Teaching Philosophy and Research Agenda

Teng Biao

**Teaching Philosophy**

The experience of teaching has profoundly changed my life. Given what many of my students have told me, both in China and the US, my teaching has apparently had a powerful impact on them as well. Before going to university, I had been a shy and pretty introverted person. I was therefore surprised to discover in 2000, when I was still a PhD student at Pekin University and found myself in front of a classroom, that I was not at all afraid. I enjoyed sharing my ideas so much with my fellow students and professors that I decided to dedicate my life to teaching and academic research.

As a teacher, I try to help students think critically and creatively, and inspire them to pursue a meaningful life, regardless of what challenges they may have faced in the past, or whatever profession they may choose for themselves in the future.

In my classes, I hope to achieve four primary goals, each of which reflects my philosophy of teaching. First, **I try to cultivate in my students the capacity to think critically and creatively.** I introduce them to this goal by not censoring myself, explaining to them, as I speak frankly about my own views, that to do so for me has become an imperative. In China, I remind them, you can lose your job or even your liberty if you speak freely (as you sometimes can in the US too). In the spirit of thinking critically and voicing your own views, I ask students provocative questions and encourage them to challenge me or the views of other so-called authority figures. I urge them to be intellectually curious and to develop the skills necessary to make counter arguments. Being able to think critically and stand up for what you believe will lead to a sense of what I call a deeper happiness. According to some of my students, the tone I set in the classroom has made them enjoy reading and writing more than they used to, which is, I believe, the best gift I can give them.

Second, **I try to make** **the students themselves, not the teacher or the institution, the center of their educational experience.** I therefore make it my responsibility to remember every student’s name, his/her background and research interests. When I succeed, students see me as a member of their team and an interlocutor, not an unapproachable teacher from whom they must keep their distance. Again, when I succeed, students feel free to talk to me openly about the challenges they are facing as they write papers for my courses; also about thoughts they may have about a career opportunity or an internship, or about a political or moral issue about which they feel confused. Through these encounters, I learn a great deal from my students as well, which confirms my belief that teaching is an ongoing process of learning for students and teachers alike.

Since students are the center of the educational process, I focus on making the material I present in class accessible. In social science courses, the reading tends to be theoretical, which can be very challenging for students as it can be for the general public. I therefore firmly believe that it is important, even my duty, to make theoretical discussions, which students might find abstract and boring, both attractive and interesting. To do so, I frequently use a variety of different media in my classes, adding to my syllabus, for example, documentary and fictional films, and, occasionally, music and novels; while I also play the “devil’s advocate,” organize debates, and examine complex concepts and theories from the perspective of current events.

Third, **I want my students to leave my classes with the skills they will need to analyze complex ideas and principles that we have not covered together. I also want them to see clearly and have a good sense of reality--to be prepared, in other words for future challenges they may face. These skills, I believe, will empower students socially and spiritually.** With this goal in mind, to give one example, during my more theoretical lectures in human rights courses, I frequently provide real-life case histories including from my own experiences, which my students tell me they find very instructive:

Before I escaped China, two colleagues and I wrote an open letter, based on a careful analysis of Chinese law, that contributed to the abolition of an extra-judicial detention system. But before long, I was censored, fired from teaching, and disbarred, which made it illegal for me to practice law. Then I was prevented from leaving the country, placed under house arrest, kidnapped by secret police and tortured.

In my assignments to students in human rights courses, I often ask them to present to the class their own research on the cases of specific political prisoners, and to think about how some of the advocacy strategies they have learned about through their research might possibly be applied to their own work if/when they work for human rights organizations in the future. During these presentations, I also provide comparative examples from China in very concrete terms, describing cases of forced labor, disinformation, and elaborate attempts to cover-up the treatment of Chinese citizens during the pandemic. In sum, when teaching about human rights abuses, I try to link some of the broader theoretical themes of the readings to the research the students are doing, to their daily lives and to their ethical consciousness.

Fourth**, I firmly believe it is important to provide students with ideas and literature from a number of different disciplines and traditions.** In my own case, I studied law, politics, information management (library science) and literature at Peking University. In these courses, and on my own, I read widely in sociology, economics, philosophy and other subjects. Later I taught *Jurisprudence (legal and political philosophy), Law and Society, Constitution,* and *Law and Literature,* mostly from a cros*s-*disciplinary perspective. At Hunter College, the University of Chicago and the New School, I have taught China-focused courses on criminal justice, human rights and international relations., among them two co-taught online seminars with the political scientists Andrew Nathan, a leading scholar of Chinese politics *-- Will China Democratize: Contending Forces in a Changing China* (2021), and a two-semester course, *Where is China Going and Why: The Party, State, and Global Order* (2022-2023). In the courses with Professor Nathan, our reading and lectures extend beyond the discipline of political science.

Since leaving China in 2014, I have given lectures or talks at more than 50 universities in the US, UK, Germany, France, Ireland, Japan, Taiwan and other countries. The students who study with me and attend my lectures major in political science as well as in other subjects. They have been raised in a wide number of different countries with varying political systems, ranging from liberal democracies to totalitarian regimes. They also come from different ethnic backgrounds, and religions. Given this diversity, they are able to learn not only from me, but from one another.

Teaching is a lifelong process, during which you keep learning new ideas and new philosophies. Over time, my educational philosophy may change, but my passion and love of teaching will become greater. My teaching experiences have, I believe, had a significant impact on many of my students and have, at the same time, transformed me.

**Research Agenda**

Since 2007, I have repeatedly been selected by Boxun News, an independent Chinese human rights media organization and by the independent scholar Zhengyoujingzuo as one China’s “top 100 Chinese public intellectuals.” In addition to my academic research and teaching, I edit “China Journal of Democracy”, write op-eds interviews to the mainstream media, run podcasts and organize academic events. I cherish the opportunity to write and speak for academic and general audiences.

Over the years, my research has focused on China’s legal system, the relation between Chinese politics and law, criminal justice, human rights, social movements and political transitions. For the foreseeable future, I will continue doing research on these issues, in particular on **“high-tech totalitarianism,” a term I coined to** describe the pervasiveness and effectiveness of the unprecedented surveillance system existing in China and used by China beyond its national borders. In ***China Since Tiananmen***, an article I published in 2019, I elaborated on the ways the Chinese Communist Party has been using artificial intelligence, social media, Big Data, e-commerce, and modern telecommunications to strengthen its total control. This article was highlighted in Germany’s journal *Philosophie* as among the “*20 Impulse für 2020*.” The domestic and international impacts of high-tech totalitarianism will continue to be a major focus of my future research.

At the present time, I am completing three books in English, in addition to a co-authored volume with Andrew Nathan, *Will China Democratize,* based on the lectures we have been giving together. I also have a number of papers in progress (see my cv for the full list of works).

My first book in progress**, *China’s Long Arm: How the Rise of China Threatens Freedom beyond Its Borders****,* focuses on China’s transnational repression, including a discussion of Beijing’s role in the UN and other international organizations and the way it has been meddling in foreign elections, imposing economic coercion on developing nations, and resisting efforts of the West to sanction China for its human rights abuses.

My second book in progress, ***Darkness before Dawn: The Human Rights Defense Movement in China****,* explores the history of Rights Defense (Weiquan) Movement -- how it emerged in the early 2000s in a repressive regime, how it inherited and elevated the democracy movement, how it challenged the political system and experienced a brutal crackdown.

My third book in progress, *When Injustice Becomes Law: Thoughts and Resistance in a Repressive Regime,* is a collection of my essays in English on civil disobedience, law and politics, resistance ethics, and the relation between legality and legitimacy in the context of contemporary China.