

COMPLICATING THE NARRATIVE OF MAO'S CHINA: INVESTIGATING CONFLICTING
HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS WITH YEAR 13 BOYS

Joanna Rainey

Eton College, United Kingdom

Abstract

I embarked upon this action research project in the Michaelmas term of 2018 in response to a problem I had observed in my classroom for a number of years: boys encountered complicated historical stories daily but were rarely willing or equipped to grapple with why and how these stories *were* complicated.

In making explicit the complex nature of a particular historical period, the consolidation of Communist control in Mao's China, and using it as a way to unlock misconceptions about this time in history, this project attempted to encourage boys to embrace, rather than shy away from, complex stories. Through discussions of issues as "historians," playing conflicting evidence card games, and undertaking independently researched micro-history presentations, the boys encountered multi-layered perspectives and were asked to explore their response to these.

The project revealed that complexity, while adding much-needed tone to a black and white interpretation, can also cloud boys' views of a period. Although their ability to identify and explain where and why a "single story" was developed and the ability to complicate this using their knowledge was greatly improved, it became clear that this needed to be part of a bigger re-think about how to approach teaching History at a specialist level.

Even living with the restrictions of an imposed exam structure and limited syllabus, this project taught me that there are multiple opportunities to stretch and explore boys' learning. In doing so, the breadth of understanding and genuine scholarship that boys can engage with is a conclusion that I have hugely appreciated having the time and space to realise and to share with others.

Introduction

Stories are problematic in the History classroom. While they have the innate power to enthrall and enlighten, they also often oversimplify, providing a single lens or viewpoint, and most dangerous of all, allow power to rest with the storyteller, rather than the story's subject. As

Kellner (1989) asserts, “the straightness of any story is a rhetoric invention” (p. x), and historians are liable to develop “selective, ordering, re-contextualising strategies” (Parkes, 2009, p. 124) to make sense, and give meaning, to the past. Creating a story of the past makes it recognisable, providing order and intrigue, but for boys whose skills of historical reasoning are still evolving, the ability to discern that stories are interpretations of the past, rather than the unfiltered past, is a lesson which must be taught explicitly (van Boxtel & van Drie, 2013). The IBSC action research focus of 2018-19, *Boys and Stories: Pathways to Learning*, was, therefore, an ideal place to begin the challenge of teaching boys to read and write history with a more nuanced understanding of the power of stories.

Analysing historical discourse is becoming increasingly politically and socially relevant and, in an era where boys are bombarded with polarised debates, the ability to distinguish the validity, strength, and evidential base of a story is an invaluable skill. This action research project aimed to make boys aware of the nature of historical stories and equip them with the tools to create their own multi-voiced story. In doing so, I would be enabled to answer my chosen research question: *How can an investigation of conflicting narratives develop historical literacy in Year 13 boys?*

Challenging the boys’ conception of historical truth and the perceived objectivity of some stories was a necessary first step in my research: as Megill (2017) suggests, “we must acknowledge narratives are images of the world rather than objective reflections of it” (p. 64). Next, and within the context of Mao’s China, understanding why the multiplicity of “stories” that are now available was previously absent, and why the official story has been mostly heavily censored and purposefully constructed, was essential before contrasting it to oppositional stories that are being discovered by garbologists and sinologists. Having the boys make sense of these stories and using them to create their own was the final step in the research action. It was fundamental to challenge preconceptions and pre-existing stories by actively engaging with complex history. Indeed, embracing complexity and multi-voicedness (*heteroglossia*) was a challenge worth pursuing. Further, using an action research methodology offered all stakeholders, myself and the boys included, the chance to evaluate how well we responded to that challenge (Stringer, 2014, p. 15).

Literature Review

Stories create a rich learning environment, but many studies demonstrate that stories are often based on incorrect interpretation or marred by a teacher’s preconceptions. Indeed, the most memorable school history experiences for students interviewed in Lee and Shemilt’s

(1993) Project CHATA almost unanimously centred on grand narratives, with little awareness of conflicting trends or oppositional experiences. Furthermore, Coffin's (2006) conclusion that "learning to read and write history successfully is not a straightforward process for all students" (p. 1) emphasises that within traditional History courses, where value is attributed to summarising, identification or content-heavy narrative, boys are less likely to engage with the empowering nature of evaluating historical discourse. When boys grapple with stories and investigate how historians create and sustain them, how they are created and curated by nations and states, and how individuals can add to and change the prevailing trends, they will be more successful in "reading and writing history" (Coffin, 2006) and be active as twenty-first century inventors and adapters (Rheingold, 2008).

