

Wikipedia and Experiential Learning in the Asian Studies Classroom

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9.1 Neutral Tone, Scholarly Agenda: Writing about the Chinese Cultural Revolution on Wikipedia

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To what extent does writing for *Wikipedia* still offer rewarding learning experiences for university students in 2026? The power of chatbots to produce polished text (often by vacuuming up *Wikipedia* content) presents a challenge for instructors and students alike. Because AI chatbots often draw from and regurgitate *Wikipedia* articles, adding verifiable and credible content to *Wikipedia* is more important than ever in terms of contributing to public knowledge. This article discusses our experiences with a *Wikipedia* capstone project in a fourth-year writing-intensive seminar at Simon Fraser University about the Chinese Cultural Revolution. We focus on balancing historical content with *Wikipedia*-specific matters, pursuing intellectual agendas while adhering to *Wikipedia*'s neutrality policy, and using automated translation tools to unlock otherwise inaccessible sources, concluding that *Wikipedia* assignments can enhance undergraduate research

and writing skills while improving online coverage of a key period in recent Chinese history.

An Instructor's Perspective: Jeremy Brown

In spring 2026, I taught a fourth-year undergraduate seminar, *Contentious Problems in Modern Chinese History*, at Simon Fraser University for the sixth time. In each iteration of the course, students have contributed at least 800 words of original content for *Wikipedia*. The first four versions of the course focused on the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.^[1] After completing my *June Fourth* manuscript in 2021, I needed a break from the trauma of the Beijing massacre, so I decided to broaden that year's focus to "Sensitive Topics in Recent Chinese History."^[2] This year, the twenty-four student seminar examined China's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

I chose to start asking students to write for *Wikipedia* in 2010 because I thought that crafting short pieces of useful information for a potentially massive online audience would be more rewarding than writing unwieldy term papers for an audience of one.^[3] I have always been wary of making the course too much about *Wikipedia* and not enough about Chinese history. We spend more time becoming subject experts than we do thinking about *Wikipedia*. Immersion in primary sources,^[4] participants' recollections,^[5] and scholarly approaches^[6] about a temporally bounded topic like the Cultural Revolution comes first in the syllabus. This foundation then allows students to assess the strengths and weaknesses of existing content on *Wikipedia*, finding sources, and advancing their individual scholarly agenda.

Scholarly agenda? If neutrality is one of *Wikipedia's* core content policies, isn't it a contradiction for me to ask students to push an agenda? Asking students to identify and pursue their own agenda is a new twist I added over the years. When students review each other's work, they fill out a rubric that

asks: “Is there an identifiable agenda that the author is promoting? What specific clues reveal the agenda? How successfully is it carried out?” When I gave a presentation to SFU professors about my first experience using *Wikipedia* in history teaching, a colleague raised her hand and asked, “Because crafting persuasive arguments is so central to historical writing, isn’t something being lost when we require students to be neutral?” This was a perceptive question. Writing in a neutral tone is achievable and worthwhile. My colleague’s question, however, made me realize that pursuing neutrality is impossible and inadvisable when it comes to choosing which topic is more interesting and important than any other, assessing which sources deserve to be cited over other ones, deciding which voices to amplify, and organizing article sections, paragraphs, and even sentences—it matters what comes first, second, and third. Such decisions should be thought through, transparent, and driven by students’ interests and opinions, which in turn should be well-informed by careful reading of historical evidence. In other words, writing in a neutral tone for *Wikipedia* does not mean adopting a neutral stance or not advancing an argument. The argument emerges through emphasis and organization rather than tone.

Jada’s contribution to the “China Railways DF4” *Wikipedia* article, especially its section on the Cultural Revolution, is an example of a student author successfully pursuing an intellectual agenda. Jada’s narrative emphasizes steady progress, innovation, and the ability of builders and technicians to make things work in the face of obstacles and disruptions. This counters standard narratives of the Cultural Revolution as chaotic “lost years” that were hostile to expertise. Jada achieves this subtly and effectively by focusing on technical details while mentioning delays and problems in a neutral tone. The mere existence of a page about a diesel–electric locomotive produced during the Cultural Revolution constitutes a scholarly intervention; Jada’s crafting,

organizing, and use of sources make it an effective contribution that counters overly simplistic portrayals of the era.

Another student chose to add a section about the Cultural Revolution to the “Chinese New Year” *Wikipedia* article. She also successfully advanced a scholarly agenda by drawing on newspaper articles to show how policy and practices toward the traditional holiday changed over the eleven years between 1966 and 1976. One might expect that Red Guard attacks on traditional Chinese culture, including holidays, would lead to the cancellation or at least the dampening of lunar new year celebrations for the entirety of the Cultural Revolution, but the reality was far more complex and reveals the durability of family ties and ritual beliefs.

