

The Impact of History Textbooks on Young Chinese People's Understanding of the Past: A Social Media Analysis

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Abstract

History textbooks are the only history books that the majority of people read in their lives. This article investigates the impact of history textbooks on young Chinese people's understanding of their nation's modern history, as revealed on the popular microblogging site Sina Weibo. We analysed posts related to history textbooks and their representations of three contentious turning points in the communist historical narrative: the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the nationalist assault on the communists in 1927, and the Yan'an Rectification Movement of 1942. Widespread engagement with and recollection of history textbook content indicates a substantial impact of these textbooks on people's understanding of the past and a willingness to relate that past to the present. Responses to textbooks vary widely, from acceptance of the textbook narrative and the expression of strong patriotic and emotional connections to the past as presented in textbooks to open and angry critique.

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Keywords

Education, textbooks, history, Weibo, youth

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Introduction

History textbooks are the only history books that the majority of people read in their lives, but analysing how young people respond to them can be challenging. This article investigates the common but rarely substantiated assumption that Chinese history textbooks inform young people's historical understanding (Müller, 2011; Yu, 2013) by analysing posts on the popular microblogging site Sina Weibo that reference history textbooks or material learned in them. In the twenty-first century, new challenges have emerged for the government's efforts to control access to knowledge. With the information revolution and the acceleration of globalisation, Chinese youth are able to access plural narratives, and their viewpoints are often thought to be less malleable than in previous generations. We consider whether the views and language used in textbooks are repeated in Weibo posts to test the influence of textbooks on their readers and we examine explicit references to textbooks to explore how they are viewed by current and past students. This enables us to understand the role of history education in the political socialisation of young people in China.

The article highlights the political emphasis on the importance of history textbooks and education, outlines the key literature, and introduces the textbooks that we focus on and our methodology, including our choice of historical case studies and the selection criteria for the Weibo posts we examined. It then presents our findings and analysis, firstly on general references to history textbooks on Weibo and then focusing on three historical case studies in turn, before concluding.

Beijing has been tightening its control of history textbooks in recent years, although textbooks have always been seen as vitally important. During the reform era, textbooks gradually reduced the emphasis on class struggle and efforts were made to reform the curriculum and even the emphasis on rote-learning for examinations through the promotion of a "quality education" (though this was largely unsuccessful; Dello-Iacovo, 2009). The Ministry of Education permitted a degree of regional autonomy over textbook content from 1986 (Zhong, 2009: 1). Over the following years, a number of different primary and secondary school textbooks were published and adopted around the country. Controversy erupted after the introduction in Shanghai of an experimental new series of secondary school history textbooks in 2004, in which the rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took a back seat to charting global economic development (Li, 2017; Zhang and He, 2017). The issue was addressed at the highest levels: the Social Science Research Centre of the Ministry of Education convened nine leading Chinese historians to discuss the new textbooks (Xu, 2017). A report of the meeting declared:

Secondary school history textbooks have always been the embodiment of the national will and the nation's central ideology. The writing of history textbooks is a major event in the long-term strategic interests of the country. Therefore, the power of writing history teaching materials should not be delegated to decentralised levels. ... Controversial issues cannot be written in secondary school textbooks (Li et al., 2007).

The importance attached to history textbooks is unmistakable. The new series was suspended (Vickers and Yang, 2013: 35). In 2017, President Xi Jinping ended the

diversification of history textbooks across China, authorising instead a single series of textbooks written and approved directly by the Ministry of Education.

The importance attached to history education and particularly the contents of textbooks in China is far from unique. Most school texts around the world set out a definitive version of history that brooks no challenge. For Mehlinger (1985: 287), examining Cold-War era American education, textbooks are “the modern version of storytellers,” imparting a shared understanding of the past to the nation’s youth. Ingrao (2009) coined the striking metaphor of textbooks as “weapons of mass instruction” to illuminate the clashing historical narratives in central European textbooks. Lenin himself emphasised the centrality of school education in the creation of communist morality among the population, and successive Russian governments agreed (Zajda and Zajda, 2003: 370). The national and international controversy created by history textbooks in Japan – the “history wars” – has attracted more scholarly attention than the textbooks of any other nation, after successive revisions first denied, then acknowledged Japanese wartime atrocities (Mitani, 2012; Lewis, 2017; Nozaki and Selden, 2009). The political purpose of Chinese history textbooks is understood in this international context.

History textbooks in China present a narrative intended to bolster nationalism and support for the CCP (Wang, 2011). Two of the most notable ways they promote nationalism are by stressing the “century of national humiliation” (百年国耻, *bainian guochi*) from the First Opium War, and the War of Resistance Against Japan. They boost CCP legitimacy most obviously by portraying the party as the saviour of the nation in the face of these external imperialist threats and its rise as inevitable. They also thread these aims of promoting nationalism and support for the CCP through their representations of other aspects of the past, such as celebrating a particular conception of Confucian good governance in imperial China and linking it explicitly to present policies (Weatherley and Magee, 2018). This political use of history is not, of course, confined to textbooks. Mitter (2000, 2005, 2008) demonstrates the importance attached to history, the silences in the official narrative, and the way in which public discussion of the past is circumscribed. As Mitter argues, the official reconstruction of the past shapes the public mind, generating new memories. Cohen (2003: 165–167) highlights “the explosion of writing on *guochi* [national humiliation] at the end of the twentieth century” and the exhortation to not forget it (勿忘国耻, *wuwang guochi*), and this trend has not let up in the years since. National humiliation is integral to Chinese nationalism and the CCP’s political legitimacy, as Callahan (2004: 203) shows, as shame is the necessary precursor to the appreciation of national salvation by the party. This narrative permeates public history sites and popular culture, and textbooks are written to provide the scaffolding for understanding the narrative when encountered elsewhere. Wang’s (2008) examination of how the CCP regulates the revision and use of history textbooks for patriotic education shows how history and collective memory are linked in modern Chinese education as they help create the ties that bind society together. By focusing on textbooks, we study the most deliberate means of shaping the next generation’s understanding of the past. Textbooks are also unusually influential because Chinese students must memorise large sections of them to pass examinations (Yu, 2013: 682).

The CCP set out to follow the Soviet model of a highly standardised education to inculcate “a firm ideological stand to guide all thought and action” (Chen, 1976: 396).

But has historical education successfully achieved the goal of creating citizens who embrace the ideology the party has taught them? As Jones (2005: 94) notes: “It is one thing to produce official histories, but dictating how they are consumed and suppressing all competing sources of historical memory are impossible tasks.” Zhang and Fagan (2016) found that students who were asked about their experience of Ideological and Political Theory Education found it to be too abstract and said they learnt little about national political participation. They reported obtaining civic education less from textbooks and more readily from teachers, relatives and the Internet. We took a different approach and examined online discussions to ascertain how far young people’s understanding of modern Chinese history draws on their textbooks, and whether they tend to accept the contents of their textbooks or to criticise and resist official narratives.

