

## Sources for Teaching China after Mao

by Mark Baker

### Abstract

It is now fifty years since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976; almost two-thirds of the history of the People's Republic of China is the post-Mao era. The reform era is at the cutting edge of research in Chinese history. At least in my own institution, students with interests in international politics and economy (including many non-history majors) are keen to explore the history of China's recent decades.

But we have struggled to bridge the gap between Mao's China and Xi Jinping's. Many instructors feel ill-equipped to teach the history of China's last five decades, beyond the barebones overview of high politics and economic growth as an afterthought to longer survey classes. Textbooks providing a historical framework are surprisingly thin on the ground; primary sources are scattered and online collections (usually assembled in the 2000s for teaching then-contemporary China) are often dead links.

After a short introduction, this teaching resource supports high school and undergraduate instructors by providing two things: first, it identifies reliable survey texts that can offer a secure framework for teachers. Second, it suggests and provides some contextual information on short primary sources suitable for high school and undergraduate survey curricula. These include some key sources on politics, but also texts and visual material on culture, society, media and gender that can help students see recent Chinese history as a three-dimensional, human story.

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"Honour the national flag, warmly love the mother country." Poster designed by Wang Linkun (June, 1987). Courtesy of the Landsberger Collection.



Mourning banners hung across the south gate of Beijing University Picture taken between 7th and 11th June 1989, a few days after the June 4th repression in Tiananmen square. Image by Daiwenchen via Wikimedia Commons.

## Introduction

**This teaching resource aims to support instructors teaching the history of post-Mao China.** It is close to fifty years since the death of Mao (on September 9, 1976), meaning that almost two-thirds of the history of the People's Republic, since its formation on October 1, 1949, is in the post-Mao era. But this can be a tricky period to teach. It often comes as something of an afterthought to longer survey classes and is usually focused on a top-down picture of economic reform and high politics. Teachers who have personal memories of the immediate post-Mao decades are moving towards retirement, and new instructors may have little memory of China before Xi Jinping assumed office in 2012. Post-Mao China has moved to the cutting edge of historical research (especially the 1980s), but this new research is only now beginning to cut through to high school and undergraduate curricula.

This difficulty manifests itself in the paucity of student-friendly history textbooks for post-Mao China—or even survey texts aimed at instructors. This teaching resource begins by suggesting several texts that can provide a useful starting point for instructors and students. It then recommends accessible and engaging primary sources for students, with a particular aim of helping instructors move away from the dominant story of politics and economic reform towards social history and individual experience.

As Maura Cunningham and Jeffrey Wasserstrom have discussed in *Education About Asia* (***China and a New Era: The Latest Twist in an Enduring Pattern?*** Volume 23:3 2018), China's long Reform era did not have precise beginnings or endings. The sources here roughly cover the 1976–2012 period between the death of Mao Zedong and the rise to power of Xi Jinping. They are designed to provide ideas for both longer modern China survey classes (where post-Mao China may be covered in just one or two weeks) and more focused classes on PRC history (which may have a more thematic structure). Rather than relying on the uncertain survival of online resources, I have focused on published sources, although most are available as e-books. Some of these resources were mainstays of classes on contemporary Chinese politics and society in the 1990s and 2000s—and may be familiar to longtime readers of *Education about Asia*—but are now worth recapturing for history classes. Due to space limitations, these recommendations only cover the mainland PRC; they don't include sources for global China or China's post-Mao international relations.

## Survey Texts on Post-Mao China

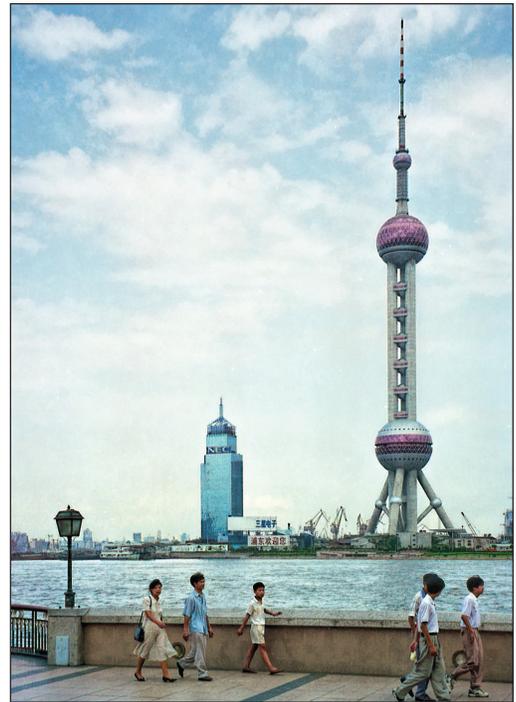
There is a lack of accessible historical surveys of the decades between Mao and Xi. Instructors do not have the advantage of the recent analytical overviews of political, social and cultural history that have enlivened teaching for earlier periods of modern China—such as Andrew Walder’s *China Under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Harvard University Press, 2017) and Felix Wemheuer’s *A Social History of Maoist China* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) for the Mao period.

