Teaching Ethnicity in China: Of Jewish and Other Stereotypes

By Cheryl Greenberg

I’m not sure what I expected, but it certainly wasn’t a room full of Chinese students fascinated with Jews.

I am in China for an academic year on a Fulbright, teaching American history at Nankai University. I was in my master’s level class, “Race and Ethnicity in American History,” having just assigned, among other things, Karen Brodkin’s wonderful essay, How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America (Rutgers Univ., 1998). We discussed the stereotype of Jews being uncommonly smart, and good with money, and together we carefully traced Brodkin’s arguments that Jewish economic and political success related to their whiteness, the timing of their arrival, and coincidence of their skill sets and industrial needs rather than to any innate Jewish abilities or talents.

The students, all of whom were not only smart but the sort of overachievers who could get into this highly ranked university, seemed to be with me all the way, discussing industrialization, the GI Bill, and racism in their slow and careful English. Earlier in the year we had discussed the fallacy of racial essentialism, or the belief that racial groups had innate differences in intelligence or ability. We agreed that such beliefs were fantasies designed by those in power to hide or justify differences in treatment or access to opportunity.

We had already discussed some of the roots of anti-black and anti-Chinese racism in American history and the wave of immigration from eastern and southern Europe. After having spent approximately eight weeks together, I was feeling increasingly confident about my Chinese students’ grasp of racial and ethnic issues in the US. What they needed most, I believed (and still believe) was practice in analysis, since they had been taught primarily through memorization and recitation of facts. And so, to give them that practice, I asked them what they thought of Brodkin’s argument. “Well,” one student replied, “I don’t think the author gave enough credit to the Jews’ intelligence. They succeeded because they were so much smarter than other people.”

I have gotten this a lot in China. I have had more discussions about being Jewish here than I have had in the rest of my life put together. Apparently the most commonly asked “Why are . . .” question on the Chinese equivalent of Yahoo Answers is “Why are Jews so successful?” Few Chinese know any Jews or know much about Judaism. What they do seem to know, and believe, are all of the stereotypes about Jews (except the Christ-killer stuff — most Chinese are unaware of or unconcerned with Christian theological understandings of Jews). Jews like money. Jews are good with money. Jews are smart. Jews control things. The difference is that Chinese people apparently find the stereotypes positive and desirable. The Jews like money. We like money. The Jews are brilliant and innovative, scientists, intellectuals and Nobel Prize winners disproportionate to their relative numbers (think Einstein, Freud, Marx). We want to be brilliant and innovative. The Jews are clannish; they stick together and succeed. China wants to succeed. How can we be more like the Jews? There is even a sign on a preschool that apparently says something like “coming here will make your child become more like the Jews.”

So I wasn’t surprised that many students came into the class believing such things. What intrigued me about this student’s comment was that it had come after explicit class discussions about genetics and why essentialism was false. More striking still, it had followed directly after a detailed set of arguments the students seemed to have understood, that explained Jewish success without resort to any essentialist explanations. These were smart and thoughtful students. Was this simply another failure to think critically?

I have thought about this a great deal since that time. And while I certainly believe that the Chinese educational system of memorization is partly at fault, it cannot explain the phenomenon entirely. It relates also to the cultural milieu in which the education is both shaped and communicated. Finally, it has to do with the failure of education, worldwide, to effectively bridge the gap between knowledge and reflection.

Chinese students are taught throughout their years of school from a series of texts which present information the Ministry of Education wishes them to learn. The students’ grades are based primarily on how well they recite the information on exams. Their college placement, their choice of major, and much of their future is determined by their score on the mother of such tests, the college entrance exam or gao kao — a test which is to the SAT as a whale to a minnow. As a result, their memorization skills are remarkable, although it is unclear how much they actually retain after the exam is over.

But it is not just facts that these textbooks present. They also present analysis as fact; there is only one way to understand each historical moment. This was occurred for this reason. The people loved this leader and were betrayed by that one. This political faction was motivated by greed, that one by love for the people. These are not presented as interpretations but as the truth. Obviously Chinese political history is taught this way, but in fact so are all subjects, so far as I can tell. So-and-so is a great author, this philosophy is dangerous. Thus most students don’t even understand that there are such things as interpretations or arguments. The implications of this for critical thinking are obvious, but not quite my point here. (Nor is it my point, although it is true, that elements (continued on p. 8)
ABC-CLIO publishers is bringing to completion two encyclopedia projects of interest to scholars of immigration history. Members of the IEHS have been involved in both of these.