The History classroom is an ideal place to inculcate and measure the skills of reading and writing history. Not only do boys arrive at the door with a pre-existing story of an era or event themselves, but they also encounter multiple and potentially conflicting plot points along the way and need to arrive at a conclusion that is both balanced and justifiable. In two years of teaching the Pre-University Special Subject course, *China under Mao 1949 to 1976*, I have become more convinced of the imperative to address the need for 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 have disrupted the narrative carefully created by the Chinese government. Similarly, Perry (2001), Fengyuan (2004) and Brown and Johnson (2015) argue that Chinese civilians had, and have maintained, considerable agency through being able to resist, oppose and refuse, directly and indirectly. This recent wave of historical scholarship strongly suggests that the single-voicedness (*monoglossia*), or the single story, of Mao's China needs to be rewritten. For students, therefore, it is necessary to discern this single story, understand how and why it has been written, and then complicate it. In this case, action research for both teacher and students, provided "a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront." (Stringer, 2014, p. 1).

Asking boys to re-write a story that has been embedded for generations, requires them to not only embrace the complexity of a multi-voiced past but to attempt to shape and reflect it in their own narrative. As Downey and Long (2016) argue, "narrative is not mindless repetition of knowledge but requires pupils to select, analyse, and derive meaning from historical information in order to construct a historical narrative" (p. 154). To re-write an already written history, boys need to engage in constructing Donaldson's (2018) "thick descriptions";

narratives that are anchored in substantive content knowledge and conceptual understanding. These skills may be defined under the umbrella of “historical literacy,” which Roberts (2013) defines broadly as “an awareness of the past in the present and the interconnection between them” (p. 15). This project focused on two particular skills that researchers of historical literacy agree are of fundamental importance:

- "Understanding the shape of change and continuity over time, understanding multiple narratives and dealing with open-endedness" (Taylor, 2003, p. 6) by corroborating evidence and considering its strengths and weaknesses.
- An awareness of modality; “the degree of certainty with which claims can be made and hedges and qualifications ... a central feature of historical writing” (Chapman, 2011, p. 34)

The ability to “deal” with conflicting stories, as Taylor (2003) terms the skill, and the ability to make and sustain claims through the creation of their own story, which Chapman (2011) terms ‘modality’, served as the test for developing the historical literacy of the boys in this project.

While Reichert & Hawley (2010) emphasise the importance of student construction in teaching boys, it is clear that although extensive research has determined the importance of checking and developing substantive knowledge, there has been comparatively little attention paid to what students can construct with this knowledge. Teacher-researchers, such as Donaldson (2018) have investigated how boys develop substantive subject knowledge and conclude that it is fundamental to secure this. Howells’ (2011) research, which encouraged his A-Level students to develop their textbook-level analysis by reading and discussing historical interpretations, confirmed the necessity to scaffold the process by which students recognise, explain, and evaluate competing interpretations.

Additionally, Lee (2005) noted that students will only develop a “big picture” vision of history if they are equipped with “an intellectual toolkit for coping with historians' disagreements, and do not expect historical accounts to mirror the past” (p. 37). This epistemic stance, or big picture, is demonstrated through comfort in using domain-specific language (Wineburg, 1998) and was measured across 38 hours of student talk by Van Boxtel, Havekes, Coppen and Luttenberg (2016) in seven Dutch classrooms across five schools. They discovered that novices (or historical illiterates) in contrast to experts (historical literates) who test multiple perspectives, barely discuss alternative perspectives or answers, instead tending to rush forward to one single answer. Such research has done much to embed our understanding of

how students learn and talk about history, but there remains room for a study of how they create and write history once their big picture is complete.