Historical Case Studies

We selected three case studies to assess how students respond to the history they are taught in online forums among their peers. Our case studies are three significant turning points in modern Chinese history from the Republican period: the widely familiar May Fourth Movement of 1919, the somewhat less well-known April 12 Incident of 1927 and the controversial and taboo Yan’an Rectification Movement of 1942. Considering a range of events with different degrees of public familiarity helps us to gauge the effects of textbooks on people’s historical understanding. People’s Republic of China (PRC) writing on the history of the regime it overthrew follows a long tradition of successive Chinese dynasties writing the history of their predecessors. At the same time, the Republican era is long enough ago to have receded from living memory, so is less contentious than more recent events such as the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution or the protests of 1989. All three case studies are significant in the history of the early CCP and are particularly subject to different historical interpretations. Others have investigated how Chinese textbooks represent such themes as the place of ethnic minorities in the Chinese nation, the opium wars and especially the history of the Sino-Japanese War (Baranovitch, 2010; Sneider, 2013; Yan and Vickers, 2019). In contrast, we focus on how the CCP presents events significant in its own early historical development in textbooks.

While it is not possible to isolate the influence of textbooks from other public historical representations of these events, the May Fourth Movement, Shanghai Massacre and Rectification Movement are far less frequently depicted than events like the Sino-Japanese War, which features in countless television dramas and documentaries. The influence of alternative sources is therefore lower. Similarly, while Weibo, like most of the Chinese Internet, contains government-sponsored and directed patriotic posts to steer discussions in a certain direction (Batke and Ohlberg, 2020), where these posts address history, they focus more on the most dramatic historical moments when the nation was under direct military attack from foreign aggressors, like the Opium Wars and the war against Japan. We therefore work on the basis that posts on our selected case studies that appear to be posted by private individuals were more likely free of official direction or interference.

Textbooks for Compulsory Senior High School and University History

Textbooks are central to teaching in Chinese schools and compulsory university courses. Not only must students memorise their contents, but most teachers depend heavily on textbooks in their teaching. One Weibo user complained on 24 March 2021, “The teacher of the Outline of Modern History is quite funny, always reading from the textbook in every class; can (s)he do anything else but read from the textbook?” (近代史纲要的老师挺搞笑的, 每次上课都读课本, 除了读课本, 还会别的吗?, *Jindai shi gangyao de laoshi ting gaoxiao de, mei ci shangke dou du keben, chule du keben, hai hui bei de ma?*). This is a common experience and shows how dependent history classes often are on the textbook content and why a close examination of these textbooks and responses to them is warranted.

We compared Weibo posts to the contents of two textbooks used for compulsory senior high school and university history education: the People’s Education Press’s (PEP’s) senior high school textbook *Compulsory History 1* (历史一 - 必修, *Lishi 1 – Bixiu*) and the Higher Education Press’s *Outline of Modern Chinese History* (近现代史纲要, *Jinxiandai shi gangyao*). We concentrated on responses to senior rather than junior high school (初中, *chuzhong*) textbooks in part because the Junior Secondary School Leaving Examination (初级中学教育毕业考试, *chuji zhongdeng jiaoyu biye kaoshi*, or *zhongkao*), unlike the *gaokao*, is arranged independently by each province and several large provinces including Guangdong, Hubei, Tianjin, and Heilongjiang (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2005) do not assess History in the *zhongkao*. Therefore the teaching and learning of History at this level is a far lower priority in these provinces for both teachers and students. Moreover, this analysis focuses on the most recent experience of history textbooks for young web users (who were mostly university graduates), from senior high school and university. *Outline of Modern Chinese History* is the teaching material for a compulsory university module of the same name, one of the four core ideological courses (along with modules on Marxism; Mao Zedong Thought and socialism with Chinese characteristics; and ideology, moral development and the law) intended to strengthen all higher education students’ understanding of communist ideology.

The PEP Senior High School History Teaching Materials, introduced in 2004, are used in twenty of China’s twenty-three provinces and at least 167 cities (provincial government websites). They are the main sources from which senior high school students learn formally about their national history, although popular culture is a major source of informal history education with historical themes featuring heavily in television, film, video games, comics and more. As few as 50 per cent of students pass the senior high school entrance examination (中考, *zhongkao*) (Hannum et al., 2011: 284), although the pass rate is higher in major cities, so it is the academically higher-achieving half of the student population that reads these books. Students must memorise the content of their textbooks in order to pass their tests. Students who choose to study the humanities and social sciences subject area (文科, *wenke*) study these textbooks even more closely

(and cover more material) to perform their best in the National College Entrance Examination or gaokao (高考), which determines university admission and is of paramount importance to most Chinese students. Teachers in many schools have been incentivised to help their students achieve the highest possible gaokao scores as part of or, in some cases, the sole criterion for performance-related bonuses (Ning, 2020). This practice encourages a strict focus on the textbook contents for examination preparation.

Compulsory History 1 is compulsory for all first-year senior high school students (mostly aged fifteen years), regardless of their later decision about whether to study social sciences (文科, *wenke*) or natural sciences (理科, *like*). It is used in the first semester of the year and focuses on political history; *Compulsory History 2*, used the following semester, focuses on economic history, while *Compulsory History 3*, used in the first semester of the second year of senior high school, covers cultural and technological developments. Further elective textbooks cover such areas as cultural heritage and “great civilisations.” So, while political history is still given primacy, this series also offers a radical range of non-political history. The eight chapters of *Compulsory History 1* include history from ancient to contemporary China (Chapters One, Four, Six and Seven) and selected world history: Ancient Greece and Rome (Chapter Two), capitalism and Marxism (Chapters Three and Five), and the changing global political order (Chapter Eight). Chapter Four is the longest of all the chapters and covers historical events in modern China from 1840 to 1949, and was our focus. The PEP textbooks are being replaced: the rollout of new textbooks began in September 2019 (in six provinces) and they will be adopted universally by 2022 (Liu, 2019).

The Ministry of Education sees History as so crucial in the formation of Chinese citizens that all university students, regardless of their specialism, study more history (alongside compulsory political education). Students majoring in History at research-focused Chinese universities are exposed to the different historical interpretations of their teachers. Students of other subjects, however, study only the rigidly taught historical narrative presented in the textbooks for their compulsory history module. The main purpose of the module “Outline of Modern Chinese History” is to promote ideological unity through the study of history and it has been the primary means by which university students encounter their national history since its publication in 2007. Despite the higher academic stage of the students, the module does not encourage them to consider scholarly debates or reach their own conclusions. Instead, like the high school textbooks, *Outline* provides them with a single, approved interpretation of the past, which frames China’s history as a political narrative, following an inevitable progression towards its current polity.