The student authors of new content in *Wikipedia* articles about Chinese New Year and a locomotive had one thing in common: they drew extensively on Chinese-language sources to write their contributions in English. Chinese is not Jada’s first language, but she is learning it and was able to navigate and draw from Chinese-language periodicals, some quite technical, about railways. The student who wrote about Chinese New Year had no background or history studying Chinese, but with help from me and classmates who could read the language, she searched the *People’s Daily* database and used Google Translate and DeepL to understand and cite articles about observing the holiday. This worked well because *People’s Daily* in the 1960s and 1970s used simple words and formulaic patterns that lend themselves to accurate machine translation. It also helped that I was available to work with the student during office hours to explain the Chinese-to-English content produced by AI translation tools.

Students also helped each other find and translate sources during two separate peer review sessions. In previous years, I asked peer reviewers to give oral presentations to the entire seminar, after which everyone had the chance to weigh in on the written work’s strengths, areas for improvement, points of

disagreement with the peer reviewer's points, and additional sources the author might consult. This aimed to get students comfortable discussing their writing in front of others—good preparation for sharing their work with a large audience on *Wikipedia*—but it was nerve-wracking to have twenty classmates and the professor all scrutinizing their sentences in real time. The bigger problem was that students tended to disengage when ten reviewers in a row followed a formulaic rubric. I switched the format in 2026, moving away from putting reviewer and reviewee on stage and toward smaller, more active groups of three students: reviewer, reviewee, and discussant. The reviewer completed a rubric in advance and verbally presented feedback directly to the student author; the discussant had also read the reviewee's paper closely and was encouraged to supplement and build on the formal review. This led to lively brainstorming sessions in which three students worked together to suggest potential revisions and new sources to explore, while empathizing about their shared challenges.

Because I invested substantial preparation time setting up a peer review and *Wikipedia* editing workflow in 2010, before Wiki Education support was available, I have continued to use a do-it-ourselves model. Early in the term students use an online discussion board to claim topics and state whether they intend to write a new article or edit an existing one. Only in the final week of the term, when students are ready to upload their original content, do I create a *Wikipedia* project page that allows students to track each other's contributions online.^[7] At the start of each term I wonder whether there will be enough room on *Wikipedia* for approximately twenty new contributions about a topic that is already well covered. So far students have always found plenty of room. This is thanks in no small part to their own unique interests, perspectives, and intellectual agendas.

A Student's Perspective: Jada Turchak

Much of the historical knowledge encountered online today is shaped not only by academic monographs and journal articles, but by collaborative knowledge platforms such as *Wikipedia*. As an undergraduate student, I often find myself reaching for *Wikipedia* as my first point of reference before delving deeper into research topics. Therefore, when I first began thinking of ideas for my capstone project in Dr. Brown's seminar on the Chinese Cultural Revolution, it felt only natural that I reach for the site. That was when I discovered, despite representing a major advance in diesel-electric locomotive development in China, the "China Railways DF4" *Wikipedia* article was surprisingly incomplete, motivating me to substantially rewrite the page.

Approaching the research stage as I would any other writing assignment, I consulted Simon Fraser University library holdings and the online databases to look for references to the DF4 and the dieselization of China. These traditional research methods yielded similar results to those of the *Wikipedia* article, leading me to pages of error codes and broken links. I began to think that perhaps my point of interest, the history of rail technology and manufacturing, was out of place in the field of Chinese history. Not only did conventional academic resources reveal a lack of scholarship, but the pre-existing English-language *Wikipedia* article, which had not been updated in almost a decade, seemed to imply a broader disinterest in my topic. Up until that point, I was only able to familiarize myself with the locomotive through trainspotting blogs, which documented the DF4 from the perspective of hobbyists but failed to provide source citations. So, while these sources made valuable contributions to public knowledge, my inability to verify their accuracy made them unsuitable for the purposes of the assignment. At the very least, these rail blogs reassured me that the DF4 was an object of interest for

international audiences, and that the information I was seeking was indeed out there somewhere.