Research Context

The participants in this research were a class of eight Year 13 History boys at Eton College. Eton is an independent boarding school outside of London in the UK. We teach 1300 boys from the ages of 13-18 years old, and, as a selective school, most boys are very academically able. That said, the class at the centre of this research was technically mixed-ability. The boys had chosen this “special subject” course as a module in their History Pre-U (the equivalent of A-Level History). I knew all of the eight boys in advance, either from teaching them previously or working with them in a wider school context. This meant that I was able to anticipate additional support or clarification that some boys might need as we delved deeper into the conceptual underpinnings of historical narrative. The action was designed around the third of six topics within the Pre-U Special Subject course and was taught from October to November 2018. I asked the boys' permission to use their ideas and contributions, and I ensured anonymity by withholding names in my discussion of data.

The Action

Previously, when teaching this course, boys would encounter dissent amongst historians at one point—a debate over death tolls as a result of the Great Leap Forward between historians Dikotter (2010) and Wemheuer (2011)—and consideration of how to define “Communism in power” through a discussion using Altheenger's (2017) research as a prompt. While boys consistently explore issues of provenance (analysing reliability) in their treatment of sources, these sources are all chosen by the Pre-U Board and represent a narrow view of the Chinese experience. This action intended to broaden that view by explicitly providing boys with the opportunity to read, research, and critique conflicting stories.

Prior to the steps below, the boys took part in two lessons exploring the nature of history as a storytelling discipline. In these lessons, the boys considered issues of agency and who interprets stories, how and why stories are named, how stories are created by those who are familiar and unfamiliar with their plots, and how language is essential to the formation of stories (Fengyuan, 2004).

Action Timeline:

Step one. 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 wrote their first story (no instructions given about form or content, maximum 1 page)

Step two. 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 three. 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 summarise the period

Data Collection

This action research project included a wide range of sources to provide data for collection and analysis. Data collection was divided into three distinct steps, mirroring the intended conceptual development of the boys and driven by the overall enquiry question. This ensured credibility through a triangulation mixed methods approach (Mertler, 2017).

Step 1 data collection. Linguistic analysis of the initial “story” of China focused on the use of domain-specific vocabulary, complexity, and multiplicity of interpretations, and teacher observation and voice recording of boys' highlighting and annotation of historians examples

Step 2 data collection. Audio recording and teacher observations of classroom conversations using van Boxtel et al. 's (2016) “characterisation of student talk” table to analyse, field notes analysing focus and depth of understanding in independent presentations

Step 3 data collection. Linguistic analysis of the final story and closing interviews

The choice of data sources, which were predominantly qualitative in nature and focused on written and oral “classroom artifacts” (Hubbard & Power, 2003), was intended to unlock the “free flowing” (Mertler, 2017, p. 131) character of qualitative research that allows the action researcher flexibility in adjusting their gaze and interpretation as new developments occur

(Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The data collected from verbal sources, including recorded conversations and semi-structured interviews and written sources, and linguistic analysis of final stories, were deliberately separated. This separation was based on the conclusion that combining the two within one activity "seems to close the door and seems to throw boys back into behaviour reflecting a lower epistemic stance, as it suggests only one correct answer" (van Boxtel et al., 2016, p. 123).

I was also careful to consider how and when I collected data, particularly my field notes and observations. I actively attempted to be mindful of Schmuck's (1997) findings on the likely negative impact of explicit teacher observation on student behaviour by writing up my findings after each lesson and activity, and only loosely guiding these observations using my enquiry sub-questions in order to prevent missing developments if waiting to observe "desired behaviour" (Mertler, 2017, p. 131). Cross-referencing my field notes with recorded conversations and video interviews from boys' perspectives further enabled the development of "the richness and the detail of what one is observing" (Mertler, 2017, p. 133).

Data Analysis

Data were collected and transcribed throughout the project and used to conduct an inductive analysis that included a specific language-based analysis to create quantitative data using a comparison between first and final stories. This process ensured that emerging patterns and themes were specific to my research question and that negative or contradictory data were equally considered (Schwalbach, 2003). Credibility was achieved through the use of multiple data sources, a polyangulated mixed methods approach, prolonged participation in the project by both the boys and me, and the assistance of an external observer (Glesne, 2006), the researcher-in-residence from Eton's Centre for Research and Innovation in Learning. Data analysis was inspired throughout by Stringer's (2014) emphasis on the importance of qualitative data to enable researchers to determine "why and how things happen the way they do" (p. 101).

