

# Complicating the Narrative of Mao's China: Developing Historical Literacy in Year 13 Boys

Joanna Rainey  
Eton College, Windsor, United Kingdom

## Further Information

This poster and further information is available at <http://www.theibsc.org/>

Researcher's Email:  
j.rainey@etoncollege.org.uk

### Introduction

This project aimed to encourage boys to identify and engage with multi-voicedness (*heteroglossia*) in the History classroom by making explicit the complex nature of a period—the consolidation of Communist control in Mao's China—and using it to unlock misconceptions about this time in history. Through discussions of issues as "historians," conflicting evidence card games and independently researched micro-history presentations, boys encountered multi-layered perspectives and were asked to explore their response to these to improve their historical literacy.

Megill's (2017) argument that, "we must acknowledge that narratives are images of the world rather than objective reflections of it" encouraged me to challenge boys' conception of historical truth and the perceived objectivity of the stories they encounter.

The early years of Mao's China are ripe with opportunities to address the issue of curated stories that disrupt the national rhetoric and provide shades of grey in a story defined by black and white. Altehenger (2017), Hershatter (2014) and Strauss (2006) have contributed to the historical practice of using local stories to investigate how Chinese citizens disrupted the narrative carefully created by the Chinese government. Similarly, Perry (2001), Fengyuan (2004), and Brown and Johnson (2015) have argued that Chinese civilians had, and maintained, considerable agency in comparison to the binary story of oppression and control which boys more traditionally encounter.

### The Research Question

How can an investigation of conflicting narratives develop historical literacy in Year 13 boys?

### Research Context and Participants

Eight Year 13 historians from Eton College, an independent boarding school outside of London in the UK, took part in this project. They had chosen this "special" subject course as a module in their History Pre-U (the equivalent of A-Level History).

### Data Collection and Analysis

Historical literacy was defined in this project as the ability to "deal" with conflicting stories; what Taylor (2003) terms as the skill and the ability to make and sustain claims through the creation of their own story. Chapman (2011) terms this "modality." Data were collected at three points during the project and negative or contradictory data were equally considered (Schwalbach, 2003) through a polyangulated mixed methods approach. Consideration of boys' language choices was the primary source for data collection, including linguistic analysis of their initial story of communist consolidation, focusing on use of domain-specific vocabulary, complexity and multiplicity of interpretation. Their conversations around conflicting evidence were analysed and compared to closing interviews.

### Key Findings and Discussion

The boys' first stories were fragmented, unanimously organised by bullet points and visible physical divisions on the page between policies or events. Their vocabulary choices implied passivity or a lack of agency of the part of Chinese citizens, e.g. "control," "absolute," "uncontested" and "oppression." A boy referred to this as being "initially handicapped" by depending on evidence from a single source.

After openly discussing the complexities of approaching and explaining this period of Communist consolidation as historians, the boys' final stories demonstrated high levels of historical literacy by:

- Articulating variations in the aims, speed, and nature of the consolidation period
- Including multiple and contradictory perspectives
- Explicitly addressing the construction of stories through the issue of conflicting evidence
- Questioning each other's "single story" interpretation

"I learnt the necessity of challenging the evidence presented as it became so clear that no account of China was a straightforward one"

"It was interesting to see these experiences which you wouldn't hear when learning history with a broader brush stroke"

"It's important to give voice to stories where there is added validity in commonality of experiences"