Methods: Using Weibo to Assess Youth Responses to Textbook History

The growth of Internet and especially social network usage in China has provided researchers with a rich database for the analysis of public opinion, especially the opinion of young adults. Yang Guobin was among the first scholars to exploit this in

his study of online activism on social networking sites in the 2000s. He found that online activism was a new form of protest, despite the state's efforts at censorship. Yang (2009: 209) argues that online activism constitutes "an unofficial democracy" as "Chinese citizens participate in Chinese politics uninvited." Microblogs, especially Weibo, have since replaced the blog as the most popular social networking medium. Zhang et al. (2018: 760) use qualitative data collected to analyse nationalism expressed on Weibo and find that it was multifaceted: the majority of nationalist microbloggers, while defending China in political discourses on such topics as Japan and the Diaoyu Islands, also criticised the government. Their analysis shows that state propaganda could provoke criticism instead of shaping public opinion, at least among those who expressed themselves in the online public sphere of platforms such as Weibo (Zhang et al., 2018: 779). We similarly used a qualitative approach to assess diverse responses to official discourse on Weibo.

Weibo has 511 million active monthly users, 78 per cent of whom belong to the post-1990s or post-2000 generations and 78 per cent of whom have college or higher degrees (Weibo Data Centre, 2018, 2020). The views expressed by its users are therefore drawn predominantly from a large, well-educated, young adult segment of the population, many of whom belong to the urban elite. By focusing on Weibo posts and especially references to textbooks for academic high school students and those who attend university, our study focuses on the educational elite of young people. Naftali (2021) finds that urban and elite students are more likely to voice frustration at the lack of civic freedoms in a survey setting, while vocational students are more inclined to voice discontent at inequality and lack of opportunity. Weibo offers a different way of examining the voice of urban elite young people but clearly, young people from other backgrounds may not share the views expressed by Weibo users and graduates of academic high schools and universities. Moreover, those who choose to post their historical or political views online are not typical and cannot be seen as representative of young, educated adults in general, but their posts provide a rare insight into how people actually respond to their history textbooks via a medium that is part of their everyday lives.

Sina Weibo is China's largest and most influential social media platform. Rival microblogging sites such as Tencent Weibo and NetEase Weibo have closed operations due to its market dominance. The only other social media platform that gains a similar popularity level as Weibo is Tencent's WeChat. Although WeChat has built a more extensive user base than Weibo since launching in 2012, and its "Moment" function (朋友圈, *pengyou quan*) is the primary alternative means for young people to share thoughts and information online (Gan, 2018), it is not an open platform, and only mutual friends can view each other's posts; it is, therefore, excluded from our analysis.

Our analytical approach is selective and qualitative. We adopted a keyword search strategy on Weibo and reviewed each post manually to exclude posts from government agencies and commercial accounts. We also excluded unclear statements from individuals. Other studies on social media analysis adopt a big data research approach, often using web crawlers, designed to mine a large volume of web data, to gather the maximum possible number of social media posts for valuable quantitative studies such

as by Zhang and Pan (2019). However, the large number of results this generates is not well suited to qualitative analysis of the contents of individual posts. Instead, we used Weibo's own search engine, which displays results by both relevance and date, reflecting how users might find posts on these topics. We searched for keywords and selected the first 1,000 posts when the search results exceeded this number.

We collected samples of data in August 2017 and March 2020 to obtain two snapshots of perspectives on history and history textbooks, covering posts from 2012 to 2020. The year 2017 saw significant changes in the Chinese social media environment, such as the new Cybersecurity Law, but the intensifying legislation was a milestone of an ongoing trend rather than a turning point. Between 2017 when we first conducted the social media analysis and 2020 when we undertook supplementary research, Chinese Internet regulations and their implementation tightened further. According to Schulte and Svensson, Weibo has "become more commercial and apolitical in character" due to increasing censorship and the economic interests of the platform owners (Schulte and Svensson, 2021: 6). At the same time, new topics emerged regarding China's domestic and foreign policies that provided a stimulating environment for Weibo discussions. The Hong Kong protests of 2019 sparked discussion on Weibo and some turned to historical parallels, as shown below. In December 2019, the new coronavirus was first identified in Wuhan, and the following chain of events sparked a new wave of Chinese nationalism and heated political discussions among Weibo users, some of which were related to history textbook contents. Our research thus captures a period of change in both the censorship environment and the political stimuli for posts.

There are limitations with microblog data, including the role of online censorship and the constraints on what microbloggers feel able to or decide to post. Posts related to the history of the CCP are more likely to be hidden or deleted than, for example, its historical enemies. On 8 August 2017, when we first conducted the analysis, the total number of posts that include the term "Jiang Jieshi" (蒋介石, Chiang Kai-shek) was 9,242,681, and there were 9,172,737 for "Guomindang" (国民党). Searching for "Mao Zedong" (毛泽东) and "the Communist Party" (共产党, *Gongchandang*), in contrast, produced only 908 and 914 results, respectively, reflecting censorship of these terms. Zhang and Pan (2019: 5-7) also point to the difficulties posed by fast-paced technological change and the brevity of online content. Platforms such as Weibo change their algorithms frequently and implement a time-sensitive principle for microblog searching. This means that more data can be available on a certain topic or keyword when it is first discussed, and fewer results appear if the topic is no longer popular (Wang et al., 2015; Zhang and Pan, 2019: 7). The point of time in which the search was conducted influenced the number of results, mainly due to changing algorithms but also other factors including changing censorship practices and an increased number of users. The content of the posts is therefore more significant than the number of posts containing any given keyword.

We searched for two sets of keywords. The first, more general terms were modern history (近代史, *jindai shi*), history class (历史课, *lishi ke*), and Outline of Modern History (近代史纲要, *Jindai shi gangyao*) to capture users' reflections on their textbook

learning experience of modern Chinese history. “Modern history,” the most general keyword, allowed us to access oblique references that bloggers made to their history textbooks as we identified the posts that referred to textbooks. “History class” is used by high school students to refer to the history they learned in class and through their textbooks and “Outline of Modern History” is commonly used by university students to talk about their compulsory history class and the textbook of the same name. Other search terms were considered but the results were left out. For example, “history textbook” (历史课本, *lishi keben*), which could be a relevant search term for the project, has fewer search results compared to “history class,” and the results it produces are less insightful as few posts reflect students’ reflection on or responses to the textbooks. History book (历史书, *lishi shu*) can be used to refer to history textbooks, but it includes all kinds of history books so was less helpful for our purposes. We searched for the second set of keywords independently of the first set of results, focusing on our Republican-era case studies: May Fourth Movement (五四运动, *wusi yundong*), April 12th (四一二, *si yi er*), and Yan’an Rectification (延安整风, *yanan zhengfeng*). We found that, when talking about these events, bloggers’ referencing of textbooks is often implicit, drawing on the same material and language, rather than explicit, so it was useful not to be confined to the original search results.