It was at this point, frustrated by the gaps in scholarship I had encountered, that Dr. Brown and I met to discuss how to approach my research going forward. Encountering the extensive Chinese-language version of the “China Railways DF4” *Wikipedia* article, alongside archival documents provided by Dr. Brown, it became clear that I would need to move beyond English sources to complete this project. Pivoting away from my more traditional methods of research, I instead began to consult Chinese databases, such as *Overseas China National Knowledge Infrastructure* (CNKI). Although I had previously taken introductory Chinese language courses at SFU, I had never applied these skills in a research setting, and therefore had to depend upon online tools to ensure the accuracy of my translations. Having also previously discovered the limitations of searching for direct references to the DF4 in English, I instead searched broader keywords such as “火车” and “机车” (both meaning locomotive) as well as “大连机车车辆有限公司” (CRRC Dalian Locomotive and Rolling Stock Company), to manually look for mentions of the “火车4” (DF4). Now, with these keywords and translation tools in hand, I began to look through the many CNKI archived journals from the 1950s through 1980s. Published by broad collectives, such as the CRRC Dalian or individual locomotive depots, were technical manuals, state-published journals, and factory reports that painted a captivating picture of the *Chinese Cultural Revolution* from the perspective of the industrial sector. Due to the nature of digitizing these typewritten sources, the actual text of these documents could not simply be copied and pasted into automated translation tools because AI could not detect text within the file. To work around this, I took pictures on my phone of passages which could then be put through an image translator. Other documents proved more challenging,

requiring that I manually entered the characters into a Hanzi input machine before I could then translate them.

Upon translation, hidden between engine specifications and model numbers, were personal voices of factory workers speaking about material scarcity and dissatisfaction, then technical progress and ingenuity. The manuals often offered honest contemplations on various moments of the Cultural Revolution and the manufacturing process, providing insights largely absent from academic literature. Interestingly, I found that with the CNKI access provided by SFU I was only able to view a select few files, while using a personal account brought me to a collection of hundreds of digitized documents. This remained a compromise, as not using an institutional login meant that most files on the database only allowed partial access and required payment after the first pages. This paywall put restrictions on my research but was easily worked around as the sheer number of publications provided me with enough information to substantially rewrite the pre-existing article. While laborious, these methods of research felt worthwhile as they would make these unconventional sources accessible, contributing to a history that has otherwise been kept obscured from English-speaking audiences.

Beyond learning to navigate online databases and translation tools, working through years of technical manuals and reports provided important insights into the specifics of my article topic. More importantly, however, these sources began to deconstruct how I understood technical modernity during the Cultural Revolution. This turned my *Wikipedia* contribution into a historiographical intervention to counter common narratives that portray the revolution as the antithesis of industrial production. Yet rather than advocating for this position directly, *Wikipedia's* neutrality policy required that I communicate it through critical source selection and the organization of information. My archival sources lent themselves well to this agenda as revolutionary slogans and

quotations from Mao Zedong were often presented alongside progress reports and operation guides. Additionally, an interesting feature of reports published during the Cultural Revolution was the requests for and responses to questions, criticisms, and input from readers, demonstrating that the publications functioned as an open education resource for a generalized audience of workers with varying expertise levels. This reflected many of the same collaborative and publicly accessible approaches to knowledge sharing that characterize platforms like *Wikipedia*, making the reports particularly relevant for the assignment. Therefore, writing for *Wikipedia* required balancing historiographical implications with the platform's expectations for concise and neutral presentation, while giving me the freedom to subtly challenge broader historical narratives through emphasis, organization, and presentation of evidence.

Alongside the primary documents from the CNKI database, secondary sources, and consulting a historian of China Railways played an important role in contextualizing the broader history of the DF4. Although I was now comfortable with translating, I found it significantly more difficult to evaluate the reliability of online Chinese-language publications. Platforms such as open-source news sites or company social media pages, which might be easily evaluated from a domestic context, required an additional level of scrutiny before I could determine their credibility. Consulting with my professor helped me identify which sources were appropriate for use and which should be disregarded. I was also put in contact with a historian who was able to answer my questions and corroborate my claims. This is when I first encountered *Wikipedia's* "no original research" policy, since our interview and much of his writing on the locomotive are currently unpublished. At times, working within *Wikipedia's* guidelines meant having to abandon particularly interesting

narratives but ensured that I would not be contributing to misinformation or overemphasizing my scholarly agenda.

