TEACHING ABOUT ASIA

Making History with Digital Video:
Student Documentaries from Photo to Film[1]

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Standing at the nexus of history and modernity, photography is the "classic example" of what has come to be termed visual culture.[2] Providing instant visual access to a given place and time, photography has since its birth been a vital means of preserving the past. The relationship of photography to history is intimate and complex, extending far beyond representation. Photographs operate historically: not only are the moments they depict irretrievably past at the instant of capture, but their ordering of reality a negotiation between "passive surrender to the facts and active reshaping of them...the viewfinder is a political instrument, a tool for making the past suitable for the future."[3] Thus, like other historical documents, photographs are not self-contained, but require interrogation on a number of levels to establish their relationship to the phenomena they claim (or are claimed) to represent.

How do we train students to do this? This essay describes one method: having them use photographic sources to create documentary films, in this case for a course on Twentieth Century Chinese history.

The assignment's goal is to train students to read and use photographs with the same interpretive caution and analytical precision written sources require. As documentary filmmakers building narratives about the past, students experience directly the construction and dissemination of historical knowledge through visual media, momentarily becoming practicing historians of the sort whose tremendous influence on collective memory goes largely unnoticed or questioned outside academia. Hopefully, they come to view documentaries more critically as well. Pedagogically, the project thus also promotes several of the information literacy standards promoted by the Association of College and Research Libraries.[4]

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In groups of three, students are assigned a range of dates about which to create a three minute film, using photographs and archival footage as raw materials. Compiled on DVD, the films will span the entire 20th century, making this a collaborative project both within groups and among the class as a whole.

There are three potential sources of project materials: scanned images; digital images gathered from the internet, and digitized film clips–the latter accessible via the *Video Encyclopedia of the 20th Century*.[5] Scanned images give the best resolution (and thus most visual possibilities) and usually the best metadata (information about the image). Unfortunately, scanning is time consuming, and copyright issues vague.[6] Internet image collections are convenient, searchable, with licensing and use policies often explicitly stated. Good examples are the New York Public Library Digital Collection and Harvard's Visual Information Access, both of which provide stipulations on use and licensing. The Associated Press's photo archive is also available by subscription.[7]

The image sets, distributed on CD-ROM, should contain at least thirty photos and clips, preferably more. Presented with more material than they could possibly use in a three minute film, students must make editorial decisions about which to use. Large and varied image sets also reduce the ever-present hazard of sources overdetermining argument.

In the first phase of the project, groups choose their images and write their script. During this period, students write an essay analyzing one image, submit an annotated list of images selected for their documentary, and write their script (due

Figure 1: Ransacked library

before production commences). It is important to focus solely on the research and writing process at this point, which will both determine the overall quality of the film, and prepare students for a compressed production cycle requiring a clear plan of action.

Next, instructional technologists help students record their script, and train them to use Apple's iMovie to assemble their film in a series of production workshops. Final cuts are compiled on DVD and viewed as a class. This concluding event should be equal parts peer review and class party, where students critique other groups' films and explain the choices made in their own.

Photographs, students often assume, speak for themselves. They don't. Captions, voiceovers, and the viewer's understanding of historical context all ascribe meaning to the image.

Take for example Li Zhensheng's 1967 photo of the Harbin Construction Institute Library (fig. 1).[8] When asked to described what's happened in the photo, students usually draw on their knowledge of the Cultural Revolution's assault on learning, whether in the form of the Four Olds campaign or

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the destruction of subversive foreign books. Armed with this historical context, the image becomes self-explanatory: Red Guards have ransacked the library for pollutive works, now strewn across the floor.

This is only half-true. Red Guards have indeed ransacked the library, but with rather different search criteria. The soft cover books on the floor were not chosen for anything, but were instead discarded for their poor aerodynamic qualities. Hardcover books, conspicuous for their absence, made better projectile weapons, and the ones missing from this picture had already gone on to a new career as ammunition in the combat between rival factions.

Thus, the general "truth" this picture conveys differs from the one most students assume. "Destruction of learning," or "assault on the past" is not the dimension of the Cultural Revolution the image directly references, but rather the anarchy and violence of the Red Guard movement.

The question confronting students therefore is this: given that the assault on the past was an undeniably central feature of the Cultural Revolution, and that few images convey the destruction of learning more viscerally than a library in ruins, would it not be an effective documentary choice to lay this image under a voiceover talking about those aspects of the cultural revolution, rather than factional violence? If so, are ethics of representation violated by using a lesser half-truth in service of a greater one? Classroom discussion of this example is fruitful and often heated, but also increases student self-consciousness in the selection and use of images, heightening their awareness of the power of representation, Ken Burns-style. That is, if a photograph is assumed to accurately represent truth, and a voiceover assumed to accurately represent the photograph, then the voiceover comes to stand for truth. The process itself imparts discursive authority; awareness of this demonstrates to students that photographs (and other visual media) are not unmediated texts.

In fact, there are at minimum two layers of interpretation at work in a given image even *before* student filmmakers add their own. The photographer provides the first layer of interpretation, first by choice of subject and moment, then by framing and composition. The metadata provides the second–and subsequent–layers. For students undertaking this project, the metadata comprised the original captions accompanying the photographs. (Word and image are intertextual; they do not operate in a vacuum.) If publishers crop an image from its original dimensions, that adds yet another layer of interpretation,

Figure 2: "During a three-week-long Conference of Learning and Applying Mao Zedong Thought, Wang Guoxiang, a model PLA soldier, shares his experiences from a meeting in Xinfa commune just outside Harbin, where the audience pinned some 170 Mao badges on his cap and uniform to express their admiration."