Discussion of Results

Theme 1 – The Power of Vocabulary in Stories

Levstik's (2000) conclusion that "decisions about what is historically significant have as much to do with what is repressed as with what is recollected" (p. 284) suggests that the power of the storyteller in history lies in their individual choices regarding vocabulary, structure, emphasis and characterisation. For historians, both professional and in the schoolroom, conceptualising the significance and nature of a period comes through it playing a "role in the

mental household of a subject” (Rüsen, 1993, p. 87): that is, grappling with knowledge, not as objective facts, but as pieces of a puzzle which need to be explained and evaluated.

The first story that the eight participants of this action research project wrote was at the very beginning of the module on the consolidation of Communist power in China between 1949 and 1956. Their stories were fragmented, unanimously organised by bullet points and visible physical divisions on the page between policies or events. The boys’ vocabulary choices implied passivity or a lack of agency of the part of Chinese citizens. Terms such as, “control,” “absolute,” and “uncontested” were mentioned by three of the eight boys, “oppression” by five, and “killed” or “purged” by six out of eight. The only pre-reading they had engaged with was the course textbook, *Access to History: Mao’s China 1936-1997* by Michael Lynch (2015). It became increasingly clear that this was a flawed interpretation in and of itself, often presenting a binary view of the Chinese experience of Communist consolidation to simplify the story. This was an issue that the boys noted themselves as they began to discover multiple and conflicting stories about this period.

It was intriguing that in their first story, five out of eight boys included a discussion of the period of limited co-operation between the new CCP regime and remaining GMD industrialists. It is part of Lynch’s (2015) narrative on the early period of consolidation, but the boys’ placement of this event next to sentences detailing the immediate removal of enemies and establishment of “absolute control” suggests they pictured it as an anomaly; a plotline which didn’t fit the story they wanted to tell. Boy G referred to this as him being “initially handicapped” by depending on evidence from a single source.

The boys’ second stories, written at the end of the three-week intervention, were markedly different in their construction. All eight boys wrote in prose with a clear structure (sometimes chronological, sometimes thematic), and consideration of central characters and the evidence and multiple sources on which their story rested. There were three particular changes which suggested that boys had developed their historical literacy skills in embracing modality (Chapman, 2011) and “understanding the shape of change and continuity over time” (Taylor, 2003, p. 6):

Boys identified characters of import beyond Mao. Boy B referred to the elevation of the peasants as the vanguard of the revolution and the development of the “state” and its tentacular power as an individual character. Although all eight boys referred to the USSR as a central character in their first stories, their presentation suggested a one-dimensional relationship of unequal power and dominance between the PRC and USSR. In contrast, Boy

G's second story noted that "as Mao started to grow in confidence and ambition, he left both the advice and support of the Soviet Union to carve China a different path."

Boys articulated a variation in the aims of the consolidation period. All eight boys demonstrated movement away from simple oppression or binary understanding of the CCP's attempt to cement power. Boy B included "elimination of opposition," but also spoke of the CCP shoring up industry and resolving food shortages through modernisation of agriculture. Boy E presented the consolidation period as one necessitating a "slow and smooth transition," unlike his first story which failed to explore changing intentions over a seven-year period.

Boys included multiple and contradictory perspectives. Four out of eight boys presented the First 5 Year Plan (Mao's first mass industrial campaign from 1952-1956) as both a success *and* failure. Boy B differentiated between its measurable impact on GDP growth, but also acknowledged issues of corrupted industrial production figures. Boy C accused the reporting of the first 5 Year Plan of "not telling the whole story." In addition, Boy E identified a second theme of his story as "the heavy cost of progress" and the concept of "cost" was applied as much as to Mao himself as it was to the Chinese people, who are often seen as the only victims of corruption and collusion.

Before writing their second stories, I asked boys to pool their ideas into a word bank to ensure their stories were reflective of the micro and grassroots history with which we had been engaging. It was fascinating to see words associated with measurement, caution, and consideration suggested by multiple boys. Boy A argued that "change" should be included, emphasising that micro-historical studies of rural regions "often reveal little day-to-day change under CCP rule." There was also general agreement that "extent" should be included, which could explore the extent of both control and diverse experiences, as well as "totality," with boys asking how far we could trust Party membership statistics as evidence of public support.