After manually reviewing the samples we collected, we eliminated irrelevant or ambiguous results and sorted the remaining posts into five categories: Trusting and patriotic, Critical, Unfamiliar with history, Resistant to learning, and “Clocking in to study (学习打卡, *xuexi daka*).” “Clocking in to study” was the most common category by far: it was a phrase used by many Weibo users sharing their progress in revision, particularly during the 2020 pandemic when so many were working from home, but most of these posts did not reveal a view of students’ history textbooks. Among the 1,300 posts we gathered in 2017, as many as 70 per cent were repeated posts, showing that users engaged with each others’ posts on history textbooks. After excluding these and irrelevant posts, fifty-eight posts remained for analysis. In 2020, we gathered 2,817 posts and analysed 617 after excluding repeat and irrelevant posts. Of 675 relevant posts collected over both years, eighty posts expressed clearly positive views and thirty-two critical. There were a fair number of results that represented a group of outliers who either claimed not to be familiar with modern Chinese history (twenty-four posts) or simply resented having a compulsory history class (seventy-five posts). The posts we collected and analysed in 2017 are primarily original Weibo posts from individual users. In 2020, more posts were responses to domestic trending topics or diplomatic news relating to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

We used a primarily lexicon-based approach, taking into account all elements of each post (including nouns, verbs, adjectives, punctuation, emoticons, context, omitted or alternative subjects). We then interpreted each post and allocated them to categories, indicating explicit expressions of emotions or opinions. For example, we considered words such as cherish (珍惜, *zhenxi*), greatness (伟大, *weida*), being moved (感动, *gandong*), admire (敬佩, *jinpei*), excited (激动, *jidong*), martyrs (烈士, *lieshi*), love of family and country (家国情怀, *jiaguo qinghuai*), and encourage (振奋, *zhenfeng*) to

be markers of being trusting and patriotic. Moreover, some words that Chinese language sentiment dictionaries would consider negative sentiments (Liu and Chen, 2015) are also markers of the “Trusting and patriotic” category, such as heart-wrenching (揪心, *jiuxin*), humiliation (耻辱, *chiru*), crying (哭, *ku*), unbearable (难受, *nanshou*), and heart-rending (心酸, *xinsuan*). These negative sentiments are accompanied by empathy with and acceptance of modern Chinese history and reflect the narrative of national humiliation in modern history education.

We determined critical responses to history textbooks from context, negative terms such as brainwashing (洗脑, *xi nao*) and poisoning the youth (荼毒青少年, *tudu qing-shaonian*), and, in many cases, the use of curse words and insults to express negative responses to the textbooks, such as mother’s (妈的, *made*), mother’s labia (妈逼, *ma bi*), have no sense of shame (脸都不要了, *lian dou buyao le*) and ass-kissing (拍马屁, *pai mapi*). Examples of markers of the category “Unfamiliar with history” include: a blank slate (一片空白, *yipian kongbai*), no understanding (不了解, *bu liaojie*), forgot all (全都忘记了, *quandou wangji le*), can’t remember (记不清, *ji buqing*), and the telling memorised and forgotten (背过忘过, *beiguo wangguo*). Posts categorised as “Resistant to learning” are mainly complaints, most of which contain one of these terms: asleep (睡着, *shuizhao*), irritable (烦躁, *fanzao*), unnecessary (没有必要, *meiyou biyao*), hate (讨厌, *taoyan*), bullshit (狗屁, *goupi*), hard to understand (难懂, *nandong*), and bald (头秃, *toutu*: students joking about losing their hair due to excessive study, such as a science major posting as he desperately tried to memorise twelve pages of the *Outline* the night before his examination). Some even said they were scared (害怕, *haipa*) or tormented (煎熬, *jian’ao*) by their history classes or the relentless emphasis on memorising the textbooks. Taken together, these terms indicate the strength of feeling of some students and graduates about their history textbooks, both positively (in the main) and negatively.

How Weibo Microbloggers Write About History

Each generation responds to the limited availability of reliable information differently. Rosen (2009) found that many Chinese students in the 1980s knew the government sought to shape public opinion so they mocked the domestic discourse and uncritically believed a Western narrative about China. By the 2000s, according to Rosen, young people were more likely to discern the purposes behind the information presented by all sides, Chinese and foreign, and draw their own conclusions. At the same time, only 5.8 per cent of respondents to a Beijing survey of youth attitudes would have expressed political views online (Rosen, 2009: 364). Clark’s (2012) seminal study of Chinese youth stresses the diverse online influences on young people circa 2008. Our research shows that the situation has changed again for today’s youth, who consume a less diverse range of viewpoints once more and often use Weibo to air their views. They receive an updated and comprehensive propaganda message through the national curriculum, public media, and historical visitor attractions. While they are the first generation of Chinese to have had access to the Internet throughout their lives, control of the online

content they access has been gradually tightened. It is still true that, as MacKinnon (2009) notes, a large amount of politically sensitive material can be found with “knowledge and strategy.” Our analysis shows, however, that 12 per cent of the total analysed samples, and 71 per cent of those that show clear binary views (supportive or critical of history textbooks), seem to accept much of the historical narrative they received at school, while a significant minority (5 per cent of the overall results and 28 per cent of the binary viewpoints) express critical political opinions on national history.

Throughout the period analysed, microbloggers who accepted the historical narrative portrayed in their textbooks tended to hold a strong personal connection to the past. Half of the positive responses to the textbooks that we collected in 2017 mention that they cried while reading or learning about modern Chinese history. One Weibo user (born in 1995, according to the profile) posted in 2017: “It is enough for me to feel angry and sad, to have teary eyes, and to be so sensitive while revising the Outline of Modern History. Study for the rise of China!” (复习个近代史纲要, 气愤悲伤眼眶酸过来酸过去的玻璃心真是够了, 为中华崛起而读书! *Fuxi ge jindai shi gangyao, qifen beishang yankuang suan guolai suan guoqu de boli xin zhenshi goule, wei Zhonghua jueqi er dushu!*) In 2020, there was a similar level of emotional engagement. For example, a Weibo user wrote on 28 March 2020: “I had too many heartbreaking moments [揪心过太多次, *jiu xin guo taiduo ci*] in history classes from childhood to adulthood.” Others who expressed similar patriotic views believe that the historical knowledge they learned from textbooks helps strengthen their understanding and love of their country and motivates them to study harder.

Many posts refer to modern Chinese history as a history of humiliation. One posted on 6 November 2015: “Modern history is really a history of humiliation and bloodshed [屈辱史和血泪史, *quru shi he xuelei shi*]. Study hard and revitalise China!” Another (born in 1995, according to the profile) wrote in 2017:

When I read the *Outline of Modern Chinese History*, I felt that the Chinese people in modern times were really in darkness but with their hearts set on the light [身处黑暗, 心向光明呀, *shenchu heian, xinxiang guangmin ya*]. They did not know what the future would bring, nor did they know whether they would have a chance to break free, but they were brave enough to fight. Every time I see the people of that time, I am moved by their willingness to sacrifice for a belief and an ideal, even though it is only a chapter or two in the book.

Other lines posted in 2017 expressed a similar sentiment: “I cried reading the first chapter of [Outline of] Modern History, honestly this quote from Kang Youwei is exceptionally sensational. We must never again experience a history that is so humiliating and shattering and like being trampled on [屈辱残破任人践踏, *quru canpo ren ren jianta*].”

