Introduction: Incorporating Minorities and Women in the Teaching of China

Chia Ning  
Central College

At last spring’s annual conference of ASIANetwork and the Asian Studies Development Program two panels—“Incorporating Minorities in the Teaching of China” and “Incorporating Women in the Teaching of China”—were dedicated to addressing the new challenges in teaching of China in four different academic disciplines. Six teaching faculty from ASIANetwork member institutions discussed the theoretical and pedagogical issues in teaching history, religion, sociology, and literature of China. Like the overwhelming majority of the teaching faculty at liberal arts institutions, none of the six presenters was trained in their degree programs as a specialist in Chinese minority studies and women’s studies. They have, however, become involved in these scholarly fields, conducting research projects and improving their pedagogy.

The traditional way of teaching China has centered on the Han majority and the male population—those who often held the dominant positions in society and were culturally and politically assumed to do so. Minorities and women, often the dominated, have been largely left out of the picture of Chinese life and society. But a growing awareness of minorities and women in shaping the social, economic, cultural, and political life of China has been an important development in Chinese Studies. By viewing minorities and women as significant players in Chinese society through all the historical eras, the current scholarship has re-evaluated the previous theories and conclusions, introduced new understandings and interpretations, and offered a good number of new teaching resources.

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The following three papers are examples of scholarship on minorities. Marsha Smith, a sociologist, started her teaching career as a non-Asianist but has developed a strong interest in China, particularly in issues surrounding identity. In this paper she examines issues of identity, focusing on the Naxi, Mosuo, Bai, and Yi nationalities in the People’s Republic of China. Lihua Ying, trained in comparative literature, discusses China’s recent literary movement, focusing on the writings about China’s Hui and Tibetan populations. Finally, Brian Dott, a Qing historian, demonstrates how to integrate non-Chinese peoples, powers, and their dynasties into the teaching of Chinese history in both introductory and upper level courses.