



Walking in Young Peng's Shoes

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Fei Xiaotong, the late Chinese anthropologist, believed that the best way to study China was by acquiring “intensive, firsthand knowledge of Chinese society itself.” But what about secondhand knowledge? Is there a suitable substitute for personal experience in the field of anthropological pedagogy?

The last time I visited China was nearly two decades ago, but during the 2016-2017 academic year, I “visited” China daily as a master’s student in comparative anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. And one teaching tool, a [point-and-click video game](#) developed by



Professor Andrea Pia, served as a key resource during my rediscovery tour.

In the early morning hours of May 8, 1999, an American B-2 cruising at 50,000 feet opened its cargo bay doors above the Serbian city of Belgrade. Cloaked in the pre-dawn cover of darkness, five JDAM bombs floated silently through the clouds, ripping past their intended target - the Yugoslavian Federal Directorate of Supply and Procurement - into the roof of the Chinese Embassy. By the time the dust cleared, three Chinese nationals were dead, buried in the rubble.

From Washington, the apology was swift. President Bill Clinton blamed outdated maps for a raid that was part of NATO's operation against Slobodan Milosevic, the former Serbian president. But in China, where I was, public anger was at an early boil. Chinese state television called the strike a "[barbarian act](#)", and Hu Jintao, then the vice president, said the incident had "[incited the fury of the Chinese people](#)." Within hours, tens of thousands of young Chinese men and women were protesting and burning American flags in cities across China, including in Dongying, a small oil boomtown in northern Shandong province that had been my home for a year.

The morning of the attack started normally in Dongying, where I was teaching English to young Chinese university students.

Around sunrise I climbed aboard my rusty bicycle for the five-minute pedal to the main teaching building on campus, a blocky-brown five-story behemoth of dark hallways and cold, concrete classrooms.

On the third floor my two-dozen English conversation students were already seated at the long wooden tables when I walked in. We spent the next two hours talking about American culture, discussing grammar, and enunciating our r's. One student who called himself Birden (after Larry Bird, the basketball legend) wanted to know what my favorite Hollywood movie was. A girl who went by the name of Juliet (she was forever looking for her Romeo) discussed her plans for after graduation.



But by mid-morning, Dongying was convulsing with anti-American rage. As I sat in my serviced apartment, glued to coverage of the Belgrade bombing on the state-run English *CCTV*, my phone rang with death threats and heavy breathing. “Teacher Greg,” one caller said in English, “leave China now, or you die.”

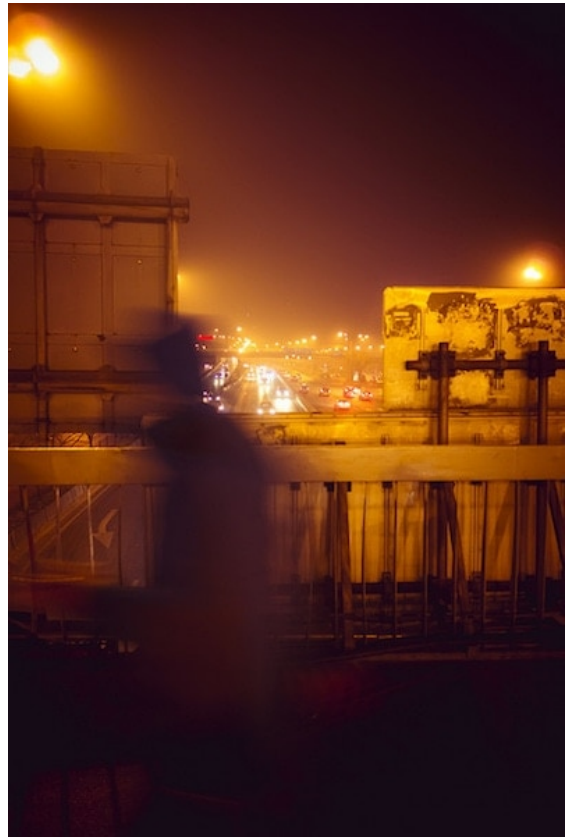
By noon the anonymous calls had become chants outside my living room; hundreds of university students demanded that the “foreigners go home.”

Another teacher and I climbed to the roof of the building with a camera, and through the viewfinder I could see some of the students I had taught that morning.

For 48 hours, the only thing standing between eight foreign teachers and our students were three Chinese soldiers, placed at the front door of our apartment complex.

Nearly two decades later, when I arrived at Andrea Pia’s [China in Comparative Perspective \(AN447\)](#) course at the LSE, my days in Dongying were still front of mind. I carried with me many preconceived ideas of China’s development, but only a narrow scope of academic or ethnographic material to draw from. Over the course of the year-long program, Pia helped students trace the collective cannon of China’s modern and pre-modern history. We were introduced to concepts related to China’s social, ideological, and political organization. And we used these theoretical frameworks to shape more nuanced views of China from a historical and comparative perspective.

By year’s end, I had a far deeper understanding of China’s past as well as its present. Despite gaining this perspective from a geographic distance, my engagement with the academic literature even helped me contextualize the events of May 1999 – for example, as surprised as I was by the outpouring of student-led nationalistic fervor, Communist Party leaders may have been even more shocked (see Zhao, 2004).



[Image](#) by [Alexander Mueller](#) (flickr, [CC BY 2.0](#)).

But for any postgraduate student studying China from afar, it is not easy to achieve what Fei Xiaotong idealized as knowledge through personal experience (Fei, 1992). Engaging with my Chinese classmates at the LSE did provide small windows into the modern Chinese state; Pia's educational video game, [The Long Day of Young Peng](#), offered another.

Based loosely on Pia's own ethnographic fieldwork, *The Long Day* pulls from topics studied in AN447 - including modules on religion, urbanism, post-socialism, consumerism, and property - to create a linear narrative "lived" by the game's protagonist and "experienced" by the game's players. Akin to a choose-your-own-adventure computer saga, *The Long Day* traces Peng's journey as a migrant, and pushes users to contextualize the myriad ways in which China's citizens must navigate their historical, political, and practical surroundings.



For me, the game was also an opportunity to test and question my own biases toward China. In the West, scholars and journalists typically emphasize the political and economic *differences* between China's past and present, while overlooking and underemphasizing social and cultural constraints. In other words, while Peng's decision to migrate and leave his ancestral homeland in search of work in Beijing was related to filial duty and economic need, it was also complicated by legal and cultural pressures - elements that have shaped the Chinese relationship to and with migration throughout the post-Mao period (Fan, 2007; Murphy, 2002).

That same calculus - to leave or to stay - bore heavily on my students in Dongying.

Before the bombs fell on Belgrade, students easily shared their ambitions, dreams, and hopes; like Peng, they had left home in search of wealth and status, but also to support their parents and grow their country.

And they, like Peng, were navigating China's modernization in real time. While towers of bricks and glass have altered the physical landscape beyond visual recognition, it seems that the personal and individual factors shaping China's social fabric have not changed so quickly.

I may never see my former students from Dongying again or have the opportunity to challenge them on their reaction to the events of May 1999. But through Pia's class and *The Long Day of Young Peng*, I at least have the satisfaction of knowing that the pace of China's progress has not yet rendered my own "firsthand" experiences obsolete.

Work cited:

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