

The Three Week IR Course

Written by Dylan Kissane

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The POL 420 course I taught in Shanghai was rounded out last Friday with some interesting final presentations from the students. Having spent the last couple of days grading their papers, I can now reflect on what went well in this course and what didn't go so well.

Looking back on a course at the end of a semester is something that every professor does. It's an opportunity to see what has worked out as planned, what topics or themes lit up the room and which depressed discussion, and to assess how useful the course was for the end user of the knowledge, the students.

The POL 420 course I delivered was designed with a couple of key restricting parameters in mind. First, though it would be a full 40 hour course, it needed to be delivered over just three weeks, the length of time that the students would be in China. Secondly, owing to budgetary pressures and the difficulty of finding inexpensive meeting spaces in Shanghai, the course would be taught in ten four hour blocks, including two 'two block' days of eight hours in the classroom. This means that, particularly on those two 'two block' days, student fatigue would need to be taken into consideration in planning the course. Thirdly, the Chinese government had recently imposed a ban on teaching certain elements of contemporary Chinese political history. Unfortunately for my class, some of the issues that were now on the banned list were also important parts of the class I would deliver. Fourthly, the opportunity to be teaching about China while in China was too good to pass up and I wanted the students to get out of the classroom and experience some of the country as part of their course, too.

With these things in mind I designed a course that would be presented in three parts: the first part was a review of contemporary Chinese history from the Qing Dynasty of the 1800s to the present day; the second part was an analysis of China from various thematic standpoints (political, social, cultural, economic); and the third part considered the challenges that China was facing in its current state (political, diplomatic, environmental, military and economic). The course finished with reflection and discussion on whether China represented an opportunity or a threat to the Western world.

Designing assignments around this course and under the parameters described above was also a challenge. In the end I went with a combination of three short papers, a minor presentation and a major presentation. The three papers allowed me to test what the students had learnt and how they were applying this new knowledge. The first paper asked them to reflect on a visit to a small business that was growing quickly but facing significant pressure from government regulation. The second paper asked students to reflect on successful and unsuccessful strategies for economic success in China, with case studies of French and American firms students visited in Beijing being the focus. Finally, the third paper asked students to engage critically with one of the better popular books on Chinese political economy, James Kynge's *China Shakes the World*, which was part of the required reading for the course.

The two presentations allowed students to consider China from both a cultural and IR perspective. The minor presentation saw students work in groups of two to explain the major cultural differences they had encountered between their native France and China during their first ten days in country. These presentations were light, amusing and had the added bonus that, in preparing them, students were forced to keep their eyes wide open and their cameras ready while exploring Shanghai, thus hopefully enhancing their cultural experience. The major presentation saw students examining one aspect of China's international relations and delivering 45 minutes of informative

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learning on their chosen subject. Here the students again worked in groups of two and the subjects chosen – including Sino-Latin American relations, the DPRK nuclear standoff and Sino-African relations – kept the class enthralled and ensured they broadened their perspective outside of the typical EU-US-China triangle.

So what worked? The papers were generally good and the presentations were mostly good, too. The workload seemed heavy enough to engage the students but not so heavy that they didn't still have a chance to explore their new world around them. The in-class activities generally went down well and a deliberate choice to 'run the gauntlet' and keep officially banned topics in the course (for example, discussion of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the tens of millions of people killed as a result of Communist Party ineptitude, and corruption at the heart of the CCP regime) was rewarded by engaged students and good discussions.

What didn't work? I sorely underestimated the impact of China's Great Firewall on student research efforts, for one thing. Students were forced to send 'illegal' links to PDFs and NGO reports to family members, who downloaded them and returned them to China by email. This slowed down the research and added time to the preparation of assignments. In addition, on the second 'long day' with eight hours teaching I probably over estimated my ability to keep the class on topic and awake. Six hours? No problem. 7 hours? Pushing it. 8 hours? People were just watching the clock.

All in all, though, this was a good course and a great opportunity to develop something interesting and useful for students soon embarking on a career in international business.

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