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Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, MAY 22 2013

At the same time as I am teaching the POL 210 course here at CEFAM I am also putting the final touches on a course on Chinese political economy I will be delivering to a travelling group of CEFAM MBA students next month in Shanghai and Beijing.

It's not strictly an international relations course and its broad scope is reflected in its title: China in a Globalised World. Like so much in our field it is interdisciplinary. I start with history, tracing the Middle Kingdom from the heights of the Qing Dynasty in the 19th century to the re-emergence of the People's Republic in the 21st century as a mature, major power in a global system of states. I touch on economics, diplomacy, more than a little culture and sociology, some demographics, comparative social studies and even have some general knowledge quizzes tucked in for good measure. The goal of the course is both to contextualise the China of 2013 in that country's broader historical scope, educate the students about the realities of the Chinese experience, and get them out into the streets of Shanghai and Beijing to feel China around them: the swathing mass of humanity that exists, creates and thrives in the world's most populous state.

Yet I was given pause during the week as I finalised my slides and lecture notes by an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education. Headlined 'China Bans 7 Topics in University Classrooms', the article explained:

In an effort to curb Western influence, China's leaders have reportedly banned the discussion of seven subjects in university classrooms, including press freedom, universal values, and the historical mistakes of the Chinese Communist Party...several professors said university leaders had instructed them at the beginning of May to avoid the subjects in class. According to academics who have been told about the list, the other taboo topics are judicial independence, economic neoliberalism, the wealth accumulated by top government officials, and civil society.

Gulp.

Looking over what I had planned to cover in the course it was clear that some of this was going to inevitably come up.

How can one teach about the success of the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) without touching on economic neoliberalism? Or about Mao's time in power without reflecting on the error that was the CCP's Cultural Revolution? Is any contemporary historical study of modern China complete without mentioning the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the impact on civil society that the government response engendered?

Flicking through my slides it became clear in a way it probably should have beforehand that not every professor enjoys the same sorts of freedoms as we in the West do. Indeed, I fear no repercussions at all from French president Francois Hollande for the consistently disparaging barbs I send his way most days. It's not because I am in the majority (his approval rating is at record lows in France) or because I am 'preaching to the choir' (I teach business students who plan to study and work in the US – there's barely a left wing voter among them). Rather it is because it wouldn't occur to me or to M. Hollande to censor my speech.

Teaching about politics, even in a course where politics does not take centre stage, in China is going to be a different experience. I don't seriously believe I will run into problems but it certainly gives me pause, if only to take a moment

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and recall the sorts of freedoms we enjoy in the West and the way professors do, indeed, sometimes take them for granted.

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