Theme 2 – Exploring the Value of Micro/Grassroots History

Enabling boys to engage with historians outside of a textbook was one of the motivating factors of this project. The richness of historical scholarship on the "golden years" interpretation of Mao's early regime and Seixas' (2000) recommendation of presenting conflicting interpretations of the past to students, with a view to "reaching conclusions about which is the better interpretation on the basis of [studying] a series of documents, historians' assessments, and other materials" (p. 20), meant there was a plethora of

opportunities to assess historical literacy skills. Boys were asked to read a chapter or article which represented a grassroots or micro-historical perspective and to present their findings to the class, guided by three questions to focus their reading and interpretations. The benefit of this approach was widely acknowledged and appreciated for the depth and nuance it added to the boys' understanding of the period. All of the boys, however, remarked on finding the readings difficult, with the word "density" mentioned regularly, particularly in comparison to their regular "light" diet of textbooks. Boy D's project on ethnic minorities and the Mashan uprising led him to conclude that it was "interesting to see these experiences which you wouldn't hear when learning history with a broader brush stroke." He noted becoming aware of the "distinction between what we're told and what happened in smaller areas." Similarly, Boy A's project on gender in Shaanxi province led him to declare Lynch (the course textbook) "male and urban centric," failing to give voice to stories where there was "added validity in the commonality of the stories and experiences." Boy F's project on Han chauvinism and the CCP's response to this concluded that Lynch had a consistently "negative view of CCP and its activities," whereas grassroots studies show that there were examples of the Party fulfilling positive policies. Finally, Boy C's project concluded that micro-history/grassroots studies were "key for looking at the *impact* of policies not just the policies and how or why they were designed" in terms of considering the stories of those who lived with and through Communist consolidation, rather than simply reflecting on the single story of those who oversaw it.

Theme 3 - Embracing Complex Stories in History

The development of historical literacy and the boys' ability to judge "the degree of certainty with which claims can be made" (Chapman, 2011, p. 34) was the most difficult element to assess in this project. Whilst Bradshaw (2007) argues that learners should be given the chance to make their own decisions about the significance of historical events, Maggioni, Van Sledright and Alexander (2009) suggest that moving learners from the "borrower stance" (where they believe that despite multiple interpretations there is still one version of the past as the "best" or "final" interpretation) to the "criticalist stance" (recognition that multiple constructions of the past are valid) needs to be taught explicitly. I attempted to walk carefully down the middle of these polarised views by discussing openly with boys the issues that historians face when reaching a conclusion about the past and specifying issues particular to historians of this period in China.

We then explored four themes of the Communist consolidation period (opposition, ethnic minorities, propaganda and control and economic and social change) through a card game, with boys betting cards with opposing evidence based on their value as interpretations. While

there was a consensus in the semi-structured closing interviews that engaging with these statements of conflicting evidence was interesting, boys also articulated their difficulties. Boy G said, “the discussions into useable historical interpretations and observations I found challenging,” while Boy C was “struck by the extent to which Mao went in order to consolidate his rule and it showed itself to be much more of a complex period of power struggle than I expected.” Boy A concluded that “the difficulty in extracting reliable information from China about the period we are studying means that I read things with more cynicism than usual,” just as Boy C learnt the necessity of challenging “the evidence presented as it became so clear that no account of China was a straightforward one.” Whilst it was clear that there was increased awareness of diversity and complexity in the historical narrative, the fact that both Boy F and Boy D continued to use terms like “true” to describe evidence in their closing interview suggests there is space for future discussion of what “true” evidence is, how they could bring past understanding and knowledge to legitimise or challenge it, or what they could learn from a statistic even if it has been manipulated.

