

***Books That Help
Students Unlearn***
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Martin W. Lewis & Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)

Richard Madsen, *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995)

David A. Hollinger, *Post Ethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (NY: Basic Books, 1995)

Peter Perdue, "Review Essay: The Shape of the World: Asian Continents and the Scraggy Isthmus of Europe," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 30:4 (1998), 53-62.

David L. Hall & Roger T. Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking Through The Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1995).

Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* 2nd edition (NY: Routledge, 1994).

A theme that cuts across our presentations for this session is the need to break ourselves and our students out of our assumptions, to broaden our conceptual horizons, to challenge our defining categories. Deconstructing hegemonic thought is not what most of our students come to our classes to do. Colorado College's recent alumni tell us they went to class to learn knowledge (and course evaluations still name "the professor's command of the topic" as a key quality they like). Alumni also admit they value the skills they learned. Yet, as a liberal arts college teacher who has been peddling China and East Asia history for the past dozen years, I find my primary interest is in teaching my student to *unlearn*.

They hate it. Students regularly complain on my evaluations, "I wish we would have spent more time learning about China/Japan [the topic] than wringing our hands about how we can't be sure how we know stuff." Thus, I am in the market for sly books that look like information but act like acid on the intellectual and cultural constructions my well-heeled students bring to class. I share our common goal of wanting our students to build "cognitively responsible" models and assumptions about how the world works and how to study it. As such, I cannot help but note that in this we are the happy, if oft-confused, inheritors of the moral mission of New England colleges of a century ago—sharing

the mission of nurturing critically-minded citizens (even if the content and our degree of certainty may have changed with the times).

Today I wish to review three books that have changed the way I teach my students to un-learn. The first relates to geographic knowledge and our assumptions of the shape of the physical world; the second relates to international relations and the structure of power and wealth after the Cold War in US-China relations; and the third speaks to our ethnic or racial identity. The first two I have taught in class as readings for my students. The last, I have not, and yet it has affected my teaching nearly as much.

THE MYTH OF CONTINENTS

Lewis and Wigen's *The Myth of Continents* is a book which has received wide notice. It won the AAS's Levinson book prize and has been reviewed extensively, including long assessments in the *World History Journal*, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, and our own *ASIANetwork Exchange* (Feb. 1999 issue). Rita Kipp reviewed it for ANE and I must say I agree with her assessment: "No one who teaches about Asia should miss this compelling book." (p. 15) The book reviews our assumptions about geography and area studies, about how the major building blocks of the globe are put together. Lewis and Wigen are pretty straightforward about their goal: "to expose the fault lines in Americans' guiding notions of the world; to trace how conventional metageographies emerged and developed, and to explore how they continue to lead us astray" (p. xiii). They do this largely by "historicizing the categories by which we think about the world" (p. 16).

And they deliver on their promise by unpacking—or un-learning—four basic concepts of global geography, or what they call metageography: continents, nations, the East-West divide, and the assumption of "geographical concordance." There's not too much by way of geography left unquestioned here. I was struck by the book for its challenge—I hadn't really thought all that much about what it meant to think in terms of the seven continents.

So, I assigned it to my classes, specifically an introductory, co-taught, two-unit class on comparative history, "Culture, Society, and History," which our department has introduced as an alternative to the two-unit Western Civilization course. This course is 60% Western Civ. put in comparison with one non-Western civilization. When I co-teach the course, that other is China from Zhou to early Qing. What I wanted the book to do was to problematize our students' assumptions about East and West. What they got from the first two chapters (altogether about 50 pages) was a history of European geographical thought. I saw challenging deconstruction—in reasonable detail—of dominant East-West paradigms from Herodotus to Arnold Guyot, the Princeton Professor who provided the geographical science for American Manifest Destiny and the occupation of the continent. My students were unperturbed, taking the story in as a pretty good account of "kinda neat information."

I was crest-fallen. No arguments, no tears of disillusionment, just, "Hey, prof., pretty good reading." I was reminded of nothing so much as the infamous Doonesbury cartoon where the lecturer at Zonker's law school attempts more and more absurd statements in order to get a rise out of his students. He ends, screaming, "Black is white, Truth is falsehood!" and collapses. As the class disperses, one student turns to Zonker and says, "Pretty good lecture; I didn't know half this stuff." As the class sessions went by, I realized my dismay was unfounded. They got it. Got it in ways I don't. My students just nonchalantly commented in class discussion, "Well, we know 'Europe' is just a construct, so probably India is, too. So, Tim, why should we assume 'China' is one thing?" Of course, I was thinking China was one thing.