On 10 March 2020, another post was written with the tag #*feiyan*# (肺炎, pneumonia, a reference to COVID-19): “We have really faced a lot of darkness and modern history is a history of humiliation” (我们真的面对了很多黑暗, 近代史就是屈辱史, *women zhende miandui le henduo hei'an, jindai shi jiushi quru shi*).” When the outbreak of COVID-19 first occurred in China and many felt that the country was scorned

internationally, some users recalled their memories of learning modern Chinese history to express their indignation and discontent. Users posted that they were “proud of China” or expressed similar sentiments related to overcoming humiliation (屈辱, *quru*). Although “national humiliation” is not a term directly drawn from textbooks nor a phrase that students often use directly, it is the pervasive core of Chinese history education and textbook narratives. It indicates that students are influenced by other sources of historical information, but they often link this overarching narrative to the history they learned from their textbooks.

A small portion of young people on Weibo questioned the authenticity of their history textbooks and whether their history education could teach them to think independently and critically. “Education was kidnapped by politics” (教育被政治绑架, *jiaoyu bei zhengzhi bangjia*) posted a Weibo user with the username Jindaishi (近代史, Modern History) on 8 August 2017, who boasted 2,934,244 followers at the time, indicating that his ideas were influential and widely shared. This blogger left the above statement on a repost from another user called Lishike (历史课, history class), whose original post discussed the politicisation of history education:

But modern history, if you don't understand it, your perspectives will be severely affected. Because often what you learn in modern history will be heavily politicised [严重的政治立场, *yanzhong de zhengzhi lichang*], which is very sad [很悲哀, *hen bei'ai*]. When studying a particular historical event, I find that there is a general lack of causal coherence in the events of modern history in our textbooks, and the causes are told in a very abstract way [我们课本上的近代史事件中, 普遍缺乏因果的连贯性, 原因也讲的很抽象, *women keben shang de jindai shi shijian zhong, pubian quefa yingguo de lianguan xing, yuanyin ye jiang de hen chouxiang*].

By May 2021, both of these Weibo accounts had stopped posting comments relating to modern history classes or education. Lishike's account was permanently blocked and Jindaishi had renamed himself Tanxin jun (谈心君, Mr Heart Talk).

One user asked on 23 August 2017: “Is history fictional?” (历史是虚构的吗? *Lishi shi xugou de ma?*) He (his Weibo profile identifies him as male and born in 1980) recalled a time when another student shouted “History is fictional” (历史是虚构的, *lishi shi xugou de*) in an Outline of Modern History class and the whole room burst into laughter (showing disagreement with him). This memory may date back to 1998–1999 or the early 2000s, based on the blogger's year of birth, but, in 2017, he wrote that “When I think of this now, I realise that the boy had understood the true meaning of history textbooks and had a better sense of discernment than many people.” This critical comment shows that university students in a classroom setting may agree with what they are taught at the time and only start to question their younger selves many years later. On 28 March 2020, another wrote:

I have seen two words over and over again today, independent thinking and critical thinking. Having had a higher education does not mean being able to do either of these things. The

politics and history classes we have had over the years have been along the same lines. The classes are just like CCTV news [新闻联播一样的课, *xinwen lianbo yiyang de ke*].

Weibo users thus expressed their critical and disapproval sentiment in a more concealed way in 2020 compared to 2017. This specific Weibo post draws a comparison between political lessons, history lessons, and CCTV (China Central Television) news, saying that they are “along the same lines” and do not inspire independent or critical thinking in students.

Some of these young people were angry about the uses and abuses of history that they saw in history textbooks. One post from 2017 stated:

In the chapter on the Xinhai Revolution and the Republic of China, the Outline of Modern History deleted all three characters of the Guomindang [国民党], and inexplicably the first Guomindang-Communist Party cooperation appears in the second chapter. (Smiling face) (smiling face) I don't know what the heck it's talking about [妈的不知道在说啥, *made buzhidao zai shuo sha*].

Another wrote that while reviewing the Outline of Modern History for the exam, s/he found the textbook had a clear tendency to praise one party and oppose another, which made the poster feel like the textbook narrative was treating the CCP's rival like an ex-lover (前任, *qianren*): “We were good but now the grass is three feet high on his grave, and I've kicked him out of the house and now all the family property is mine. What a brainwashing [这洗脑洗的, *zhe xinnao xi de*].”

There were notable differences between the results in 2017 and 2020, reflecting the tightening of censorship and resulting self-censorship over the period. In 2017, there were some strong critiques, such as “the book Outline of Modern Chinese History is really shamelessly compiled. I give it a negative infinity score for the level of ass-kissing” (中国近代史纲要这本书真的是编的大写的不要脸。拍马屁的水准我给负无穷分, *Zhongguo xindai shi gangyao zhe ben shu zhende shi bian de daxie de buyao lian. Paimapi de shuizhun wo gei fu wuqiong fen*). Such statements were no longer found in 2020.

Other students posted complaints about studying modern Chinese history textbooks (especially the *Outline* in the first year of university), particularly the way that they had to focus more on the end goal of examinations than the content. In 2020, a large majority (69 per cent of the samples collected) of posts in our searches included the tag “clocking in to study.” While these diligent students were often frustrated by the focus on examinations, many were likely to accept the official narrative after such studious attention to it.

Students complained or boasted that they were spending New Year's Eve (31 December) memorising *Outline of Modern Chinese History*, ahead of the exam on 2 January. Some complained about the monotony of the textbooks that they had to study with such intensity. “I am a university student now, and I studied humanities subjects in senior high school,” wrote one microblogger on 23 March 2020. “I really hate the module Outline of Modern Chinese History. It's really annoying to be taught the same thing repeatedly” (我真的好讨厌中国近代史纲要这门课, 来来回回地学真的好烦,

wo zhende hao taoyan Zhongguo jindaishi gangyao zhemen ke, lailai huihui de xue zhende haofan). For this student, it is not the subject matter that is objectionable but the fact that the university course (and its textbook) is so similar to the senior high school one, due to the emphasis on the same key historical developments. Among the seventy-five posts that explicitly display young people's reluctance to study history, other common complaints included having excessive amounts of homework and finding the class dull (making them "just want to sleep", 只想睡觉, *zhixiang shuijiao*) or pointless.