The four-volume encyclopedia Multicultural America: An Encyclopedia of the Newest Americans, edited by former IEHS president Ronald Bayor will be published by ABC-CLIO in July 2011. The volumes include essays on the 50 immigrant groups who have arrived in the U.S. in large numbers after 1965.

Meanwhile, editor Elliott Barkan, another former IEHS president, is finishing up the last contributions to the 4-volume Encyclopedia of American Immigration History, which also plans a publication date in late 2011. Articles from over 120 contributors cover American immigration history from 1600 to 2010.

The Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota offers Grants In Aid awards of up to $500 to assist graduate students, independent and other scholars traveling to conduct research for at least one week (five research days) at the IHRRC. The deadline for applications for 2011-2012 awards is June 1, 2011. Information on the web at: www.ihrc.umn.edu/educators/grantsinaid.php

The National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia has named Ivy L. Barsky as its director and chief operating officer. She will join the museum on July 1, 2011. Barsky was previously deputy director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City. The Philadelphia museum opened at a new location near Independence Mall in the fall of 2010.

During 2009 the Canadian parliament designated the existing Halifax museum, The Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 41, as a National Museum, and also increased its annual funding nearly threefold. The new and expanded museum was opened to the public on February 7, 2011. The Canadian government plans to spend about $25 million (Canadian) during the next five years to upgrade the building and develop new exhibitions. Pier 41 in Halifax was a principal receiving point for immigrants from Europe over many years. The museum, originally founded in 1999, had previously concentrated primarily on the story of European immigration, but now plans to expand its scope to cover all immigrants to Canada. Information on the web at: http://www.pier21.ca/

The Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota has begun a project to digitize letters written by and to immigrants between 1850 and 1970. Sample letters from the pilot project can be seen at: www.ihrc.umn.edu/research/dil

At the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia a current exhibition, "Forschestra! A Taste of the Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish America" reveals different aspects of American Jewish life by looking at food and culinary practices in a range of settings. The exhibit is based upon the recently-acquired Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish America. Consisting of nearly 10,000 items gathered over twenty-five years, the collection captures the daily lives of American Jews from the 1880s to the present.

A current exhibit at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York harbor is "Forgotten Gateway: Coming to America Through Galveston Island." Through Sept. 18, 2011.

The National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has undertaken an ambitious project as part of its recovery from the disastrous Cedar River floods of 2008. It involves the moving of a 1500-ton brick-and-mortar museum building from a site near the river bank to a higher elevation nearby. The museum hopes to have the building on its new foundation by the end of May 2011. Information, including webcam views of moving operations at the site, is at: http://www.ncsmol.org/


Visit our new website... www.iehs.org

From the IEHS President...

Hello to all IEHS members!

After a very long winter of frigid temperatures and lots of snow, spring has finally arrived in the Middle West—just in time to make grading final exams a bit less onerous. Happily, a much needed break during the worst of the semester just past came at the OAH meeting in Houston in late March. Lovely weather prevailed for those of us who managed to leave the confines of the Hilton-Americas, if only briefly. Elsewhere in this issue of our Newsletter, detailed information on IEHS award recipients, Executive Board actions, and the financial health of the organization can be found in Tim Draper’s minutes of the IEHS Annual Business Meeting held during the OAH.

I am especially pleased to report that the Society will now award $2,000 annually for the Theodore M. Saloutos Memorial Book Award—doubling the $1,000 prize that has been awarded since the last increase in 1995. Entirely separate from the Saloutos Fund which is administered by the University of Minnesota, the Society’s own treasury now has a record amount on hand. However, JAEH editor John Bukowczyk rightly cautions—and I totally agree—that the fast changing nature of journal publication makes these funds an absolutely necessary cushion for what may be difficult times ahead.

Since our meetings in March, thanks to the tireless work of IEHS Web Editor Rachel Kranson and website designer Steven Williams, the Society’s newly designed website, www.iehs.org, has “gone live”? If you have not yet had a chance to do so, please visit the website to see the wonderful changes that IEHS Web Editor Rachel Kranson has brought to our online presence. Remember to register so that you will be able to login and access areas of the site that are available only to IEHS members, such as “Syllabus Sharing.” Owing to the ongoing efforts of Anna Pegler-Gordon and Maddalena Marinari, the site includes a new section, “Resources for Educators,” that Anna and Maddalena hope to expand as IEHS members suggest additional resources for inclusion. The improved website should also facilitate planning of conference sessions through its “Conference Sessions—Sessions Seeking Participants” section.
Finally, let me call your attention to the JAEH Featured Media Resource: Sempre, Rudi, a documentary film directed by Bruno Ramirez, produced by Patrick Bosté and Bruno Ramirez (Canada, 2008); it is available for viewing at http://www.press.illinois.edu/journals/jae/h/media/sempre_rudi/.