The Myth of Continents worked in my class for a couple of reasons. First, I only assigned as much as could fit my syllabus. In this case, fifty pages from the introduction and first chapter. (The University of California Press is pretty good with copyright clearance, charging about \$4.00 for each copy.) There is much more that goes on in the book—on Africa, on World Systems theory, and of course on their solution to the myth of continents (they support the idea of culture areas in a general sense). But one hit was enough; I had other information to handle. Second, Lewis and Wigen write well and provide a rich texture of detail—they make their analytical points by telling an information-rich story. Thus, I think my students took it first of all as an historical narrative and only secondarily as an analytical essay. Finally, Lewis and Wigen do not digress. They follow their theme pretty closely, somewhat repetitively, and in plain English. This last point is a cause of some serious criticism. Those of you interested in World Systems theory will be irritated with their shallow and dismissive handling of Wallerstein. The review in *Journal of World History* just hates the book; the review in BCAS regrets the lack of interpretive depth in the book. These are all issues worth pursuing in upper level course, and I would advise assigning a range of book reviews if you plan to use larger sections of the book.

In the end, *Myth of Continents* has convinced me of the need to teach world history when I teach Asian (or any) history. William McNeill, Marshall Hodgson, Braudel, and Wallerstein (to name a few) have been arguing this for decades. Indeed, Lewis and Wigen acknowledge their debt to Hodgson in particular. And so they should; most of what they have to say was published by that grand old Islamicist in the 1960s. On the other hand, have you been reading Hodgson lately? The challenge to my teaching is to put that perspective in without turning all courses into global history classes. Still, we cannot get a clear perspective on what is "Chinese" or "French" or "American" (or different regions and time periods in those categories) without a sense of trans-local systems, be they economic, religious or culture areas, or climatic zones. Peter Perdue captures this challenge well in his thoughtful comparative review of this book and Gunder Frank's *ReORIENT* and R. Bin Wong's *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience*

(Perdue, 1998 in BCAS, 30:4, 53-62).

CHINA AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Richard Madsen's *China and the American Dream* is my candidate for the most important over-looked book. It is a thoughtful and challenging analysis of why America and China misread and mistrust each other and why it is important to cut it out. Madsen is an accomplished China sociologist who has done considerable field work in China. He is also one of the co-authors with Robert Bellah of the famous study of American values, *Habits of the Heart*. The problem is, The University of California Press has seen fit to bring the book out only in a \$30 hardback edition. Thus, I have used the concluding chapter, "An East-West Dialogue for the Next Century: New Myths for a New World" (pp. 209-228 + notes 232-4). (Copyright clearance was \$2.15 per copy.) While Madsen writes clearly, this is heavier going and so I have only assigned it in upper-level classes.

Madsen introduces a challenging new master narrative in US-China relations—three actually: internationalization of capital, the professionalization of management, and a trend toward particularism. Madsen's three themes are social facts on a global scale that expose our public debates on China as being lamely parochial. Not only that, he makes a persuasive argument that we are not even talking about China when we rant on about MFN or stolen nuclear secrets or dissidents. He introduces the concept of primary and secondary reference points in public discussions. The latter stands as a metaphor for the former. Madsen shows, for example, that the "liberal myth" of China which seeks out these heroic dissidents has served Americans pretty well as a way to talk about our domestic debates over the creation of a free and just society during the Cold War. But in the context of new global forces and the end of the Cold War with the collapse of Soviet power, there are new problems the old "myth" cannot address: the need for "new integrative visions that can help people reconcile and balance the ambiguities unleashed by the market, the necessities recognized by the social science professions, and the yearnings activated in the quest for community" (p. 227).

Madsen names our current task: "What is required is not so much for the United States to teach China about democracy as for people in both societies to help each other search for democracy amid the confusing contradictions of the modern world." Madsen raises the ideal of humility in U.S.-China relations. He means it in the sense used by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr as an attitude that seeks high ideals while acknowledging the "vanity in all human ambitions and achievements." "This is no excuse," says Madsen, "for ignoring human rights violations in the name of cultural relativism. It is motive for continuing to pursue the cause of basic human decency around the world while realizing that this can never be accomplished unless one also reforms oneself" (p. 227).

This just knocks my socks off. But it didn't do much for my students. This text worked less well because Madsen is more ambitious than Lewis and Wigen. He is

working on several levels at once. The concluding essay is a *tour de force* but it does not provide a great deal of narrative. It did not fulfill my students' requirement that it read like information. It was not unpopular, but it did not have the impact of *Myth of Continents*. I think I should use the whole book in this case, or perhaps a couple of earlier chapters that have sufficient detail to give his shocking sociological categories life and breath. This is by far my favorite reading of the three, and so stands as a reminder to beware: what we as teachers like may not suit the novice reader on that topic. Still, my students kept coming back to the three global trends of the post-Cold War world: internationalization of capital, professionalization of management, and the counter rise of particularism. The "transcendental pretense" of Western norms (see Hall & Ames) became a topic of conversation in both classes in which I used Madsen's reading. Student concluded: a) the global system owes an awful lot to NW Eurasian innovations (the West), and b) it's out of our hands now—the disciplinary regimes of capital and management are no more determined by people in Washington or London than in Beijing or Tokyo. If Lewis and Wigen have twigged my students to what the world isn't, then Madsen has introduced them to the outline of what it may, indeed, be today.