Historical Case Studies on Weibo

Weibo users referenced the May Fourth Movement, the first case study, in different circumstances. The large majority of microbloggers used similar words as their textbooks in their description of the historical event, while only a small number questioned the textbook narrative. Most people's comments on May Fourth embraced the textbook narrative and saw the Movement as a ground-breaking and successful mass movement. For example, one microblogger (born in 1985, according to the profile) posted on 4 May 2017: "In 1919, China embarked on a thoroughgoing patriotic movement against imperialism and feudalism, which led to the widespread spread of Marxism in China. The May Fourth Movement brought about an important turn in the history of the Chinese revolution" (1919年, 中国展开了一场彻底地反对帝国主义、封建主义的爱国主义运动, 从而使马克思主义在中国广泛传播。五四运动使中国革命历史发生了重要转折, *1919 nian, Zhongguo zhankaile yi chang chedi de fandui diguo zhuyi, fengjian zhuyi de aiguo zhuyi yundong, cong'er shi Makesi zhuyi zai Zhongguo guangfan chuanbo. Wusi yundong shi Zhongguo geming lishi fashengle zhongyao zhuanzhe*). *Compulsory History 1* concludes its account by defining May Fourth as "a complete and uncompromising anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist revolutionary movement" (Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2007: 66), echoing Mao Zedong's description of it as a "revolution against imperialism and feudalism" (Mao, 1965: 237); the Weibo user's account uses similar language to the textbook, and indeed is closer to the textbook's definition of the Movement than Mao's. Another microblogger wrote on 2 April 2020:

The May Fourth Movement that broke out in 1919 was a patriotic movement carried out by the Chinese people for the survival and liberation of the nation and for the independence of the country, inaugurating the new democratic revolution in China and leaving a glorious page in the modern history of China. (1919年爆发的五四运动, 是中国人民为了民族的生存和解放, 为了国家独立而进行的一场爱国运动, 揭开了中国新民主主义革命的序幕, 在中国近现代史上留下了光辉的一页, *1919 nian baofa de wusi yundong, shi Zhongguo renmin weile minzu de shengcun he jiefang, weile guojia duli er jinxing de yi chang aiguo yundong, jie kaile Zhongguo xin minzhu zhuyi geming de xumu, zai Zhongguo jin xiandai shi shang liu xiale guanghui de yi ye.*)

Some posts departed from the textbook narrative. One post from 3 May 2015 argued that, because of this movement, the government had to give up potential national interests to

appease the public. Another individual posted on 25 October 2014: “Although, thanks to the May Fourth Movement and conciliation talks by people from all walks of life, Japan returned Qingdao in 1921, the Beiyang government and the Paris Peace Conference were still a huge failure!” Although both *Compulsory History 1* and *Outline of Modern Chinese History* imply that the May Fourth Movement succeeded in stopping the government from signing the Treaty of Versailles, neither gives the movement as the reason that China regained Qingdao after the Conference of Washington or explicitly acknowledges the contribution of the Beiyang government during the Paris Peace Conference. Such readers may have been influenced by diverse historical sources, but could still have embraced the value judgement in textbooks and filled in blanks in their knowledge in accordance with the general assessment of this period provided by their education.

May Fourth was more in Weibo users’ minds in 2020 than in earlier years, following the media coverage of the centenary the year before, so more posts mentioned it in our 2020 searches. Then, in February and March 2020, the novel coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan prompted young Chinese to draw historical parallels to China’s contemporary situation. One Weibo user, while participating in a discussion about the effectiveness of traditional Chinese medicine, commented on 15 February 2020:

Yesterday I suddenly thought of the history textbooks from my childhood, and the slogan of the May Fourth Movement, Mr De [Democracy] and Mr Sai [Science]. All of a sudden I realised that the debate had existed for 100 years. Back then democracy and science were just new words; now these two words have so many meanings that it just seems ironic to me.

This is not the only post in which the poster confuses the slogans of the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement. “The May Fourth Movement brought in Mr. De and Miss Sai,” a blogger wrote on 1 April 2020, changing the gender of Chen Duxiu’s characterisation of Science. “Now Miss Sai has been replaced by the scheming Miss Fu’rui (Freedom) with the help of publicists and literati. Ha ha!” (现在赛小姐在公知和文人的助推下，被心机女福瑞小姐(freedom)取代了。呵呵! *Xianzai Sai Xiaojie zai gongzhi he wenren de zhu tui xia, bei xinji nü Fu rui Xiaojie (freedom) qudaile. He he!*) More posts referred to the two movements as interchangeable events and drew the connection between the May Fourth Movement and “Democracy” and “Science.” This misunderstanding is traceable to university history textbooks. In *The Outline*, the first section of Chapter Five is entitled “New Culture Movement and May Fourth Movement” (新文化运动和五四运动, *Xin wenhua yundong he wusi yundong*) and it is under this title that *New Youth* (新青年, *Xin qingnian*) and “Democracy” and “Science” are presented (Higher Education Writing Group, 2015: 100–101). Evidently, some students conflated these inter-related movements. History textbooks at both senior high school and university levels cover Chen Duxiu’s 1919 essay calling on “these two gentlemen” to “save China” (Chen, 1919). “It has been a century since the May Fourth Movement, and Mr Sai has not really come to China,” another microblogger complained. In teaching about Chen’s essay, the textbooks equipped these microbloggers to criticise China’s government in a historical context.

A significant proportion of references to May Fourth in our sample expressed patriotic and anti-imperialist sentiments. On 4 March 2020, one Weibo user who opposed the new draft regulations for Foreign Permanent Residency in China – which proposed to relax the conditions for applying for residency and was open for comments in February and March 2020 (Ministry of Justice of the People’s Republic of China, 2020) – posted that a new “May Fourth Movement” should be initiated. Other users who mentioned the May Fourth Movement in their posts share the practice of using the Movement as a historical reference for anti-foreign sentiment and cited the key slogan from the Movement that was included in their textbooks. One wrote on 2 April 2020:

I’m really angry. The slogan of the May Fourth Movement in the history books is: struggle for national rights externally, punish traitors internally [外争国权, 内惩国贼, *wai zheng guo quan, nei cheng guo zei*]. From the Xinhai Revolution to the founding of New China, how many revolutionary martyrs have spoken out and worked hard in these decades? It took the sacrifice of millions of people to build our present life. Why is it that in our own country, when our compatriots are bullied, the answer is only “Chinese people and foreigners are treated equally” [中国人, 外国人一视同仁, *Zhongguo ren, waiguo ren yishi tongren*]?

In fact, the slogan in the textbook is “Struggle for sovereignty externally, eliminate national thieves internally” (外争主权, 内除国贼, *wai zheng zhu quan, nei chu guo zei*), so the microblogger either misremembered it or was influenced by another source, but they still cite “history books” as a point of authority. This post was a response to another incident that provoked the anger of Internet users and nostalgia for the May Fourth Movement: On 1 April 2020, three foreigners in Qingdao jumped the queue of people waiting for coronavirus tests. Someone filmed it and posted the video on Weibo; the post went viral and received 340 million reviews and 110,000 comments. Many commented that they were ashamed of Qingdao and sorry for the students who fought for its return to Chinese sovereignty in 1919. Both senior high school and university history textbooks emphasised the centrality of the Shandong Problem and the need to return Qingdao to Chinese sovereignty to May Fourth, and this is a message that was remembered by these users. Chinese youths are once again using the May Fourth slogan “Vow to fight to the death for the return of Qingdao” (誓死力争, 还我青岛, *shisi lizheng, huan wo Qingdao*) in hundreds of different Weibo posts.