Most survey works on the Reform era are too detailed and policy-heavy for use in the classroom, though may be useful for instructor consultation or more advanced classes (for example, Yongnian Zheng’s *Contemporary China: A History Since 1978* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) and Gilles Guiheux’s *Contemporary China: 1949 to the Present* (Polity, 2023; original French 2018)). Frank Dikötter’s *China After Mao* (Bloomsbury, 2022) is more readable and vivid, and certain extracts can be the springboard for productive student debate (for example, the grim reading of the early 1980s on pp. 59–74 and pp. 232–246 on China before and after accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001). Julian Gerwitz’s lively *Never Turn Back: China and the Forbidden History of the 1980s* (Belknap Press, 2022) is accessible for college students and could be a useful pairing with Dikötter excerpts. Jeremy Brown’s *June Fourth: The Tiananmen Protests and Beijing Massacre of 1989* (Cambridge University Press, 2021) is not just an excellent survey of the events of 1989 but also provides broad coverage of the political and social tensions either side of the protests and subsequent government crackdown.

Instructors on China survey classes may also ask students to read post-Mao chapters in longer survey texts. Of these, Timothy Cheek’s short chapter “**The Reform Era as History**” (pp. 191–204), in Michael Szonyi ed., *A Companion to Chinese History*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2017) is recommended for the accessible way it distils Cheek’s analysis of post-Mao China. The three post-Mao chapters in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern China* (edited by Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Oxford University Press, 2016) also combine key information with expert analysis. These suggestions from 2016–17 do not incorporate the last decade of new research on the Reform era or reflect on the period in light of Xi Jinping’s rule, but Janet Chen’s new edition of Jonathan Spence’s *The Search for Modern China* (W. W. Norton, 2025) does some of that work in its revised post-Mao section (chapters 24–28).

Rather than assigning textbooks, some instructors may cover the broad survey in large lectures and ask students to read a specialist research article prior to discussion sections (this is our approach at the University of Manchester). Here are three very different articles that are sufficiently accessible to give undergraduate students a deep dive into 1980s history:

- Nicholas Bartlett, “The Ones Who Struck Out: Entrepreneurialism, Heroin Addiction, and Historical Obsolescence in Reform Era China,” *positions: asia critique* 26:3 (2018).
- Emily Wilcox, “Moonwalking in Beijing: Michael Jackson, *piliwu*, and the origins of Chinese hip-hop,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 23:2 (2022).
- Yueran Zhang, “Accidentally Emboldened: Industrial Workers between Democracy and Despotism on the Shop Floor in Wuhan, China (1984–1985),” *International Review of Social History* 70:1 (2025).



The Oriental Pearl TV Tower became the tallest structure in China when completed in 1994. It is one of the first structures to rise in the Pudong New Area, a Special Economic Zone targeted to finance and trade established in 1993.

## Primary Sources

The rest of this teaching resource recommends primary source collections and picks out highlights for undergraduate and high school curricula. The longer suggestions are designed for student pre-reading, whereas the shorter excerpts may be introduced in class.

### Life Stories and Oral Histories

The best-known primary sources for post-Mao China focus on the elite politics of reform and the protest movement of 1989. This section looks beyond high politics, to the life stories which were collected and published by researchers between the 1980s and 2000s but which are now at risk of being forgotten. These individual stories can be a good pairing with elite documents, encouraging students to consider how top-down stories of reform and progress were experienced on the ground.