*Figure 3: "**True Believer.** As the Cultural Revolution deepened, Red Guards fanned out around the country, to hunt down 'reactionaries' and to share their 'revolutionary experiences.' This soldier in the People's Liberation Army became famous for his revolutionary passion and vigor. Photographed on 16 April, 1968, he clasps the Little Red Book of Mao's sayings, and points proudly to the Mao buttons and badges given to him by peasant audiences around China moved by his revolutionary zeal."*

acting separately and in addition to the caption.

These interpretive layers have many effects. As a single image is reproduced and displayed across different contexts, the corresponding lineages of representation introduce difference to sameness.

Consider two versions of a photo of PLA soldier Wang Guoxiang, also taken by Li Zhensheng (figs. 2-3).[9] The first is reprinted from the entire frame of the negative, with a caption supplying context in a fairly straightforward manner. The second has been cropped and given a caption interpreting this particular image with reference to general historical phenomena.

Note the differences in effect. In the first example, Wang is centered in the frame; he appears smaller because the room behind him provides scale; we see that he sits on a bed. The hand with pad in the lower left corner indicates context: this is an interview with a journalist, not a struggle session. In this visual context, his facial expression has an aspect of severity, but one that grows more from earnest explanation than anger or aggression.

Cropping has removed all traces of Wang's surroundings from the second image, leaving him to loom threateningly, even angrily. The journalist and background details have vanished. The editors provide an interpretive framework by labeling him an anonymous "True Believer." Bold face type heightens the

imposition of archetype, while the withholding of Wang's name completes the erasure of identity. The caption ominously describes Red Guards who have "fanned out" across the country to "hunt down 'reactionaries,'" supplying a vocabulary for interpretation: "revolutionary passion and vigor" defines him; he "clasps" the Little Red Book, "points proudly" to his Mao badges, which he has received from peasant audiences "around China" who are "moved by his revolutionary zeal." (Nowhere mentioned is the three-week conference where the photograph was taken.)

The point here is not that *The Chinese Century* has distorted history, but rather that its presentation of this particular image serves a clear rhetorical purpose. Many student films will, of course, engage in far more questionable discursive strategies, some overtly political or unintentionally Orientalist, others simply generated by lack of familiarity with course materials. As with written assignments, this is unavoidable, and indeed an integral part of the educational process. Practice may not make students perfect information producers and consumers, but it helps them to become more critical ones.◉

Endnotes

[1] These remarks have benefited from the feedback of colleagues at the 2006 AsiaNetwork conference in Lisle, IL, and the June, 2006 ACM conference "Introducing a New Generation of

Students to Academic Inquiry," as well as Colorado College's Academic Technology Services staff.

[2] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 65.

[3] Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989), xiv.

[4] Association of College and Research Libraries, *Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000), 11-14.

[5] New York: CEL Educational Resources, 1986.

[6] This project should fall under the purview of "fair use," as long as images are credited and student films not sold. For the current state of copyright law as regards educational and other use, see the website of the Library of Congress's Section 108 Study Group (http://www.loc.gov/section 108/), especially the comments of Howard Besser.

[7] http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/index.cfm; http://via.harvard.edu:9080/ via/deliver/ home?_collection=via; and http://www.apimages.com/eng/index.html?photoarchive

[8] Li Zhensheng, *Red-Color News Soldier: A Chinese Photographer's Odyssey through the Cultural Revolution* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 179.

[9] Li, 215; Jonathan Spence and Ann-ping Chin, *The Chinese Century: A Photographic History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: Random House, 1996), 201.

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to look at Asia not simply through their Western lenses. In a discussion I had with a student from Yale who was participating in an SIT summer program in Kunming for example, he passionately argued that the best solution to the widening income gaps in China was for the poor rural folks to all go to the cities and work there. So much for agricultural development!

My experiences during this trip and my conversations with American students while in Asia further reinforced my conviction of the critical role that ASIANetwork plays in Asian studies in this country. We have our work cut out for us and I am confident that we will meet this challenge! ⬡

a mainland tour of Chinese sites. Rashna Singh illustrates Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* to her students through her analysis of imagery that depicts India according to western preconceptions and stereotypes.

Karil Kucera, as part of a panel that focused upon the benefits and challenges of inter-institutional collaboration, discusses the Image Database to Enhance Asian Studies (IDEAS) project, whereby representatives from four ASIANetwork schools, have created a shared digital database, now available on the worldwide web.

These articles represent only a portion of the conference highlights. Space limitations prevent us from including in this issue several of the excellent presentations from the 2006 conference, but we certainly will do our best to share them with our members in the Winter issue.

These conference presentations, along with the other articles we are publishing in the *Exchange*, are representative of the creativity and innovation that characterize the efforts of many of our ASIANetwork colleagues to teach about Asia with sensitivity and insight. Because outstanding teaching involves discussion as well as collaboration and sharing, we invite your comments and reactions to the articles presented here.

Tom Lutze and Irv Epstein
Co-editors