It was clear from re-reading the data collected from this project that boys were puzzled, challenged, and ultimately responsive to “learning to live with a clouded view” (in Boy D’s words). Three developments, in particular, became clear when considering how far boys embraced complex stories:

Boys addressed the issue of conflicting evidence. Boy C and Boy A’s conversation (Appendix A) revealed the most explicit references to contradictory evidence; indeed, at three points, they mention evidence being “different” or “conflicting.” At the beginning of the conversation, Boy C searched to dismiss this; however, they later transitioned to explaining that a difference between intention and the reality of implementation can exist without one statement negating the other. Boy A remarked that “it never says that they believed what they wanted them to believe, just that they *knew* what they wanted them to believe,” with Boy C concluding that “both sources comment on the disparity between what the Party put out as appropriate thoughts and behaviour, and the reality of conformity for the purpose of safety.” They recognised, through focusing on word choice, that the reach and totality of the propaganda system was not adequate evidence of its success, merely of the primacy of its place in Mao’s China.

Boys explored the construction of stories through evidence. Boy B and Boy F indicated an awareness of the danger of taking statistics at face value, particularly when they are traditionally used as evidence of the absolute nature of CCP control in the early years of the PRC (Appendix B). Boy F remarked that the Thought Reform of Intellectuals movement,

which resulted in 1.5 million being lectured on the nature of revolution and engaging in self-criticism, was a campaign “which only runs for about a year, and its outreach is very small.” His connection between this early anti-intellectual purge and a later purge in 1956-57 suggests he was aware of the authenticity with which statistics are often imbued, but not convinced by it.

Boys questioned each other’s “single story” interpretation. Boy B demonstrated his understanding of the impact of linguistic conditioning by responding to a comment that all Chinese citizens supported the PRC by asking, “The people didn’t really know better did they?” (Appendix C). He used our prior discussion on the concept of “operant conditioning,” where attitudes are modified through reward and punishment (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), to argue that CCP’s maintenance of popular support cannot be adequately explained simply by their visible policies (rewards) but needs to include an understanding of their more concealed social conditioning (punishments).

Conclusion

Rüsen (1993) argues, “historical learning cannot just be a process of acquiring history as ‘objective’ facts; it must also involve historical knowledge beginning to play a role in the mental household of a subject” (p. 87). Exploring the process of learning history with the boys, and discussing their experience of it, demonstrated just how correct Rüsen was. Their initial stories of Mao’s China explored a one-dimensional interpretation, accompanied by absolute vocabulary choices, and were shaded with a determination to name or characterise the period as a recognisable entity.

It became increasingly clear, through explicitly discussing the issues that professional historians face and through asking the boys to express their concerns and doubts about their learning (see Appendix D), that living with open-endedness and modality rather than with absolutes was uncomfortable for them. As the project progressed, however, all eight of the participants engaged directly with this discomfort, and the final stories they produced demonstrate measurably improved levels of historical literacy (Chapman, 2011).

The success of this project and the many questions it has raised for future consideration have already had an impact on my practice. My Year 11 class have investigated the issues of ownership of the Arab-Israeli conflict narrative and my Year 9 class have researched an example of destruction and the story that was created around it. Each of these activities was approached by openly discussing the complexity of understanding how and why stories are

created and sustained in history, and by encouraging boys to embrace the discomfort of a clouded conclusion.

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. Whilst the eight Year 13 boys who participated walked away with a complicated story, they walked away richer in their historical understanding.

Reflection Statement

This action research project allowed me the time and space to consider, and attempt to resolve, an issue I have been grappling with since the beginning of my teaching career. Whilst it is clear that I am only at the beginning of that journey, the ability to consider how to respond to the issue of complicating history without over-complicating it, to experiment with possible strategies, and to evaluate their impact has been invaluable. I was at points jubilant, frustrated, exhausted, and hopeful, and I finished on that note: Hopeful that I will continue, with the support and experience of my colleagues, and the energy and genuine passion of the boys I am proud to teach, to explore the power of stories.

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Appendix A

Conflicting Evidence Game, Conversation Between Boy A and Boy C

Card 1: The press was a fundamental part of the system of mass communication. It kept people in positions of power up to date with Party policy, provided propaganda materials and new concepts and slogans to be used. The combined circulation of all newspapers rose from 3 million in 1950 to almost 21 million by 1959. Newspapers were discussed in organised reading groups and read aloud to allow transmission to illiterate Chinese

Card 2: Small circulation relative to the total population meant that newspaper reading groups were much more an urban phenomenon than a rural one, in fact they had to introduce them in villages in mass campaigns to exploit their effectiveness, such as the Campaign to Study and Apply Mao Zedong Thought 1964-66. Books were even less accessible (literally and financially) than newspapers to the majority of the population

Boy C: It's revealing the challenges of spreading Mao's thought but I think it's also quite a good example of the Party's organisation in achieving its goals

Boy A: My one is a slightly conflicting view. I think this shows the importance of propaganda to all of Mao's people, which is slightly conflicting to yours as it impresses upon you the general universality of the propaganda around China

Boy C: What were your stat dates?