The most famous collectors of Chinese life stories available in English translation are Sang Ye and Liao Yiwu. Of their collections, my favourite for teaching is Xinxin Zhang and Sang Ye's *Chinese Lives: An Oral History of Contemporary China* (Pantheon, 1987, original Chinese 1986). The short, punchy life stories are accessible for high school or college students and help show the diversity of experience in navigating from the socialist period to the Reform era. Highlights include peasants-turned-entrepreneurs (pp. 8–13), an out-of-luck ex-soldier (65–68), a businessman in the construction sector (87–94), an ordinary male worker (135–139), and a female high school student (347–350). By contrast, Sang Ye's *China Candid: The People on the People's Republic* (2006) has a more extreme cast of characters and lacks the quiet restraint that makes the earlier *Chinese Lives* so compelling. This shift may be the result of both conscious production for non-Chinese audiences and changes within China in the twenty years between the two collections. All the same, students would benefit from stories such as the wry migrant worker (pp. 28–39) or the professors floundering in the private sector (235–243).

Much of Liao Yiwu's *The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories, China from the Bottom Up* (Anchor Books, 2008, original Chinese 2001) focuses on memories of citizens at the bottom of Chinese society during the Mao period. There are also some fascinating stories of the Reform era in the collection, especially those of the village teacher (pp. 160–172) and the neighbourhood committee director (182–192); pp. 203–213 is the extraordinary account of how a previously conformist Communist Party member got swept up in the crackdown after the June Fourth massacre in 1989.

For classes covering the transition from the Mao era to Reform, the life stories of former Red Guards in Yarong Jiang and David Ashley's *Mao's Children in the New China* (Routledge, 2000) are highly recommended. The standout feature of the collection is the striking unhappiness of female interviewees. A combination of winners and losers from Reform (interviewee no. 4 and no. 9) would make a fascinating pairing. The interviewees in *China Remembers* (Lijia Zhang and Calum MacLeod, 1999) also provide a good mix of support, wariness, and hostility to the changes in post-Mao China. The private trader made good (pp. 209–215) and the big entrepreneur (240–247) contrast well with the travails of a rubbish collector (248–253) and two laid-off workers (271–279). If that all sounds a little clichéd, the reflective and sometimes surprising interview with rockstar Cui Jian (202–208) is a useful antidote. Lijia Zhang's own memoir, *Socialism is Great: A Worker's Memoir of the New China* (Anchor, 2008), also gives a highly readable and personal view of a young woman coming to maturity in a state-owned enterprise in the 1980s (as [reviewed in Education About Asia](#), Volume 15:1, 2010). With informants born a few years after Zhang, Ann-Ping Chin's *Children of China: Voices from Recent Years* (Knopf, 1988) gives wonderful space and voice to China's emerging post-Mao youth. The highlight is perhaps the individual voices in chapter 5 of two Shanghai sisters, interviewed twice at a five-year interval (in 1979, aged 13 and 7, and in 1984, aged 18 and 12). This text is recommended for all students, but especially high schoolers.

Full life stories or longer interviews do not always give sufficient context for teaching, so instructors may wish to use accessible scholarly work that includes contextualised excerpts from informants. The options here are especially rich for China's women and girls. Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter's *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s* (Stanford University Press, 1988) includes short documents—official, semi-official and personal—at the end of each chapter. The translations in chapter 2 (pp. 67-80) are especially instructive on the tension between state social conservatism on the one hand and economic reform and social change on the other.

For academic works giving space for informants' stories from the 1990s and 2000s, see the following: Tiantian Zheng, *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), especially chapter 7 on returning to rural hometowns; Li Ma's *Christianity, Femininity and Social Change in Contemporary China* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), which may be particularly suitable for those teaching in Christian colleges and high schools, but also deserves to be known more widely; and Xin Guo, *Shifting Traditions of Childrearing in China* (Routledge, 2021), where the superb chapter 5 looks at personal experiences of mothering across five generations. This is especially useful for introducing stories of family planning/one-child policies in a longer historical context.

### Literature, Film, and Media

It is sometimes hard to know where to start setting literary sources for a history course. Instructors in literature or film studies will have their own favourites, but for a history class, the focus should be on accessibility and knack for promoting classroom discussion. In prose fiction, my recommendation from early “scar” literature coming out of the Cultural Revolution would be the wearisome alienation captured in Wang Meng's “**Eyes of the Night**” (1979, translated in Perry Link ed., *Rose and Thorns*, University of California Press, 1984) or Wang Anyi's “**The Destination**” on the difficulties of young people returning to cities after being sent to rural areas during the late Cultural Revolution (1981, English available in the *Lapse of Time* collection, China Books, 1988). “The Destination” can be paired with Laifong Leung's interview with Wang Anyi in *Morning Sun: Interviews with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation* (Routledge, 1994, pp. 177–187). It may be contrasted with the more avant-garde contemplation of violence in Yu Hua's “**The Past and the Punishments**” (1989, translated into English in 1996 and published by the University of Hawai'i Press as the titular story in a collection of Yu Hua's fiction). I hesitate to recommend full-length novels for a history syllabus, but Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* (Washington Square Press, 2001, original Chinese 1999) is a wonderfully readable contrast to all of the above. Even a short excerpt gives a flavour, such as pp. 105–117 on the narrator's ambivalence towards her German lover. A colleague in a world literature class has successfully paired *Shanghai Baby* with Ding Ling's “Miss Sophie's Diary” of 1928.