This superb, approximately 35-minute film enables us to recall the life work and last days of Rudolph Vecoli who mentored so many, built the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota into the major center in our field, and served as IEHS president from 1982 to 1985. Shortly before Rudi’s death in June 2008, IEHS was honored to present him with the Society’s Lifetime Achievement Award.

Later this year, the Nominating Committee will begin taking suggestions for the 2012 slate which will include candidates for IEHS Vice-President/President Elect, so it is not too early to begin thinking about who might succeed Hasia Diner as IEHS president in 2015.

Once again, let me close by giving special thanks to Jim Bergquist for his work on our semi-annual Newsletter. Remember to send him your news.

Best wishes,
Barbara M. Posadas,
President, IEHS

NECROLOGY

Nora Faires, Professor of History at Western Michigan University, died Feb. 6, 2011 at her home in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She was 61 years of age. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh, and taught previously at the University of Michigan-Flint, the University of Texas at Arlington, and the University of Puget Sound. A longtime active member of the IEHS, she had served as its treasurer. Early in her career she worked in German-American studies, but more recently turned to studying migrations across the Canadian-U.S. border. She was co-author (with John Bukowczyk) of Permeable Border (2005), which in 2007 received the Albert B. Corey prize, jointly sponsored by the American Historical Association and the Canadian Historical Association.

PERSONALS

Elliott Barkan (California State University at Santa Barbara), former IEHS president, was invited by the U.S. Consulate General in Barcelona to give a series of lectures on immigration into the U.S. in relation to the changing circumstances in Europe, the recent influx of newcomers particularly into Spain, Germany, Italy, England, and France, and the context of a widespread recession and failed integration programs. He spoke in Barcelona, Zaragoza, and Tarragona.

Albert M. Camarillo (Stanford University), a member of the IEHS, has been elected president-elect of the Organization of American Historians. Alan M. Kraut (American University), former president of the IEHS, has been elected the OAHA’s vice-president. He has been nominated for the office of president-elect in the next election.

Philip Gleason (University of Notre Dame), former president of the IEHS, received an honorary doctorate from the University of Dayton (his alma mater) in April 2011.

Randall Donaldson (Loyola University of Maryland) was elected president of the Society for German-American Studies at its annual meeting in Newark, Delaware, April 2011.

Ellen Wu (Indiana University) spent the academic year 2010-2011 at the University of Texas, where she was a Ford Foundation Fellow at the Center for Asian American Studies. She researched a project on “The Origins of the Model Minority.”

CARLTON QUALEY AWARD

The Immigration and Ethnic History Society presented the 2009-2010 Carlton C. Qualey Memorial Article Award to Julio Cesar Capo Jr., “Queering Mariel: Mediating Cold War Foreign Policy and U.S. Citizenship among Cuba’s Homosexual Exile Community, 1978-1994” (vol. 29, no. 4) at its annual meeting in Houston in March, 2011.

The prize of $200 is awarded every other year for the best article appearing in the Journal of American Ethnic History during the two preceding calendar years.

The citation read at the meeting follows:

The 2009-10 Carlton C. Qualey Memorial Article Award is presented to Julio Capo Jr. for his essay “Queering Mariel: Mediating Cold War Foreign Policy and U.S. Citizenship among Cuba’s Homosexual Exile Community, 1978-1994.” Richly documented with newspaper reports, Immigration and Naturalization Service records, visual materials, and Cuban sources degrading homosexuals, Capo’s lively essay explores the contradictions and ironies leading to the loosening of United States immigration policy barring homosexual aliens. Capo convincingly argues that this change was initially provoked by concerns for approximately 1000 Mariel immigrants fleeing Cuba’s “masculinist” revolutionary state policy and seeking refuge in the United States. Confronted with exclusionary immigration law regarding homosexuals, American policy makers feared potential international criticism concerning the nation’s failure to support human rights. Falling short of the formal legislative reform favored by gay rights activists, an informal policy change resulted: a protocol that “don’t ask, don’t tell” test offered an informal strategy allowing admission of homosexuals. The result was a policy change that moved the United States away from its Cold War preferential treatment of the victims of Communist oppression towards conformity with the 1975 Helsinki Accords mandate for welcoming the victims of state sponsored violations of human rights. With an objective eye, Capo constructs his narrative of the unlikely collaborators who contributed to this policy change: gay advocacy groups, Fidel Castro, Jimmy Carter, the Justice Department, the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the American Psychiatric Association each played a part in pushing the United States reluctantly towards this path of reform and reassessment. Capo’s essay serves as a model for its agile analysis of the complex web of interests and accidents that led to immigration policy change, for its objective analysis of identity group politics and for its fascinating story of how sexual politics became entwined within the foreign and domestic policy of both the United States and Cuba. Most of all, the essay serves to demonstrate how and why the history of a persecuted minority, its defenders and its antagonists, tells the history of our nation’s reluctant support of human rights.
Conferences and Meetings...