The events of 12 April 1927, unlike the May Fourth Movement, are not commonly discussed today, but there were nonetheless nearly 300 posts mentioning “April 12” on Weibo between 25 July and 5 August 2017. They were reviews of a newly released movie, *The Founding of an Army* (建军大业 *Jianjun Daye*), produced by China Film Group Corporation to commemorate the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of the People’s Liberation Army. All of them empathise with the communist party members who were killed. The textbook narrative naturally condemns Chiang Kai-shek and his “massacre policy,” but also elides the CCP victims with the “masses.” *Outline* presents estimates of the White Terror’s victims made at the Sixth National Congress of the CCP in June 1928 as fact: over 310,000 victims between March 1927 and mid-1928,

from among “Communist Party members and the revolutionary masses.” The party and the people are thus united in their suffering as in their political beliefs, which encourages readers, who would later be viewers of the dramatisation, to identify with the victims. The textbook laid the groundwork in presenting apparently cold hard facts, on which the movie took root and produced a more emotional reaction. As one viewer (born in 2001, according to the profile) put it,

I had previously learned in textbooks that it was a counter-revolutionary coup and I knew that many people died, and much blood was shed in the coup. But until I saw the movie scenes, I never understood exactly what a coup was!

Another user posted:

There are only a few words on the April 12 counter-revolutionary coup and Nanchang Uprising in history textbooks. I did not expect that the situation was so tragic and serious... This film really floods me with passion and a sense of patriotism steals over me... May our motherland be more prosperous.

In the following years, online reviews of *The Founding of an Army* continued to appear from time to time, most of which link the plot of the movie to the contents of history textbooks. A total of eighty results from 12 April 2019 (the anniversary of the outbreak of violence) to 23 March 2020 were presented by Weibo when we searched in 2020. On 30 May 2019 (another anniversary) one user (born in 2000, according to the profile) wrote: “It was the bloody killings [血腥杀戮, *xue xing sha lu*] in front of me when I watched *The Founding of an Army* that gave me a sense of emotion that the cold numbers in textbooks describing the April 12 Incident had never given me.” This student recalled the “cold numbers” in textbooks while feeling emotional after watching the scene of “bloody killings,” indicating that information remembered from their textbooks was their reference point when they encountered new representations of the past. The textbooks helped establish the heroic character of the communist martyrs and young people express their gratitude to and pride in their country on social media. “Watching *The Founding of an Army*,” another user (born in 1989, according to the profile) posted on 7 July 2019,

The April 12 tragedy, the Nanchang Uprising and the battle of *Sanheba* for the retreat of the army, were three places that really made me upset. I’m glad I live in an era of peace, thanks to the martyrs who gave their flesh and blood in exchange for our happy life today.

More posts in 2019 and 2020 condemned the violence of the nationalist party. On 2 March 2020, the Chinese political and economic review website *Wuyouzhixiang* (乌有之乡, Utopia) published an article entitled “The future of the Guomindang” (国民党出路何在 *Guomindang chulu he zai*,) which concluded that advocating national reunification is the only way forward for the Guomindang (GMD) (Hu, 2020). On the same day, a micro-blogger disagreed with the article and reposted it with the comment:

Want the GMD to not just think about competing for votes but to reach out to the people of Taiwan and do the work of promoting national unification? Such a pipe dream! Since the April 12 coup in 1927, the GMD has been a traitorous and treasonous party [汉奸卖国党, *Hanjian maiguo dang*] and has never changed; even during the War of Resistance, it was only actively anti-communist.

While the strong condemnation of the GMD as “*Hanjian maiguo dang*” is not found in the history textbooks, suggesting other sources of influence, it is consistent with the PEP’s senior high school textbook’s description of Chiang Kai-shek as the imperialist powers’ “preferred spokesman” (Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2007: 68) and that he “hunted down and killed the communists in Shanghai.” Similarly, the *Outline*’s narrative covers “Chiang Kai-shek’s collusion with imperialist forces” and condemns his “massacre policy” (Sha et al., 2015: 127, 130–135). On 12 April 2020, only a few microbloggers marked the anniversary of the April 12 Incident, one calling it “a Memorial Day in history textbooks” (历史课本上的纪念日, *lishi keben shang de jinian ri*). Thus, while popular culture informs people about such historical events, they often refer to their textbooks or draw on themes consistent with those contained in their textbooks in their responses to new portrayals of the past.

In November 2019, when the Hong Kong protests were at their height, some Weibo bloggers compared events in Hong Kong to the April 12 Incident. Some saw the young demonstrators as modern counterparts to the brave communists targeted in 1927, whose cause is described in *Outline* as “necessary, just and progressive” (必要、正义、进步、*biyao, zhengyi, jinbu*). Others stated that the anti-communist party protests reminded them of the attack on the early communists, suggesting that the textbooks’ conflation of the CCP with the masses succeeded in aligning the party with the country in students’ minds, so they see an attack on the communist rule as necessarily unpatriotic. Two opposite interpretations of the same historical event are apparent, showing how history can be drawn on to suit the commentator’s standpoint.

Our final case study was the Yan’an Rectification Movement. The Rectification Movement is excluded from the historical narrative offered to senior high school students in the PEP textbook as too historically complex, in keeping with the official declaration in 2007 that “controversial issues cannot be written in secondary school textbooks” (Li et al., 2007). It is, however, included in the compulsory university history module as college students are entrusted with more sensitive historical topics and the state wants to provide the parameters for their understanding of this event. *Outline* sets out a clear line on the movement, describing it as “the Enlightenment of the Chinese people” (中国人民的启蒙运动, *Zhongguo renmin de qimeng yundong*) (Sha et al., 2015: 135). A majority of posts and comments that mentioned it on Weibo between 2012 and 2017 simply followed the textbook narrative, highlighting the greatness of the movement as it encouraged people to be educated and to achieve ideological self-improvement. Others recalled and re-organised quotes from *The Outline* and posted them on Weibo, such as in this post from 11 May 2014:

The Yan’an Rectification Movement was the first large-scale rectification movement in the history of the Chinese Communist Party. It began in May 1941 when Comrade Mao Zedong

gave a report on “Transforming Our Learning” [改造我们的学习, *Gaizao women de xuexi*] at a meeting of senior cadres in Yan’an, and ended with the adoption of “the Resolution on Certain Historical Issues” [关于若干历史问题的决议, *guanyu ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi*] at the Seventh Plenary Session of the Sixth Central Committee on April 20, 1945. The Yan’an Rectification Movement has far-reaching historical significance in the history of the Chinese Communist Party, and it is a great innovation in the history of Party-building.

The dominance of this kind of post on Weibo is strongly indicative that the textbook is the influential force, as the Rectification Movement is not a feature of popular culture and alternative sources would be unlikely to present it positively. The Rectification Movement was, in fact, accompanied by widespread violence and thousands of deaths, and presaged the political repressions to come under communist rule.