Boy A: 1950-59

Boy C: They are slightly different. They seem to be in agreement that there was widespread attempts to control the population through the press, it's just I think yours emphasises the success of it after its implemented, whereas mine's more focused on the challenge of getting it in in the first place. I don't think they're necessarily conflicting, just different.

Card 3: From 1949 to the mid-1950s, Party members and cadres were provided with propaganda handbooks, telling them what issues to stress, providing background information and material for inclusion in wall or blackboard newspapers, cartoons to be reproduced by local artists, songs for mass meetings and advice on propaganda methods. Furthermore, propaganda networks were established from 1951 and lasted until 1953, 'responsible for ensuring that the people in their charge knew and accepted what the Party wanted them to believe'

Card 4: The Party was less successful in controlling language used in private between families and friends than language in public – 'language itself became bifurcated: the heroic language

was used to satisfy even more probing demands for evidence of thought reform, whereas the private language preserved the traditional norms that kept friendship and ties alive. The two discourses were kept apart as a result of conflicting social demands, but each could be used in its appropriate context' (Dittmer, 1987)

Boy C: I think this is interesting as it's the first I've seen of someone suggesting that there was actually this separation between personal and political, because the sources we've looked at before suggest that everyone was entirely indoctrinated. The Question A we did with the woman suggesting that Mao was her 'first love', as much as there were people who were dissenting, thought reform was genuinely changing thoughts rather than political thoughts. So I think it's quite a revealing source to suggest that language used may have been a result of conformity rather than genuine change

Boy A: I think mine seems to echo more of what we've heard before, people telling people what they should believe. I think there's quite an emphasis on the secularism apparent in Mao's China, because even the Party members were being told what to believe by the central Party. But it does slightly conflict with your one because this one seems to think that most people were being told what to believe, whereas your one suggests that in private people believed, sort of, what they wanted.

Boy C: I think the two can co-exist though, the last line of yours, what's the exact wording? There is a suggestion in that that there is conformity measure and a reality

Boy A: Yeah, it never says that they believed what they wanted them to believe, but that they knew what they wanted them to believe

Boy C: So I think both comment on the disparity between what the Party put out as everyone's thoughts and the reality of conformity for the purpose of safety.

Appendix B

Conflicting Evidence Game, Conversation Between Boy B and Boy F

Conversation about Cards 1 and 2

Boy F: So, this first little snippet reveals there was clear oppression of the GMD and people who opposed the CCP beforehand, this is shown by the '2-3 million deaths' including executions in Shanghai and the anti-Campaign of 51

Boy B: Ok, the evidence that's revealed in this source is the intellectual cleansing movement, or thought reform (using statistics from statement). One of the major effects of this campaign was the creation of dissonance, or conflict, between the new ideology and traditional thought processes, like respecting elders

Boy F: What was your response to it?

Boy B: I think it's quite interesting how Mao was trying to dismiss, in a way, past thought even though still today there is still an emphasis on respecting elders. There's a clear clash, which I think to an extent that would be almost inevitable, as Mao said to destroy everything, to build new stuff upon

Boy F: I think my source is very similar to yours in how Mao is seeking to destroy remnants of the past, like supporters of the past party. In a cynical way it is logical if you want to begin a completely new regime. So my reaction to it is that it was extreme, but we already knew things like this had happened

Boy B: How can you explain it though, as an historian?

R: I guess it shows the extent Mao was prepared to go to, to eradicate any opposition, and it also shows a fear factor that would have been present throughout China, and how this might have been an incentive for people to bend towards communism and Mao's way of thinking

Boy F: How would you explain yours as an historian?