Considering that my assignment would eventually be published to a public audience, it was important that I incorporated both popular opinion and personal vision into my contribution. My final submission on the “China Railways DF4” page came to reflect conversations with scholars and peers, as much as the time I spent consulting archival documents. For example, while some of us found the inclusion of locomotive specifications to be of central importance, others were more interested in the story of the locomotive more broadly. This inspired me to utilize features such as tables and sidebars to incorporate technicalities without interfering with the general reader experience. For potential audiences unfamiliar with the layout of diesel-electric locomotives, I also wanted to add blueprints and photographs to the article. It was here that I encountered the more technical challenges that come with editing *Wikipedia*, such as encoding an “infobox” template and adding photos through Wikimedia Commons. As a point of reference for editing, it was beneficial for me to refer to other *Wikipedia* articles and follow their code formats visible from the “source editing” screen. I also referred to images that had previously been uploaded onto Wikimedia before adding images myself. This ensured that I was not publishing images already available in the database or violating copyright laws.

Now that my contribution has been published, it has been interesting to see the impact that a *Wikipedia* article can have. When searching for the DF4 on Google, Gemini generates an AI overview that cites the article and directly uses my writing. Additionally, what was once a seemingly abandoned page has been met with great enthusiasm by my peers and has now seen several new contributions alongside my own. Seeing the article available online and interacted with has also made me reflect on why the information had been previously ignored.

The absence of the DF4 in formal scholarship and the

challenges I encountered during the research phase led me to the realization that certain historical narratives remain obscure, not for a lack of importance but because they exist outside of accessible knowledge platforms. This reframed my understanding of historical writing and the role of collaborative public knowledge, such as *Wikipedia* or the DF4 factory reports, by emphasizing how collective participation and audience demographics might influence the ways authors present their information. Simultaneously, seeing AI-generated content reproduce and circulate information from my article illustrated the importance of producing verifiable and responsibly written works.

Therefore, while my contribution focused on the manufacturing history and technical specifications of the DF4 diesel-electric locomotive, the experience demonstrated that *Wikipedia* assignments have the potential to encourage students to think critically about underrepresented histories, ethical authorship, neutrality, and the circulation of knowledge through public-facing learning. As my experience suggests, *Wikipedia* assignments remain valuable not despite the rise of AI but because of it. In the end, what originally began as an incomplete *Wikipedia* article became a personal reminder that historical narratives and public knowledge are shaped by archival access and the quality of materials as well as the motivations of individual authors when making contentious or obscure topics accessible to broader audiences and AI algorithms.

[1] "SFU Tiananmen Square Project," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects/SFU_Tiananmen_Square_Project.

[2] "SFU History Sensitive Topics in Recent Chinese History," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects/SFU_History_Sensitive_Topics_in_Recent_Chinese_History.

[3] Jeremy Brown and Benedicte Melanie Olson, "Teaching Tiananmen: Using Wikipedia in the Undergraduate Classroom to Learn How to Write about Recent History," *Perspectives on History*, April 1, 2012, <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/teaching-tiananmen-using-wikipedia-in-the-undergraduate-classroom-to-learn-how-to-write-about-recent-history-april-2012/>.

[4] During the first two weeks we watched clips from a documentary filmed at the outset of the Cultural Revolution (Tokieda Toshie, "Report from China" ("Country of Dawn," *Yoake no Kuni*), Iwanami Film Productions, 1967) and read sources from Michael Schoenhals, *China's Cultural Revolution, 1966–1969: Not a Dinner Party* (ME Sharpe, 1996). The full course syllabus is available on Google Drive: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VqX5GWqmcIMsD1bS13zRTL6Nz_32BY1I/edit?usp=sharing&oid=107754698686373287889&rtpof=true&sd=true.

[5] In addition to browsing oral history testimony from "[China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project](#)," University of Pittsburgh Library System Digital Collections, students read excerpts from Hongci Xu, *No Wall Too High: One Man's Daring Escape from Mao's Darkest Prison*, trans. and ed. Erling Hoh (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017); Xinran, *The Good Women of China: Hidden Voices* (Chatto & Windus, 2002), as well as Naihua Zhang, "In a World Together Yet Apart: Urban and Rural Women Coming of Age in the Seventies," in *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing up in the Mao Era*, ed. Xueping

Zhong, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di (Rutgers University Press, 2001), 1–27.

[6] Students read Richard Curt Kraus, *The Cultural Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2012), Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder, “The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History: An Introduction,” in *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History*, ed. Esherick, Pickowicz, and Walder (Stanford University Press, 2006), 1–28; an article or book chapter of their own choice related to their interests; plus the introduction, afterword, and their choice of one additional chapter from Daniel Leese and Amanda Shuman, eds., *Justice after Mao: The Politics of Historical Truth in the People’s Republic of China* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[7] “SFU History Cultural Revolution Project,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:School_and_university_projects/SFU_History_Cultural_Revolution_Project.