In 2000, Gao Hua of Nanjing University published the first major Chinese study of the persecutions of the Yan’an period, *Hong taiyang shi zenyang shenqi de* (红太阳是怎样升起的, *How the Red Sun Rises*) (Gao, 2000). Although the book is banned in mainland China, it has influenced Chinese academic and public opinion. A minority of responses on Weibo showed that some people felt angry that they had to praise the Rectification Movement in their examination answers in order to pass. Someone posted this review of Gao’s book on 11 April 2012:

I finished Gao Hua’s *How the Red Sun Rises* after reading it off and on, and systematically learned the ins and outs of the Yan’an Rectification. Politicians, to achieve their own goals, did everything they could and were willing to sacrifice innocent people’s dignity, reputation, and even the lives. [They] did not hesitate to revise or rather falsify [篡改, *cuangai*] history. What held people together was not relationships, but interests. What a cruel history; what a horrible domain that is, [for most people] believe the words of a single party [一家之言, *yijia zhiyan*]!

Students who were revising for their examinations also expressed anger or sarcasm when they were told that the Yan’an Rectification was a great movement. One posted on 15 November 2012: “When answering the multiple-choice questions on politics, I felt a sense of ‘guess which lie is the designated official statement~’ ‘Yan’an Rectification is a great ideological liberation movement...’” Another recorded on 19 September 2012: “Question 28: The Yan’an Rectification Movement was a very great ideological liberation movement... Ask the Heavens, when will it be re-characterised [重新定性, *chongxin dingxing*]?” A university student posted on 20 July 2016:

It’s raining in the south. The air is cool. The plants are lush and green. I was leaning against the window, flipping through the Outline of Modern History for the first time, and I was enjoying it. But when I read “The Yan’an Rectification Movement was a great ideological movement”, I couldn’t help but curse.

Compared to the other two case studies, the Yan’an Rectification Movement was highly politicised and controversial, and was presented in less detail when it was covered at all – in

university but not senior high school textbooks. When textbooks failed to provide students with a solid knowledge base, a minority expressed their direct disagreement with the official narrative. One described the movement as a play directed by Mao Zedong to establish his unparalleled and unshakable authority: “From what I can see now, the Yan’an Rectification Movement in 1941 was nothing more than Mao’s performance to completely clear up the Party’s dissidents, fight against the Party’s internal opponents, and establish his only correct and great authority.” There are also people who draw on this period to criticise the CCP. A post about the Yan’an Rectification Movement quoted an unknown source with the inflammatory statement, “the personal history of Mao is a history of homicide.” As such remarks are usually censored or deleted online, it is hard to identify the proportion of young Chinese who share these opinions. These strongly worded posts are all from several years ago; a smaller number of posts in 2020 express doubt over the correctness of the rectification, one accusing their history teachers of “talking nonsense.” Some Weibo users call for another rectification to reform the nation and the CCP, sharing the textbook’s positive assessment of Yan’an in 1942 but using it for contemporary political commentary. Overall, among the 112 posts of our sample that indicate either of the two extremes of trusting and patriotic sentiments or critical views on the Rectification Movement, 71 per cent of users reject the textbook narrative angrily, while the other 29 per cent accept it.

Conclusion

Our innovative analysis of Weibo posts to explore responses to history textbooks indicates that history textbooks help shape the historical understanding of students and graduates through their unambiguous representation of the past. While young people may mock their teachers’ reliance on textbooks, question the simplistic view of history they present, and resent having to memorise them, the textbook narrative clearly stays with them after graduation. A majority of Weibo posts on a sample of historical events bear marked similarities to the textbook narrative, and young people reported an emotional connection to patriotic historical subjects. Where users present different views, they often cite textbooks as a point of reference, showing the continuing influence of the texts on students after they are exposed to alternative sources of information.

Our historical case studies on how the PRC presents the history of the preceding regime proved illuminating. The May Fourth Movement is a touchstone for contemporary patriotism, but the history textbooks seem to have confused some readers by conflating it with the New Culture Movement. We found similar language about the May Fourth Movement on Weibo as in the textbooks, providing evidence of the effect of textbooks on young people’s historical understanding, although it is difficult to separate different potential influences on young people with a topic so widely covered as May Fourth. The interaction of history textbooks with popular history was addressed directly in our analysis of responses to the April 12 Incident in Shanghai. While the film made about the massacre of communists in 1927 prompted a more emotional response than the textbooks’ account of it, Weibo posters reported relating the film’s content to the “cold facts” they gained from their textbooks,

showing how textbooks and popular history can inter-relate and reinforce each other's message with different approaches to the same events. And despite claims that textbooks were confined to "cold facts" on that event, students also reported crying while reading about the century of national humiliation in their textbooks, so they are clearly far from devoid of emotional impact. Finally, analysing responses to the Rectification Movement was particularly revealing. Most posts about it (71 per cent) were negative, often very angrily so, but negative responses declined over time as censorship intensified. We found that the rarer positive assessments of the Rectification Movement on Weibo were most likely directly influenced by the textbook that covered it as the topic is too taboo for treatment in many quarters in China, while external sources of information would not be positive.

By providing students with the one and only "correct" view, history textbooks are often successful in persuading their readers to accept narratives that conform to Chinese communist ideology. Young people apply the lessons learned from their history textbooks to popular culture portrayals of the past and to contemporary events with echoes of the history covered in their textbooks. Yet many also reject the narrative of their textbooks and, when they do so, they express anger with the state's efforts to distort the history they are taught. The decline in Weibo posts with negative assessments of history textbooks between the posts collected in 2017 and those analysed in 2020 does not necessarily mean that such scepticism has declined, simply that they are less likely to be publically expressed.

Analysing Weibo allows a valuable way of accessing the views of young people and this limited study shows the possibilities of more extensive research in this area. A combination of our qualitative analysis approach with the breadth of data that can be farmed from Weibo with quantitative techniques could give rise to greater insights into responses to official sources of information. Weibo has its limits as a source: it reflects the views of predominantly urban young people with higher educational attainment, at the expense of rural and disadvantaged youth whose divergent responses to patriotic education can be assessed by alternative means such as surveys (Naftali, 2021). While we cannot know the whole range of views that young people hold, the habit of many of posting personal opinions online and regularly updating social media accounts offers an opportunity for close observation. These young people can be impressionable or insensitive, credulous or cynical, as different individuals respond to the same education in contrasting ways.

However, the decline in diversity of views expressed on Weibo over the period studied, and specifically in negative views of textbook narratives, shows the increasing difficulty for scholars seeking to undertake this kind of research. The decline in diversity of views will likely increase further with the tighter control of textbook contents and standardisation of textbooks across the country since 2017, combined with tighter censorship and consistent public history representation of the past beyond formal education. While different accounts of the past continue to circulate among young people online, the increased control of the Internet in recent years has curtailed discussions of modern Chinese history, and the window for research using social media to access popular opinion may be closing.


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