The Norwegian American Historical Association (Norway chapter) will hold a seminar June 14-17, 2011 at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Theme: “Migrant Journeys: The Norwegian-American Experience in a Multicultural Context.” Details on the web at http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/


The annual meeting of the German Studies Association will take place in Louisville, Kentucky, Sept. 22-25, 2011. Included in the program are four sessions dealing with “Germans and the American Civil War.” Web information: www.tegsa.org


The McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the Library Company of Philadelphia will sponsor a conference on “Ireland, America, and the Worlds of Matthew Carey” in Philadelphia, October 27-29, 2011. Carey (1760-1839) made his mark in both his native Ireland and in Philadelphia as a printer and editor of influential periodicals. He became the most prominent spokesman for Irish Catholics in America. Information on the web at: http://www.mcea.org/programs.htm


The 36th annual meeting of the Social Science History Association will be held in Boston, Nov. 17-20, 2011. Theme: “Generation to Generation.” Web info: http://www.ssha.org/annual-conference


The Immigration and Ethnic History Society will hold its next annual meeting in connection with the Organization of American Historians, April 19-22, 2012, in Milwaukee.

From the Nominating Committee...

The IEHS nominating committee is seeking suggestions for officers to be elected in early 2012. A new vice-president (and president-elect) will be elected for a three-year term. The present vice-president (Hasia Diner) will succeed to the presidency. In addition, three board members will be elected. Nominations (including self-nominations) may be sent to the chair of the nominating committee, Anna Pegler Gordon (Michigan State University) by Jan. 3, 2012. E-mail: gordonap@msu.edu

For a list of the present IEHS officers and board members, see the listing on the webpages at: http://www.iehs.org/officers.php

Higham Travel Grant Winners

Three graduate students were recipients of John Higham Travel Grants for travel to the OAH-IEHS annual meetings in Houston in March. They were: Joseph Solomon Moore II, University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Mimi Cowan, Boston College; and William Sturkey, Ohio State University. Each received $500 for travel expenses.

For information about applying for the Higham travel grant in 2012, see p. 11.

IEHS Introduces a Renovated and Expanded Web Page

Members of the Immigration and Ethnic History Society are encouraged to explore the newly renovated website, the result of considerable efforts by Web Editor Rachel Kranston, with the assistance of web designer Steven Williams. The new website was installed shortly after the IEHS meeting in Houston in March.

The website retains some familiar features: introduction to the Society, mission statement, lists of officers and board members with addresses; information about the annual meeting, pages for applying for membership, information about the Journal of American Ethnic History and the Society's Newsletter, and announcements of events relevant to the Society.

New features include links to research facilities and libraries, pages to share syllabi resources available on film, information for organizers of panels, and special offers available to members. See the website at: www.iehs.org
Annual Business Meeting
Immigration and Ethnic History Society
Houston, TX, March 18, 2011

President Barbara M. Posadas called to order the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Immigration and Ethnic Society at 4:30 p.m., Friday, March 18, 2011, at the Hilton-Americas. Fifteen Society members were present, including all officers except Treasurer Cheryl Greenberg, who is in China on a Fulbright Fellowship, and a majority of the Executive Board.

President Barbara Posadas asked for a motion to approve the minutes for the 2010 meeting, which was seconded and approved. She then announced plans for the annual dinner following the business meeting and recognized the chairs of the Society’s various committees and outgoing Board members for their diligent efforts to manage Society business during the past year. She also thanked members of the Nominating Committee, Local Committee, awards committees, and all other Society members who helped plan and organize the 2011 IEHS meetings, reception, and dinner.

Noting that Society affairs had been “blissfully quiet” during her second year as president, Posadas applauded the Society co-sponsorship of the National Endowment for the Humanities proposal for a 2012 workshop on immigration and increasing for only the second time in its history the monetary award for the Saloutos Memorial Book Award (from $1,000 to $2,000 annually).

During the Secretary’s Report, Timothy Dean Draper provided the names of the three new Executive Board members: Madeline Hsu, Tyler Anbinder, and Deirdre Moloney.