POSTETHNIC AMERICA AND RACIAL FORMATION IN THE UNITED STATES

The third topic is ethnicity and race. In one of those happy experiences as a teacher, I received David A. Hollinger's *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (Basic Books, 1995) from one of my former students who is now studying at Berkeley. I read it and found its message inspiring: ". . . Americans need to push yet harder against the authority that shape and color have historically been allowed by society to exert over culture" (p. x). Hollinger's solution is a form of *cosmopolitanism* which "favors voluntary over involuntary affiliations" (p. 3). This, of course, builds on the global sociological analysis Dick Madsen offers in *China and the American Dream*. It is a useful challenge, spelled out clearly in this short paperback (200 pp. of big print; \$12 from amazon.com). It is, essentially, a long essay. It reinforces the idea of the cultural construction of identity. Yet, I have not used it in class. Haven't found the angle. I wonder why.

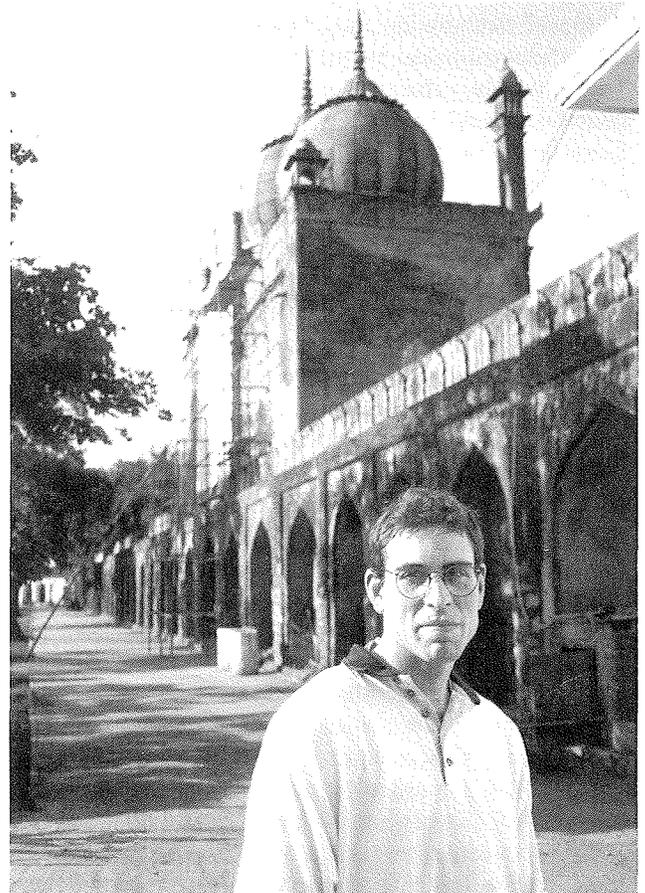
Well, my student was waiting for her teacher's slow pace of unlearning. This spring I got from her Michael Omi's and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States* (Routledge, 1994). And I see what I missed in Hollinger: power. It's nice to say "affiliation" over "biological identity" but Omi and Winant remind us this is a choice not only, or even primarily, made by the individual—it is most often social ascription and carries terrible consequences in terms of power. Access to Weber's big three—wealth, status, and power—are meaningfully determined by ethnicity and race in ways Hollinger fails to confront. Equally, Omi and Winant rather forget class and gender in their single focus on race. What we have here is an illuminating debate that thoughtfully

brings to our attention key parts of what makes up ethnicity or race and some of the consequences our "cognitively responsible" students should confront. And their teacher.

This last example, of course, is my most happy one because it challenges me in ways that make me uncomfortable—therefore indicating it is a cutting edge of awareness for me—and it was given to me by a student. The student teaching the teacher. If that's not success, I can't think what is.

THE COSMOPOLITAN PERSPECTIVE

What these books have in common is a commitment to a humane and cosmopolitan perspective on Asia and America. They seek to challenge our parochial models and to provide us with comparative standards in human geography, international relations, and ethnic identity. *The Myth of Continents*, *China and the American Dream*, and *Postethnic America* change the way I teach not because they are the first or most insightful proponents of the challenges and comparative models they provide, but because they do so in a way my students can engage, take as their own, and turn around and use to question their teacher.



Freeman Student Fellow Andy Busch, Illinois Wesleyan University, at Sufdarjang's Tomb, New Delhi, India. Photo taken by Faculty Fellow Brian Hatcher.