

Chinese historiography

Textbook case

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Study Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong's thought—and Bill Gates

"CLASSES struggle, some classes triumph, others are eliminated." Such, wrote Mao Zedong, is history. Such, too, was history teaching. In the 1970s it was not uncommon for a teacher to begin a lesson by telling students to take a ruler, turn to a page of their textbook, lay the ruler along the side of the page...and tear it out. Now again, in many parts of China, textbooks are being rewritten. But this time the aim is to make them livelier and less dogmatic. Some changes are raising hackles.

In September last year, the introduction of a new history textbook in Shanghai's senior secondary schools caused a storm because of its cursory treatment of Mao himself (Bill Gates and J.P. Morgan were better served). It also failed to dwell—as Chinese history textbooks ritually do—on the sufferings of pre-Communist Chinese at the hands of foreign imperialists. A group of history scholars in Beijing reportedly sent a letter to the government saying the book contained serious errors in its political orientation.

The Chinese press has now dubbed the book one of the shortest-lived in the history of Chinese textbooks. In May education officials in Shanghai decided to withdraw it. Since September a new book hewing closer to the old style has replaced it.

The controversy, however, has not abated. Some of China's feistier journals, despite being state-owned, have criticised Shanghai's decision. *China Newsweek*, a magazine controlled by China's second-largest news agency, called it "rash". It said the public as well as scholars should be more tolerant of teaching materials that deviated from their set opinions. A weekend newspaper, *Southern Metropolis Weekly*, quoted a scholar as saying that Chinese children had been fed a "superficial" and "problematic" view of history and this "laughable" approach had to change.

Nor has China abandoned efforts to enliven textbooks and reduce rote-learning. In September some schools in Beijing (to the consternation of media commentators) introduced a new curriculum for senior secondary students that makes the study of the first and second world wars optional. Instead of plodding through history, dynasty by dynasty, textbooks are now arranged by themes such as politics and economics.

Changes in the Chinese-language curriculum have caused a stir too. In many Beijing schools this year, "The Story of Ah Q", a gloomy allegorical novella written by Lu Xun in 1921 and long beloved by China's Communists for its damning insights into the "feudal" thinking of the time, has been dropped. New to the set texts is a martial-arts novel by a Hong Kong writer, Louis Cha. At least schoolchildren will be happy.