President Posadas provided a brief Treasurer’s report since Cheryl Greenberg is out of the country and will issue a twelve-month financial report in April. Posadas reported that FY2009-2010 showed the Society with a balance of $142,000, while eleven-total for FY 2010-2011 shows a balance of $160,000. Since the Society has made all four payments to University of Illinois Press, Posadas stated that the balance should not decrease much during the final month of the fiscal year.

Program Chair Hasia Diner noted that the Society was sponsoring four sessions at this year’s OAH Annual Meeting and explained that such sessions may also serve for facilitating membership growth. The Society will sponsor a session at the Berkshire Women’s Conference and has two panels already submitted for the 2012 American Historical Association meeting.

Journal of American Ethnic History editor John Bukowczyk explained that he had reviewed editorial matters in an earlier Editorial Board meeting and would emphasize business affairs in the Business Meeting. He discussed the Journal move from the History Cooperative to JSTOR, noting that it is too early to forecast the potential impact on the number of institutional subscribers. The University of Illinois Press reported another decrease in institutional subscriptions, which, if continues in the near future, may necessitate the Society to focus on long-term financial planning. He mentioned that at some point the Society may need to address increases in institutional subscription rates. Bukowczyk detailed how institutional changes in funding have led to a change in the Journal’s Review Editor and may pose future hurdles for university support of journal editorial work. Finally, he advised the Society to consider 501(c)3 status, which Posadas stated the treasurer plans to pursue upon her return.

Jim Bergquist provided a brief report for the Society’s newsletter, stating that the last issue included 560 copies with costs comparable to previous years. He stated that he remains interested in contributions, especially on pedagogy.

Winners of the Society’s prizes were announced. These included the Saloutos Memorial Book Award co-winners Jennifer Guglielmo, Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), and Lorin Thomas, Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), the George E. Pozzetta Dissertation Award winner Marijke Pollflé, the University of Nice Sophia Antipolis (France), for the project, “Emigration and Politicization: French Migrants in New York and New Orleans in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century (1803-1860)”; the Carlton C. Qualey Memorial Article Award winner Julio Cesar Cepó, Jr., “Queering Mariel: Mediating Cold War Foreign Policy and U.S. Citizenship among Cuba’s Homosexual Exile Community, 1978-1994” (vol. 29, no. 4), and the John Higham Travel Grant (jointly administered by the IEHS and the OAH) co-winners Mimi Cowan (Boston College), Joseph Solomon Moore II (University of North Carolina-Greensboro), and William Sturkey (Ohio State University).

Rachel Kranston detailed the extensive redesign and restructuring of the Society website with plans to go live in April with such new features as a searchable membership directory, discussion forum, syllabus areas accessible to members, resource area for K-12 teachers, and electronic dinner reservation and annual election ballot options. She requested volunteers to post syllabi online as well as examine the beta version before the new website goes live.

An amendment creating the office of Website Editor was moved, seconded, and approved unanimously, becoming By-Law Amendment Eleven.

Secretary Draper noted the passing of long-time member Nora Faires and requested that members pass along any news on the passing of members for inclusion in Society memorials in future years.

Barbara Posadas adjourned the annual meeting at 4:24 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Timothy Dean Draper
IEHS Secretary
THEODORE SALOUTOS BOOK AWARD, 2010

The co-winners of the 2010 Theodore Saloutos Memorial Book Award for the best book of the year in immigration and ethnic history are: Jennifer Guglielmo’s *Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945* and Lorrin Thomas’s *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City*. The committee consisted of Maria Cristina Garcia (Cornell University), chair; Eticho Azuma (University of Pennsylvania); and Alan Kraut (American University). The award was made at the annual dinner of the Immigration and Ethnic History Society in Houston on March 18, 2011. The citations follow:

Jennifer Guglielmo’s *Living the Revolution* gives voice to two generations of Italian working-class women in the needle and textile trades of New York and New Jersey, whose political radicalism has been largely obscured or marginalized in the historiography of Italian migration to the United States. Guglielmo drew on a rich array of Italian and English-language sources to carefully piece together her compelling story of these remarkable women and the political networks they created to challenge the oppressive conditions they encountered in the workplace and in their day-to-day lives. The women in Guglielmo’s history—workers, writers, activists, and organizers, mothers, grandmothers, and daughters—drew on and were inspired by traditional forms of protest in the homeland, as well as transnational social movements such as anarchism, socialism, and communism. They challenged racism, capitalism, and patriarchy, and created a vibrant and radical political subculture. Ultimately, their experiences with racism in the United States, the Red Scare, the rise of fascism, and the Great Depression undercut their radicalism and moved their political activism into more mainstream expressions. Guglielmo has written a engaging study that will be essential reading for any scholar of gender, radical history, labor, and of course, immigration and ethnicity.