Boy B: I would look at it as an example of removing opposition, but it's interesting that this campaign only runs for about a year, and the outreach is very small, only 1.5 million citizens are lectured in the end. It might have been to identify opponents hidden in the population, but I would assume it wasn't extremely successful

Appendix C

Conflicting Evidence Game, Conversation Between Boy B and Boy F

Conversation about Cards 2 and 3

Boy F: This reveals a really positive view of the CCP and Mao, showing how the CCP was really going round revamping China, cleaning things up. It's quite interesting that this was written by an American historian who says it was a 'new China to be proud of', that abolished foreign influence and stamped out corruption

Boy B: Ok, I've got something slightly different. It's also written by Fairbank, in 1987, it's quite short but it's very interesting. He notices, or states, that actually the people that loved Mao and the CCP itself from 1949 later come to see that the system that they lived in and the success of it depended on absolute control and manipulation of the people (quotation). It's like the Chinese realising what the West could see for a while, but obviously people in China were oblivious to it, they believed in the system so much.

Boy F: So my response to that is from an American historian. I'm surprised that in 1987 he would say such positive things about the Chinese government because they were not rivals as such, because China wasn't at the same level, but ideological enemies you could say. And especially the line that 'China abolished foreign influence', it's intriguing that he would praise this as America tried to take advantage of, to a certain extent exploit, China earlier on with the open door policy. It's surprising he has such a positive view of China.

Boy B: I'm not as surprised with this statement in terms of Fairbank himself, rather the details of it. It's interesting that it took so long for the Chinese themselves to realise what kind of country, and government, they were living under. It might not be obvious that one is being controlled completely if things are going well. What's interesting is that Mao's success, his ways of ruling a government, would not be discovered for a while.

Boy F: How can you explain it as an historian?

Boy B: What this does is really credit Mao's power as a ruler, his genius, mastermind, in managing to control a country for so long without people realising that they were subdued to an extent

Boy F: I guess mine reveals as an historian you might have to contemplate the fact that the CCP were the right thing for China at the time, that they really were a force that was saving China from poverty, cleaning up the criminals

Boy B: But the people didn't really know better did they?

Appendix D

Closing Interviews with Boy E, Boy A and Boy C

Question: What was your idea/concept/story of Mao's China (Communism in Power, 49-56) when we arrived?

Boy E - I had close to no idea bar some limited knowledge of the One Child Policy!

Boy A - A journey of China from backwardness in the century of revolution to the modernity of China today, of course with the costs that a dictatorial state often brings. I saw the famine as something that, although not properly dealt with, was in some way natural and inevitable.

Boy C - I had very little knowledge of the period coming into it. While I did presume that the early stage would be one of consolidation I was struck by the extents to which Mao went in order to consolidate his rule and it showed itself to be much more of a complex period of power struggle than I expected.

Question: Did this change? How/why?

Boy E - Yes! Studying Mao for a term has expanded my knowledge and fuelled my interest immeasurably. After whetting the appetite with a week or so on the Civil War, both the learning in class, accompanied by the reading in the evenings significantly broadened my awareness of the aforementioned period. I enjoyed the technique of noting a period or theme, then consolidating in class rather than the other way around. Moreover, the way that historiography (at least interpretations other than that of Lynch, the textbook) was incorporated in the lesson greatly improved the understanding and awareness I was able to gain from each part of Mao's time in power

Boy A - I now know the extent of fear and censorship in China and the magnitude of the brutality that played a huge role in people's lives. I much better understand Mao's descent into the authoritarian figure that did little to stop the famine and caused the terror and uncertainty of communist China at the time. At the same time, I am able to now empathise to an extent due to the situation and the lack of information available.

Question: How much did opposing stories play a part in your writing/document questions?

Boy E - Not as much as they should have. I think there will be two sides to every argument and though perhaps in Mao's case you have to be quite radical to differ from the views of the overall nature of Mao's regime, his responsibility and awareness for individual actions are certainly up for debate. Therefore, especially with the amount of material I had available to me, I should have (and could have) addressed/talked about opposing stories far more.

Boy A - The difficulty in extracting reliable information from China about the period we are studying certainly plays a part. It means that in this period more than most I read things with more cynicism than usual.

Boy C - The opposing stories were useful insofar as it taught me to challenge the evidence presented in the questions as it became so clear that no account of China was a straightforward one.