but rather if and how what was said corresponded to the realities on the ground in Tibet. We had arguably descended into the ninth
circle of controversy by compounding the Cultural Revolution and Tibet in a cross-cultural classroom discussion: a ninth circle whose residents are not trapped until eternity in ice kept frozen by the beating of Satan’s wings, but rather trapped until eternity in a vicious and self-reproducing cycle of binary oppositions and reinforced identities. But instead of finding and supporting polarised and unyielding sides, students were really entering into dialogue and thinking about the topic at hand: which was far more than I had expected, having participated in a few less formal and considerably less civil ‘debates’ on this topic over the years.

The collection assigned as reading for this discussion, *The Struggle for Tibet*, was essential to highlighting the shortcomings of the identity-based thinking that tends to abound in discussions of the Cultural Revolution, Tibet and many other uncomfortable topics in Chinese history: thinking reinforced in the idea that ‘pro-Tibet’ opinions are always ‘anti-China’, and that ‘pro-China’ opinions are always ‘anti-Tibet’. Such simplistic thinking in fact produced the Cultural Revolution and brought it to its climax: as such, in discussing and thinking through the Cultural Revolution, another model is necessary. The readings in *The Struggle for Tibet* instead proposed a model of dialogue, learning and deidentification from even the most rigidly opposed of binary positions. Students displayed the lessons of this approach in a surprisingly pleasant and thoughtful dialogue, rather than a ‘debate’, engaging with the controversial topic at hand, yet avoiding controversy as a hindrance to listening to, understanding and learning from one another. Of course, the adoption of such an approach one November morning does not guarantee the similar adoption of such an approach throughout one’s life. Yet while this approach to thinking through topics and deidentifying from autopoetic binaries will not necessarily be the guiding principle of learners’ subsequent lives, this exposure will at the very least provide a model for reflecting upon controversial and contentious issues in the future: issues that are, of course, unavoidable.

**Lessons Learned**

In the late 1960s, I admired Mao because I felt strongly about things like peace, freedom, justice, truth, and a fair chance for the little guy. Today I detest Mao and his legacy. Why? Because I am drawn to things like peace, freedom, justice, truth, and a fair chance for the little guy. (Perry Link 2011).
My goal in this article has been to produce new concepts and thereby suggest potential new tools for educators dealing with controversial topics, towards overcoming the simple binaries, abstraction, and identities that are too easily reproduced in the discussion of controversy. I thus propose the following methodologies for application in the pedagogy of controversy across disciplines.

**Humanisation**

As articulated above, the pedagogy of controversy is best served by teaching against humans’ conventional reactions to controversy, which often lead to abstraction from the human realities at hand in favour of a particular position or identification in which one becomes invested as either a ‘winner’ or a ‘loser’. From historical controversies like the Cultural Revolution, the Northern Ireland situation, or the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to such social controversies as abortion or affirmative action or scientific ‘controversies’ such as evolution or global warming, the use of humanisation to move beyond abstract ideas to real human experiences, dilemmas and crises helps learners engage more empathetically with the issues at hand rather than the abstract binaries that they have produced. Concretely, humanisation can be accomplished through the diversification of course media, the use of images and documentaries, the aversion of easy and always tempting abstractions and the instructor’s presentation of the topic at hand as a fundamentally human issue that transcends simplistic labels.

**Deidentification**

Again teaching against standard reactions to controversy, deidentification encourages the overcoming of simplistic, binary identifyatory thinking in the discussion of historically, politically and emotionally charged topics. Rather than starting from and reinforcing binary identities, the pedagogy of controversy should seek ways to move beyond them and highlight both ‘internal’ differences (e.g. multiple perspectives and approaches to the Cultural Revolution under the label ‘Chinese’) and ‘external’ similarities (e.g. common dilemmas of history). Only such an approach can avoid the stigma and finger-pointing usually associated with and reinforced by controversies, by underlining the common challenges faced by humanity, while at the same time continuing to recognise and account for the uniqueness and significance of each individual historical tragedy. Concretely, deidentification can be
modelled through the instructors’ description of his or her own intellectual growth in relation to the topic at hand, the presentation and discussion of a diverse array of viewpoints over the course of the semester, and a critique of the simplistic notion of debate’ as an approach to contentious subjects, focusing instead upon continual intellectual growth and reflection that remains passionate while at the same time maintaining a distance from emotional attachments.

These two methodological concepts, realised through the practices noted above, attempt to preserve the production of knowledge as a process of dialogue and reflection rather than a one-step attainment of comfortable self-certainty. Yet as much as I would like to provide a conclusion to the controversy surrounding the pedagogy of controversy, true to this process of dialogue and reflection, the verification of these ideas can only be established in their further implementation and development by other instructors in other contexts and other fields.

Finally, beyond the pedagogy of controversial topics, my findings also arguably have significant repercussions in particular for my home discipline of anthropology. The prevailing reaction against past colonial mistakes in the discipline has resulted in a relativistic culturalism that reliably steers away from engaging in controversy. Yet such an approach is nothing but an inverse image of the past, continuing to imagine a monolithic other whose ‘value’ has simply been inverted. While providing the appearance of disciplinary progress, these approaches remained trapped in the past. The anthropological obsession with finding an absolutely correct way to represent ‘the other’ only reproduces the problem of representing the other; anthropology’s relativist avoidance of sensitive and controversial issues of human rights, inequality, oppression, historical grievances and victimisation in other cultures is not an example of redeeming culturalist sensitivity as many would argue, but rather an example of the most glaring disrespect, in that it denies ‘the other’ the degree of sophistication, complication and contention that we immediately recognise as inherent to our own societies and must realistically recognise everywhere that human society has reached. An anthropology that moves beyond identities and binaries to detotalise ‘culture’ and recognise the common challenges that we all face as humans, recapturing the original meaning of anthropology as the ‘study of humankind’, is then far more promising than a tautological anthropology that takes culture as both its object of analysis and means of explanation for ‘others’.

The quotation above from China scholar Perry Link captures such a co-existence of intellectual growth and reflection alongside a commitment to
fundamental values and understanding of the common challenges facing humanity in an always complex world. What matters are not the labels and ideologies to which we become invested or attached, but rather the empathy, care and growth that we embrace as teachers as well as researchers. This quotation, capturing the tragic irony of Maoism and its lessons for the world, served as a useful closing point of discussion in our seminar, as well as, now, for the pedagogical reflections above.

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Notes
1. For a useful discussion of the inevitability of controversy in life and the resulting responsibility for educators to engage with controversial topics, see Burron 2006.
2. For an exhaustive example of the paranoid yet popular attempt to document a ‘Western’ conspiracy to ‘demonise China’, see Li and Liu (1996).
3. These issues have become a growing topic of public discussion in recent months, in light of the expulsion from China of a number of longstanding foreign journalists, along with delays in processing visas for bureaus like the New York Times and Bloomberg, who have in the recent past run stories on corruption that angered Chinese officials. For an overview of expulsions from 2012 through 2014, see Branigan (2014).
5. On learning as a fundamentally transformative and constantly evolving process, or a process of ‘becoming’, see Semetsky (2006).
6. For a revealing study of Hu Jie’s documentaries and their portrayal of forbidden memories, see Li (2009).
7. On the politicisation of Tibetan Studies and the reductions that overlook the experiences and agency of Tibetans in favour of a simplistic narrative, see Yeh (2009).
References


The pedagogy of controversy in the field of China Studies