Lorrin Thomas’s, *Puerto Rican Citizen* is a social history of Puerto Ricans in 20th century New York City focusing, in particular, on Puerto Ricans’ critiques of U.S. citizenship. The 1917 Jones Act granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, allowing them to migrate to the United States relatively freely, and theoretically granting them the privileges and responsibilities that come with citizenship. Over the next six decades, over a million Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States in search of economic opportunities, and until the 1970s, the vast majority settled in the New York metropolitan area. Thomas examines the racial, political, and economic tensions that emerged in this New York community as Puerto Ricans, both activists and ordinary citizens, tried to understand this new political identity and what citizenship meant to their daily lives. Drawing on interviews, memoirs, and a wide-range of Spanish and English archival sources, Thomas discusses Puerto Ricans’ political engagement with the New Deal, their wartime service, their engagement with Puerto Rican nationalism on the island, the radicalism of the 1960s, among many other topics, to examine both the limitations of legal citizenship for racialized minorities, and Puerto Rican conceptions of rights and their expectations of the state. Angelo Falcon of the National Institute for Latino Policy recently wrote in his blog that this is the book he’s been waiting for for twenty-six years. It is the opinion of the Saloutos Memorial Book prize committee that Thomas has written one of the best books on the Puerto Rican experience.

Other New Publications Noted...


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(continued from p. 1)

of American education include such indoctrination as well.)

This phenomenon is not just political; it is understandable. China is a huge country
with a complex, five-thousand-year history, and students must learn how to make sense
of it. But the interpretations that are presented clearly reflect policy decisions.
Consider teaching regarding ethnicity, or what the Chinese call ethnic minorities
(there are 55 recognized minority groups but, cumulatively, they total less than 10
percent of the Chinese population). The state has embraced ethnic identity even as it
seeks in policy terms to institute what people here call "Hanification"—the centralizing
and unifying of social practices and the fostering of a national identity based largely
on those of the majority Han people. Thus minority groups receive extra points on
their college entrance exams and other benefits, but (for example), recently Beijing
decreed that schools in Tibet could no longer teach in Tibetan but only in Mandarin Chinese. Anthropologists document ethnic groups — on the assumption that
their traditions will disappear. Locals dress up in traditional costumes to lead tours and
perform traditional dances.

(During a tour of a series of caves, deep inside the earth, we were stopped by our
tour guide at a spotlight. There we were treated to a demonstration of how the
women of one ethnic minority who never cut their hair tie it up. The light went off,
and then on again to reveal a woman from a different group who put rings around their
necks to elongate them, standing there to model her swanlike looks. The light then
went off again and we proceeded on our tour of [other?] natural formations.)

In some ways, then, China resembles the postwar America of National Brotherhood Week — where diversities of ethnicity and
religion (but not race) were accepted but simultaneously reduced to “food, festivals and fashion.” (The cave spectacle also reminded me of Ota Benga, the African pygmy displayed at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair and then installed in the Bronx Zoo’s monkey house, or the Hotten-tot Venus displayed in England and France in the early nineteenth century, but that is a topic beyond my point here.)

And so, when Chinese textbooks discuss
these national Chinese subgroups, they
present this information, fitting customs
into a narrative cultural profile. Not only is
this reductive, equating identity and culture
with clothing or dance, but it also, presumably inadvertently, implies that specific
values or beliefs underlying the custom or
embedded in the group’s history can be
generalized to everyone in the group. And
once again, because the exams evaluate how
well the information given is then recited,
these generalizations are simply presented as
facts.

Complicating matters, most Chinese still
live in ethnically homogeneous areas, par-
cularly in rural China. So most Chinese
people outside cities rarely encounter a
person from a different ethnic group. Even
within cities, because the primary social
group is the family and their close friends
and relations, there is relatively little mixing until, perhaps, college. So there is little
in people’s personal experience to counteract
these pronouncements — or the cultural stereotypes that predate the textbooks. Thus
does essentialism become fact. The people
from one province are known to be nice; the
men from another, make good husbands. A
particular minority group is known to be
clanxious, another to enjoy singing and
dancing. Students from one region of the
country are considered especially promising
because so many Chinese writers and philo-
sophers came from there. And that one
group — they are troublemakers. Chinese
students absorb these stereotypes and
understand them to be facts in the same way
that they understand that they must support their
elderly parents and that hydrogen is the
lightest of the elements.

