

THE CHANGING 'DREAM' IN THE CLASSROOM: LITERARY CHINESE TEXTBOOKS IN THE PRC

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NO DREAMS ARE MORE powerful or poignant than those a nation imparts to its children. One revealing window into such dreams is a school textbook. On 20 February 2019, an anonymous post on Weibo disclosed that updates were being proposed to the People's Republic of China (PRC) middle-school textbook for literary Chinese, including the removal of the rousing story of Chen She 陳涉 (d.208 BCE), the peasant leader of a grassroots rebellion against the tottering Qin empire (221–207 BCE). Chen's biography comes from Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (b.145 BCE) *Records of the Historian* 史記, a classic of Chinese literature as well as a foundational

work of history. The current textbook selection narrates Chen's life from his youth until his rise in the rebellion. According to a manual for teachers, it is supposed to 'demonstrate the tremendous power of the first righteous peasant uprising in our country's history' and give students a sense of 'the spirit of struggle underlying the peasants' righteous uprising'.¹

According to the Weibo source, education authorities plan to replace Chen She's story with an anecdote about Zhou Yafu 周亞夫 (d.143 BCE), an upright and law-abiding general of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) whose story is also found in the *Records of the Historian*.² Since the early 1960s,



The tomb of Chen She in Hunan province
Source: Baike

generations of mainland Chinese students have learned Chen She's story by heart, which is why news of its planned removal from the latest textbooks astonished the Chinese public.

News outlets reported an outcry on social media.³ The new textbook's editor-in-chief told the state-run *Global Times* that the change was 'a purely academic adjustment' to 'avoid interdisciplinary overlap', since parts of Chen She's story will remain in the history textbooks. Xu Guoqi 徐國琦, Professor of History at the University of Hong Kong, instead interprets the update as an expression of fear: a story that once symbolised the noble cause of (Communist) revolution could be seen today as an encouragement to protest.⁴ We argue further that the change points to a profound shift in the nature of the national 'dreams' being proposed to the younger generation in which heroic revolutionary courage is no

longer a priority. What is called for instead is the courage to uphold the system, as expressed by the current Party line of 'ruling the nation in accord with law' 依法治國 (see the *China Story Yearbook 2016: Control*, Chapter 2 'Control by Law', pp.43–57).

The Political Role of School Textbooks in China

Textbooks present themselves as unbiased sources of knowledge (even though in virtually all non-scientific cases this is blatantly not true). In mainland China, this makes them powerful purveyors of official ideology to susceptible young minds. Robert Weatherley and Coirle Magee have argued that the Chinese Communist Party would consider middle-school history textbooks 'an ideal medium for the transmission of political propaganda', and therefore carefully control the content and how it is framed.⁵ The literary Chinese curriculum can produce an even more powerful effect, since the political subtext is submerged in stories that themselves are inspiring and also linked to a proud cultural heritage. Presented in the context of language learning,

stories such as these are justly prized and not merely part of a program of flat-footed ideological instruction.

In 1951, when the leading authorised textbook publisher, People's Education Press (PEP), produced the PRC's first middle-school textbooks, they did not include the story of Chen She. At the time, the *People's Daily* criticised them for failing to present inspiring tales of ancient heroes engaging in the 'glorious Chinese tradition of revolution' that had culminated in the establishment of the 'New China'. It was in this context that, beginning in 1960, PEP included Chen She's story in textbooks. China's youth were instructed to dream of further revolution, with consequences that are now well-known.

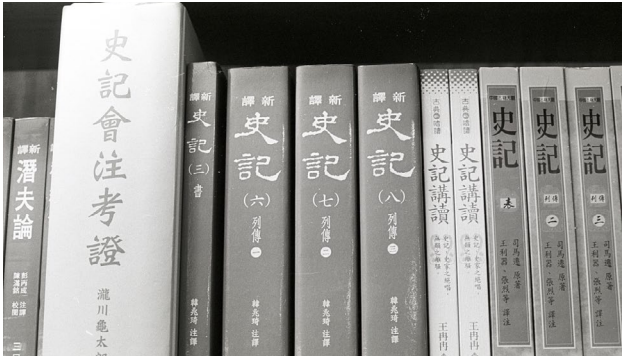
The Party-state under President Xi Jinping is placing ever more importance on the role of textbooks in political messaging. In the past, publishers following the lead of provincial departments of education were allowed to compile local textbooks that took into account regional differences. But since 2017, with the establishment of its National Textbook Commission 國家教材委員會, the Party-state has started to oversee the compilation of school

textbooks. It plans to replace the various current versions with nationally standardised texts by 2020.

Announcing this news, the Ministry of Education said the new textbooks would 'adhere to the correct political direction ... and fully represent the new political theory, ideology, and strategy of the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core'.⁶

The New Party Line and Zhou Yafu's Story

Since Deng Xiaoping launched his policy of Economic Reform and Opening Up to the outside world in 1978, China's economy has grown tremendously, but so too have economic inequality and official corruption. The pro-democracy protest movement of 1989 began in response to corruption. Both corruption and the perceived inability or unwillingness of China's legal system to deliver justice have also led to other, more local uprisings. Xi Jinping's administration has responded by placing great emphasis on 'rule by law' and a large-scale anticorruption campaign (see the *China Story Yearbook 2015: Pollution*, Chapter 2 'The Fog of Law', pp.67–85 and the *China Story Yearbook: Power*,



Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (b.145 BCE) Records of the Historian 史記
Source: 命は美しい, Flickr

Chapter 1 Forum ‘Power Surge: China’s New National Supervisory Commission’, pp.31–33). The notion of ‘ruling the nation in accord with law’ has therefore become an important slogan. It is against this background that we interpret the state’s discomfort with taking the righteous rebel Chen She as a paradigm, and its preference for the law-abiding Zhou Yafu.

Zhou Yafu, a Han dynasty general, successfully suppressed the Rebellion of the Seven Princes of 154 BCE. Sima Qian characterised him as an upright military man devoted to strict discipline. The anecdote selected for the textbook begins when the emperor orders Zhou and two other generals to set up camps by the border to repel incursions by hostile neighbouring peoples. The emperor himself visits the camps to encourage

the troops, with the other two generals immediately welcoming their ruler. At Zhou Yafu’s encampment, however, armed sentries greet the emperor’s party and allow him in only after he shows his official imperial credentials. This story promotes the notion that things must be done in accordance with the law and echoes Xi’s slogan. It also implies that the same rules should apply to everyone, even to the most powerful person in the country — that is, it hints at a dream of full ‘rule of law’ rather than just rule by laws that do not constrain the rulers themselves. The language of traditional Chinese historiography has always hidden its critical intent between the lines. Whoever chose the Zhou Yafu story as part of the new China Dream continues this tradition, hinting at a version of ‘rule of law’ that far exceeds what Xi Jinping would likely endorse.

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