Introducing poetry to the classroom can be effective at provoking discussion and disagreement, as long as it is accessible enough for students to follow the main themes. I would make two recommendations: first, Sun Jingxuan's “**A Spectre Prowls Our Land**” (1980, translated in Barmé and Minford eds. 1988 *Seeds of Fire*, Hill & Wang, pp. 121–128) may be a little heavy-handed, but is certainly accessible, and is especially interesting if students also read Sun's subsequent self-criticism of 1982 (“**A Seriously Flawed Work**”, pp. 129–130 in the same volume); second, students can enjoy discussing the imagery of the “Misty Poets.” Starting points might be the three wonderful early poems of Shu Ting translated in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature* (second edition, Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 572–574) or Bei Dao's explicitly political poetry, such as “**Declaration**”, “**Answer**” and “**Requiem**” (pp. 44–46 and 48–49 in Tony Barnstone, ed. *Out of the Howling Storm*, Wesleyan University Press, 1993). If poetry does not feel quite right for a particular classroom, Cui Jian's “**Nothing to My Name**” (1986)—China's most famous rock song—might be an alternative to spark discussion. Lyrics are widely available in translation online.

Many instructors will be in a teaching context where it is difficult to schedule a film screening or have students watch a full-length movie. For short excerpts in class, fifth- or sixth-generation classics that were

filmed during the late 1980s or 1990s capture the sights and sounds of that long-gone era. One example is *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992, directed by Zhang Yimou), such as the scenes of Qiu Ju traveling from village to market to county town (22.30–29.00). Jia Zhangke’s classic *Platform* (2000) is too long and cryptic for most students to enjoy in full, but some scenes can stand alone (such as the amusing debate on privatization of the troupe at 1.01.50–1.06.00).

For those with the luxury of including full movies on their syllabus, my personal favourite is Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Shanghai Dreams* (2005), which captures the multiple crossroads of the early 1980s. Its subject matter of sexual violence means that it is hardly an easy watch (and instructors should certainly watch the full movie before sharing with students). The wrenching family story of *So Long, My Son* (also Wang, 2019) is perhaps the best meditation on the long Reform era (covering 1980s to 2010s) but at three hours, it may be too long for student viewing. For a shorter and less gritty piece which captures some of the nostalgia for the early Reform era, students could catch an episode of the feel-good TV drama *Like a Flowing River* which, unlike many earlier dramas set in the Reform era, is available with English subtitles (2018–2024. Episode 4 on the household responsibility system is recommended).

Some students may prefer movies in documentary mode. The reformist calls of Wang Luxiang and Su Xiaokang’s *River Elegy* have become something of a cliché of western studies of Reform-era China, but can work well on a history syllabus because of their strong sense of China’s past. Episode 6 (“Blueness”) is probably the most accessible, and the full-text script is available with helpful footnotes on pp. 202–223 of *Deathsong of the River* (1991, edited by Bodman and Wan, East Asia Program, Cornell University). Of English-language documentaries on China, *Heart of the Dragon* (directed by David Kennard, 1983–84) is of interest in its own right and also provides a glimpse of western attitudes toward 1980s China. Episode 12 (“Trading”) on economic reform is the obvious pick, although episode 10 on an estranged couple’s mediation sessions is particularly good at giving subjects a voice.