Since these beliefs about different groups
are “facts,” my students don’t hesitate to
assert them. Unlike American students, who
may well believe these same things but
know better than to say them in a classroom, my Chinese students feel no such
reticence. A few months ago the New York Times ran an article on Darlie toothpaste —
formerly Darkie—which is marketed widely
in Asia. Darlie’s logo is a black man with
a smile of big white teeth. The manufactur-
ers, responding to a barrage of western
criticism for their racist stereotype, changed
the "k" to an "I" but left the product and
image otherwise intact. I sent a copy of that
story to my students. One of them e-mailed
back, confused: “I don’t understand, Profes-
sor Greenberg. What’s wrong with tooth-
paste?”

In other words, my students believe in
Jewish essentialism because they believe in
essentialism. It is an essentialism shaped by
culture and education, and presented as facts
to be memorized for the test. So I have
become a woman on a mission. It is not
easy enough to teach my students critical thinking skills. I must also teach them to apply
these skills to examine the supposed facts they already know.

That conviction, in turn, has led me to a
critique of not just Chinese education but of ours as well, one that does emphasize
critical thinking. I am reminded of the experi-
ence of a colleague in the U.S. who teaches
Japanese history. He offers a course on the
samurai, and begins by asking students what
they think they know about this group. They,
not surprisingly, respond with images of
fearless warriors wielding swords to defend
their village or their emperor to the death.
The course then examines the structure of
this community, its mid-level bureaucrats
and administrators, its political interests and
status concerns. Then, at the end of the
course, he asks his students again what they
know about the samurai. Many respond with
images of fearless warriors wielding swords
to defend their village or their emperor to
the death. We may not resort to memorization,
we may not treat interpretations as facts, we may encourage students to formulate
their own opinions or support hypothe-
ses with evidence. But in the end, I am not
convinced that we do a much better job
helping students apply those skills to their
own assumptions and biases, nor of showing
them why they should.

I am not sure how to bridge this gap. But
somehow, we must help our students learn
not only that events are subject to multiple
interpretations; not only how to gather
independent evidence to construct an original
argument; but also that while culture matters, characterizing entire peoples as the
inheritors of certain traits is not only false
but can be a very dangerous move in a world
still riven by racial and ethnic hatreds.

Cheryl Greenberg, currently on a Ful-
bright lectureship in China, is Paul E. Rea-
ther Distinguished Professor of History at
Among her recent books is Troubling the
Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the
American Century (Princeton University
Press, 2006).
New Publications Noted...

(continued from p. 7)


(continued on p. 10)
New Publications Noted...
(continued from p. 9)


Southern Cultures, the journal of the Center for the Study of the American South at the University of North Carolina, devotes its Spring 2011 issue to the Irish in the South. Available on-line at http://www.southerncultures.org/


Activities Report for the Immigration and Ethnic History Newsletter

Mail your information for the next Newsletter to:

James M. Bergquist, Department of History, Villanova University, Villanova PA 19085-1699

or FAX a copy to (610) 519-4450 or send information via E-Mail to: James.Bergquist@villanova.edu

Your name and affiliation:


THEODORE SALOUTOS BOOK AWARD

Closing date for submissions for the annual Theodore Saloutos Book Award is December 31, 2011. The 2011 award will be presented for the book judged best on any aspect of the immigration history of the United States. “Immigration history” is defined as the history of the movement of peoples from other countries to the United States, of the repatriation movements of immigrants, and of the consequences of these migrations, both for the United States and the countries of origin. To be eligible for the award, a book must be copyrighted 2011, must be based on substantial primary research, and must present a major new scholarly interpretation. A book may be nominated by its author, the publisher, a member of the Saloutos Prize Committee, or a member of the Society. Inquiries and nominations should be submitted to the chair of the Saloutos Prize Committee, Eichiro Azuma, Department of History, 208 Colgate Hall, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6379 (eazuma@sas.upenn.edu). Copies of the book must be received by the three members of the committee by December 15, 2011. Send books to Prof. Azuma at the above address as well as to Alan Kraut, 6013 Sonoma Road, Bethesda, MD 20817 (akraut@american.edu) and Madeline Hsu, 2309 Kinney Road, Austin, TX 78704 (myhsu@austin.utexas.edu). The award for books published in 2011 will be presented at the annual dinner meeting of the Society in April 2012.