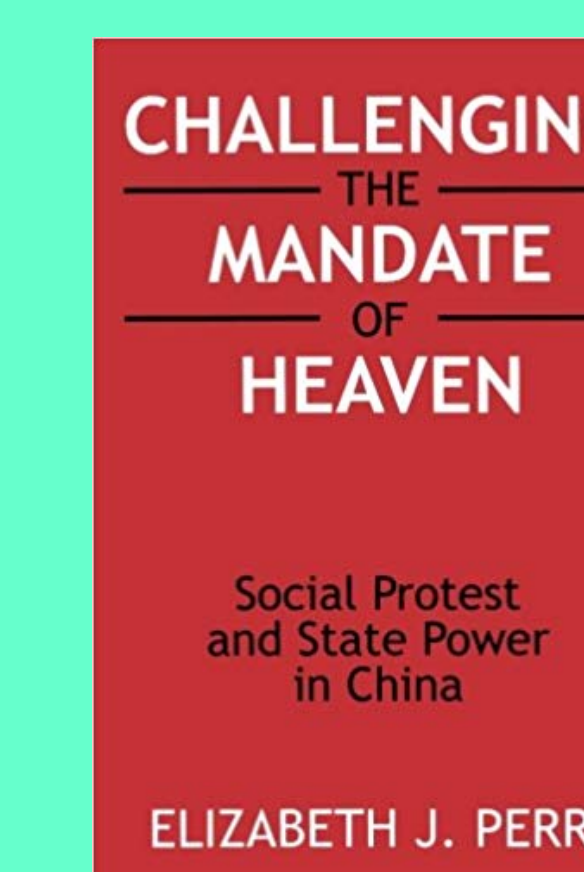
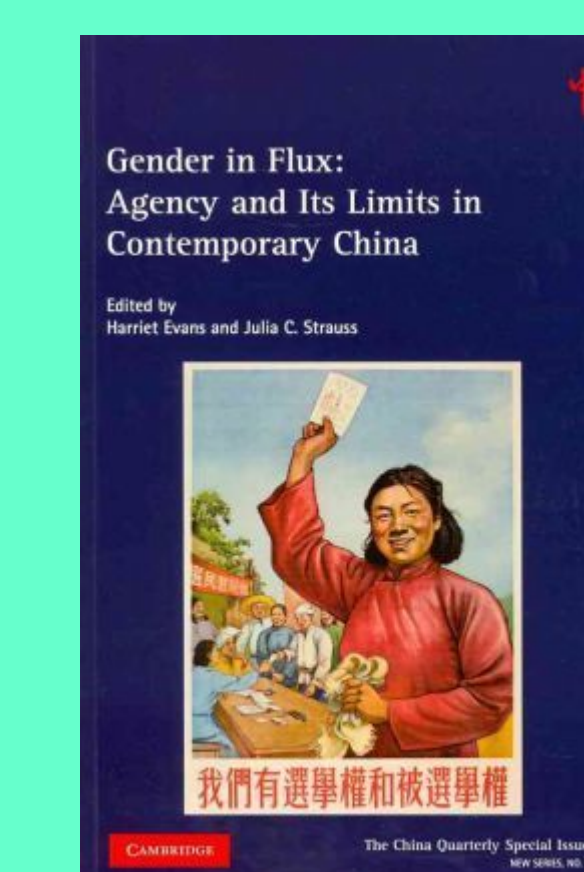
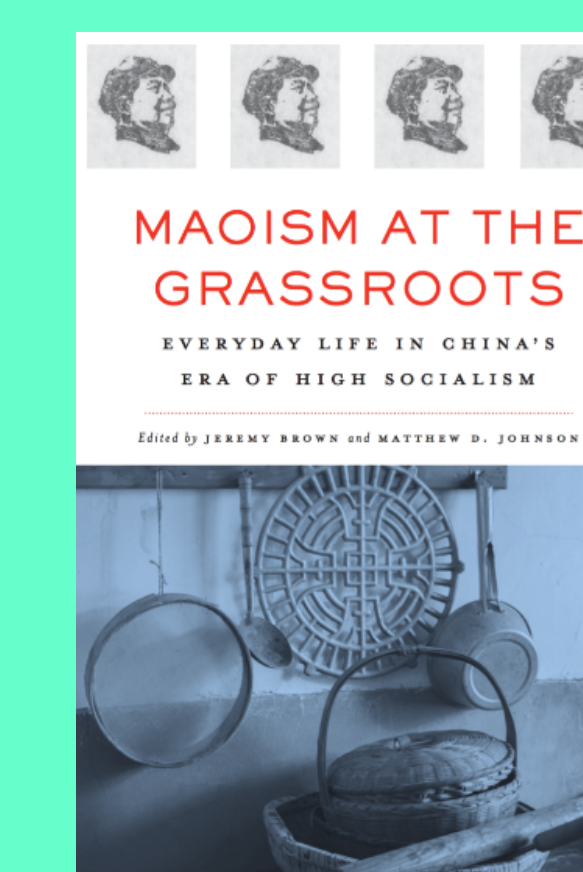
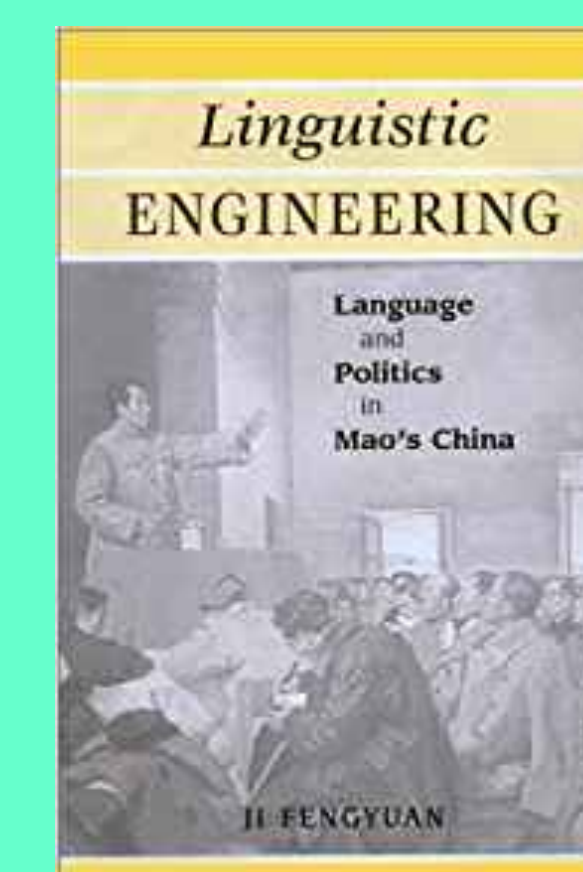
## The Action:



- **Step 1** - How do historians cope with doubt and write about conflicting stories?
- **Historical focus** – exploring how historians have written the story of Mao's China, 1949 to 1956
- **Activity** - Using Brown & Johnson's (2015) introduction and Strauss (2006) as examples, linguistic analysis, boys to write their first story

- **Step 2** - How can we create a story with conflicting evidence?
- **Historical focus** – investigating conflicting evidence about the extent of control, change and success of Mao's transformation of China between 1949 and 1956
- **Activity** – conflicting cards game, revelation in pairs of contradictory evidence and conversation using prompts, independent research project on micro-history article or chapter in Brown & Johnson (2015)

- **Step 3** - How can we write the story of Mao's China between 1949 and 1956?
- **Historical focus** – developing a 'claim' and justifying it through selection and analysis of evidence
- **Activity** – creating a multi-voiced story to explain the period



### Conclusions

- Grappling with stories, how they are created and sustained, curated by nation-states, subtly or explicitly shaped by individuals, enabled the boys to become active as twenty-first century inventors and adapters (Rheingold, 2008).
- Asking the boys to express their concerns and doubts about their learning, and encouraging them to live with open-endedness and modality rather than absolutes, was clearly an uncomfortable space for them to inhabit.
- Some boys continued to use terms like "true" to describe evidence in their closing interviews, which suggests there is space for future discussion of what "true" evidence is, how past understanding and knowledge is used to legitimise or challenge it, or what can be learnt from a statistic, even if it has been manipulated

In preparing boys for a world where facts are easily manipulated and claims of "objectivity" are dubiously omnipresent, this project has been vital in teaching me the need to challenge the ease with which boys tend to accept stories at face value

### Key Readings

- Brown, J. and Johnson, M.D. (2015). *Maoism at the grassroots: Everyday life in China's era of high socialism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- Coffin, C. (2006). *Historical discourse: The language of time, cause and evaluation*. New York: Continuum
- Fengyuan, J. (2004). *Linguistic engineering: Language and politics in Mao's China*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press

Full Reference List: <https://tinyurl.com/RaineyReferences>



International Boys' Schools Coalition Action Research Program 2018 - 2019  
**Boys and Stories: Pathways to Learning**