The long Reform era also brings us into the world of **China’s internet**, from the early boom of chatrooms and internet cafes to the 2000s clampdowns on internet activity and emergence of online celebrity culture. Historicizing today’s online landscape can help students develop a critical perspective on their own digital lives by thinking about past versions of online communication. One way of doing that is to dive back into early expectations of how the internet would change China. David Gompert’s essay “**Right Makes Might: Freedom and Power in the Information Age**” (chapter 3 in *Strategic Appraisal*, 1999, by RAND Corporation) is useful partly because students love nothing more than a bad prediction (in this case, that China would need to democratise to develop technologically) and partly because it can get students thinking about why the prediction seemed plausible at the time. If the whole essay feels too long, pp. 45–50 or pp. 69–73 are enough. Moving into the twenty-first century, case studies of celebrity, scandal and politics on the Chinese internet can provide interesting points of similarity and difference with students’ own online contexts. One accessible example is Guobin Yang’s “**The 2010s: Guo Meimei: The Story of a Young Netizen Portends a Political Throwback**” (chapter 10 in Cheek, Mühlhahn, van de Ven, *The Chinese Communist Party: A Century in Ten Lives*, Cambridge University Press, 2021), which does a wonderful job at capturing the zeitgeist of the early 2010s and Xi Jinping’s rise to power.

### **Elite Politics, Intellectual Thought, and 1989**

The elite politics of reform are well-covered in the two major collections of primary documents in translation: *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume II* (Columbia University Press, 2000) and *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection* (W. W. Norton 1999). These collections include canonical documents from Deng Xiaoping and Party conservatives (such as Chen Yun and Deng Liqun) as well the communique from the Third Plenum of December 1978 which set China’s reform agenda. Most instructors are unlikely to need to look much beyond these, although I also recommend the reformist perspectives in Orville Schell and David Shambaugh’s *China Reader: Reform Era* (Vintage Books, 1999), such as Zhao Ziyang’s 1987 blueprint for political reform (pp. 57–69).

The events of 1989 are sure to be discussed in any classroom outside the PRC, but it can be difficult to navigate the multiple memoirs and source collections. The immediacy of Minzhu Han's (pseudonym) edited collection *Cries for Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 1990) makes it a good place to start, particularly the translations of big-character posters showcasing a wide range of political attitudes. Other highlights are the student statements, an extract from Chen Mingyuan's famous speech at the Peking University triangle (pp. 124–126), and the big-character poster by former sent-down youth of the Cultural Revolution urging students to leave the square (pp. 324–326). *The Tiananmen Papers* (PublicAffairs, 2001), is less accessible, although the Standing Committee minutes of 2–3 June are gripping and students may enjoy the provenance debate on these documents. Zhao Ziyang's *Prisoner of the State* (Simon & Schuster, 2009) mostly requires too much contextual knowledge for classroom use, but one exception is Zhao's recollection of his early morning visit to Tiananmen Square on 19 May, 1989. As well as being widely available online, Zhao's full speech is translated in *Beijing, Spring 1989* (Routledge, 1990, pp. 288–290). Deng Xiaoping's very different speech of 9 June—a striking attempt to both claim the narrative and close the box on the 1989 movement—is reproduced in this (pp. 376–381) and several other collections.

For a taste of the high emotions of 1989, I have shown students the controversial interview with Chai Ling in the documentary *Gate of Heavenly Peace* (Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton, 1995, 2.05.00–2.10.20). The interview feels voyeuristic on its own, and should be coupled with the contrasting accounts of Chai and interviewer Philip Cunningham in their memoirs (respectively pp. 173–182 in *A Heart for Freedom*, Tyndale House, 2011 and pp. 194–211 in *Tiananmen Moon*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009). These accounts help students reflect on the crisis of late May 1989 and the positionality of western observers.

As for the wider history of post-Mao intellectual thought, *Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection* and *Sources of Chinese Tradition* include extracts from key thinkers, with a skew towards dissident perspectives in the run-up to 1989 (e.g., Wei Jingsheng, Wang Ruoshui and Fang Lizhi). These documents will suffice for most classes, but some instructors may wish to both include a wider range of voices and encourage students to look at the period after 1989. This is especially true for student papers. I have found it tricky to incorporate intellectual thought in the classroom, but have been rewarded with strong end-of-semester essays on the topic. Students have especially benefitted from three pieces: Chen Ming's 2008 essay “**Modernity and Confucian Political Philosophy**” (pp. 110–130 in *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought*, University Press of Kentucky, 2012); Chen Pingyuan's personal reflections on the intellectual scene from the 1980s to the 1990s (pp. 108–127 in Wang Chaohua's *One China, Many Paths*, Verso, 2003); and Gan Yang's 2005 lecture on the three strands of Maoism, Dengism and Confucianism (pp. 29–42 in *Voices from the Chinese Century*, Columbia University Press, 2020). David Ownby, co-editor of that collection, also maintains the superb *Reading the China Dream* website. Its archives are mostly translations of essays from the Xi Jinping era, but with many interesting reflections on China's recent past.

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