GEORGE POZZETTA DISSERTATION AWARD

At the annual dinner meeting of the IEHS in Houston on March 19, 2011, the George Pozzetta Dissertation Award was given to Marieke Polffiet, of the University of Nice Sophia Antipolis (France), for the project, “Emigration and Politicization: French Migrants in New York and New Orleans in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century (1803-1860).” The Immigration and Ethnic History Society announces competition for the 2012 George E. Pozzetta Dissertation Award. It invites applications from any Ph.D candidate who will have completed qualifying exams by November 15, 2011, and whose thesis focuses on American immigration, emigration, or ethnic history. The award provides $500 for expenses to be incurred in researching the dissertation. Applicants must submit a three-page to five-page descriptive proposal in English, discussing the significance of the work, the methodology, sources, and collections to be consulted. Also included must be a proposed budget, a brief curriculum vitae, and a supporting letter from the major adviser. Submission deadline is November 15, 2011, with the winner to be notified by March 1, 2012. Send application materials by e-mail to all committee members, with an additional hard copy by surface mail to the committee chair, Nancy Carnevale, Department of History, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ 07043; and via e-mail to Tyler Anbinder, George Washington University (anbinder@gwu.edu); and to Walter Kamphofner, Texas A&M University (walkamp@tamu.edu). Inquiries may be sent to the committee chair, Professor Carnevale, at carnevalen@mail.montclair.edu.

NEW IEHS BOARD MEMBERS

In the 2011 elections for the IEH executive board, three new members were elected: Madeline Hsu (University of Texas), Deirdre Moloney (Princeton University), and Tyler Anbinder (George Washington University).
THE IMMIGRATION AND ETHNIC HISTORY SOCIETY

...was founded in 1965 as the Immigration History Group. It was chartered in 1972 as the Immigration History Society. In 1998 the Society, which had traditionally dealt with ethnicity as well as immigration, changed its name to the Immigration and Ethnic History Society.

The purpose of the Society is to promote the study of the history of immigration to the United States and Canada from all parts of the world, including studies of the background of emigration in the countries of origin; to promote the study of ethnic groups in the United States, including regional groups, native Americans and forced immigrants; to promote understanding of the processes of acculturation and of conflict; to furnish through the Immigration and Ethnic History Newsletter information as to research, organizations, meetings and publications in the field of immigrant history; to help organize sessions on immigration and ethnicity at meetings of learned societies; and generally to serve the field of immigration/ethnic history with special reference to professional scholarship.

MEMBERSHIP

Annual dues: Individual (print or electronic), $45, $55 (Canada & Mexico), $80 (other foreign addresses); Student (print or electronic), $25, $35 (Canada & Mexico), $60 (other foreign addresses); New member (print or electronic), first year $35, $45 (Canada & Mexico), $70 (other foreign addresses). Institutional members (print or electronic), $245, $255 (Canada & Mexico), $280 (other foreign addresses). For print and electronic delivery, add $10 to individual rate, $50 to institutional rate. New memberships and membership renewals should be sent to Journals, University of Illinois Press, 1325 S. Oak St., Champaign, IL 61820. They may also be sent via the web-page:

http://www.press.illinois.edu/journals/jaeh.html

OFFICERS OF THE IEHS

President: Barbara Posadas, Northern Illinois University, Dept. of History, DeKalb IL 60115. E-mail: bposadas@niu.edu
Vice-president: Hasia R. Diner, New York University, Dept. of History, New York NY 10012. E-mail: hrdl@nyu.edu
Secretary: Timothy Draper, Waubonsee Community College, Division of Social Sciences and Education, Sugar Grove IL 60554. Tel. (630) 466-2566. FAX (630) 466-5795. E-mail: tdraper@waubonsee.cc
Treasurer: Cheryl Greenberg, Trinity College, Dept. of History, 300 Summit St., Hartford CT 06106. Tel. (860) 297-2371. E-mail: Cheryl.Greenberg@trincoll.edu

Editor, Journal of American Ethnic History: John Bukowczyk, Dept. of History, 3094 Faculty/Administration Building, Wayne State University, Detroit MI 48202. Tel. (313) 577-2799. FAX (313) 577-6987. E-mail: m2092@wayne.edu

Editor, Immigration History Newsletter: James M. Bergquist, Department of History, Villanova University, Villanova PA 19085-1699. Tel.: (610) 687-0838. FAX: (610) 519-4450. E-mail: James.Bergquist@vill.edu

Inquiries about the Society should be directed to the appropriate officer. Newsletter submissions and questions about editorial matters should be sent to the newsletter editor at the address above. Requests for back issues of the newsletter should be sent to the editor; send $2.00 per copy (by check made out to Villanova University).

Subscriptions to the Immigration and Ethnic History Newsletter and the Journal of American Ethnic History are part of membership in the Society. Members' changes of address should be sent to Journals, Univ. of Illinois Press, 1325 S. Oak St., Champaign IL 61820, or via the web at

http://www.press.illinois.edu/journals/jaeh.html

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