

History Lessons

Shanghai schools find **new ways** to teach world history

➔ Teaching history in a Shanghai international school is at once a promising and baffling task. History is a rich subject, but the trick lies in getting the students, who hail from all over the world, to relate to it. From new technology to class trips, to guest speakers and pen pals, several history teachers share their approaches to blowing a little dust off of the past.

Tonya Parham teaches Advanced Placement U.S. History at the Shanghai American School. Most teachers and students complain of teaching to the test, but it is a necessity in AP classes, which prepare students for a cumulative exam in May. "There is so much content in the AP class that it makes it hard to get out of the classroom," says Parham. To ensure lively discussion, Parham, who has taught in Shanghai for five years, teaches using the Socratic method. "It's a lot of me questioning the students, then asking follow-up questions, then asking follow-ups to the follow-ups." She also spruces up her class with 21st-century gadgetry. The school equips all students with Macbooks, enabling Parham to record comments on essays and then return these to the students via iChat.

Rob Savelle teaches history at Yew Chung International School's Gubei campus. In addition to the International Baccalaureate Program, YCIS teaches a traditional mixture of European and American history. Besides the staid curriculum, YCIS emphasizes travel, both domestic and abroad. The "Education Outside the Classroom" program brings many students on weeklong trips to Chinese cities like Beijing and Xi'an.

There is also the World Classroom Program, in which students spend two weeks traveling to places like the USA, Mexico, Thailand and the Czech Republic. Additionally, "All of our year 12 students go to Thailand. Here they interact with the locals and get a sense of Thailand's development, getting first person accounts of how things change ... This is one of the major perks of working here—to see the students become interested in the real world while they're out there hearing stories."

Across the river at YCIS Pudong, the bulk of the curriculum is also geared to China. But History teacher Dusten Kent downplays the role of content, instead favoring methodology. "We see history in the sense that as long as critical thinking and

research skills are being taught, the content is arbitrary." His department focuses on Chinese history in years 7 through 9. "Our school philosophy is East meets West. It'd be sad if the kids lived here for four or five years and just learned British history." But he discourages rote memorization. "Instead of teaching a perspective, we teach a guiding question ... It's not about regurgitating information."

Chronology is the guiding principle at the SMIC Private School. Neale McGoldrick, who has been teaching since 1968, "believes that kids need a foundation on which they can glue things." But this approach is not a numbers game, it stresses historical development and how those developments connect nations around the world. Knowing dates and dates only, McGoldrick says, is like "learning the phone number of a person you don't know." SMIC's classes mainly stay inside the school walls, although guest speakers representing the various nations, themes or eras being discussed are regularly invited to present. In addition to the school-wide History Day, McGoldrick highlights their pen-pal program. Students write letters to people with firsthand historical experience. For example, McGoldrick's friend, who was in jail with Nelson Mandela, exchanged letters with the students.

Undoubtedly a heavyweight in the history field, Concordia International School's Mark Johnson is a busy man. In addition to an interactive curriculum modeled after social historians like Howard Zinn, which "deemphasizes big political stories," Johnson spends a lot of time in the field: "I have gone with twenty students to Hiroshima and Nanjing to study WWII." Johnson is also proud of the visiting speakers that come to Concordia. In the past, they've had Markus Zusak, author of *The Book Thief*, and Gavin Menzies, historian and author of the con-

troversial *1421* and *1434*. Next year, they are trying to get Leslie Chang and Peter Hessler, the powerhouse couple of China writing.

CISS also hosts Shanghai History Day, during which thirty international and local schools from Shanghai come and present based on a chosen theme. The entries range from traditional papers to websites and documentary films. Last year, one of Johnson's favorite presentations was a dramatic performance about the evolution of reconstructive surgery in World War I. The theme for next year is "Debate and Diplomacy: Successes, Failures, Consequences."

History Day is an embodiment of the larger missions of Johnson and other educators. The students make an original assertion about the subject and support it with original research. Johnson stresses the progressive nature of historiography, the conceptualization of history as a discipline. "I rail against the idea that history is set," he says. And Johnson doesn't mince words about history's role in his life. "It gives my life meaning, and I want to pass on this enthusiasm."

Big stories or small, lecture or computer-based lesson, there are many different approaches to the same past. What should impress parents (and students) is the variety that history allows. Says Johnson, "History opens up to every discipline under the sun; it's the most freeing discipline." • **Hunter Braithwaite**



Concordia students at History Day