Annotated Asian Studies essay

Contents

1. Annotated example of an Asian Studies Essay.
2. Guidelines about essay writing, with examples from the Asian Studies Essay.

Annotation key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tentative claims</th>
<th>Strong claims</th>
<th>Transition signals</th>
<th>Specialised vocabulary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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In what ways are Chinese lives better now than during the Mao period (1949-1978)? In what ways are they more difficult? Justify your argument with specific examples from the academic literature.

Chinese lives have changed dramatically since the Mao period. While the rapid changes have improved life for Chinese people, the benefits have not been equally distributed, and old challenges have been replaced with new ones. Characteristics valued for a ‘quality life’ include wealth, good nutrition, available health care, quality education, job security, freedom of job choice, and opportunities for entertainment and shopping. This essay will discuss the benefits and challenges of changes to Chinese poverty, nutrition, economic equality, education, healthcare, the iron rice bowl,¹ leisure and consumption.

¹ Secure state jobs

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Peasants in Mao’s era experienced extreme poverty, which is much less prevalent today. The proportion of the rural population below the poverty line has dropped from 33 per cent in 1976 to 3.6 per cent in 2009.² Collective agriculture meant less productivity.³ The state took over trade and ended rural markets which had contributed to peasants’ incomes.⁴ Now that collective agriculture has been abolished, production has increased, and peasants also have the option of added income, because sideline enterprises and small businesses are allowed and even encouraged. The rural impoverishment in Mao’s time was ultimately unsustainable, and there was a lack of significant improvements in farmers’ living standards.⁵ Although the struggles of the poor have not been eliminated, they have decreased, and peasants’ incomes have risen greatly, especially in coastal regions.⁶ Today nutrition in China is significantly better than it was during Mao’s time. Robert Ash’s study on rural living standards reveals that, “Even... at the end of Mao’s life food consumption for most farmers remained within the

³ Ebrey, China: A Cultural, 283.
⁴ Ibid.
⁶ Ebrey, China: A Cultural, 300.
⁷ Ash, Squeezing the Peasants, 983.
Leap Forward, many people, especially peasants, “were left with less than half of what they needed to survive.”⁸ Today, improvements in nutrition have led to an increase in the average height of Chinese.⁹ From 1959-1962, over thirty million unnecessary deaths occurred due to food shortages, as well as more deaths afterwards due to long years of malnutrition.¹⁰ Life expectancy has risen from “about 41 years in 1950... to 73 years in 2006.”¹¹ This dramatic improvement in nutrition is a sign of better lives in China today.

Although the Chinese have become richer and healthier, the relative economic equality during Mao’s time has been replaced by a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Rightists suffered then, and the unemployed suffer today. Land distribution and communes during the early Mao period almost eliminated economic inequality. However, it also provided a chance for “land reform activists” to take revenge on their enemies, and thus created social inequality.¹² Landlords and rich peasants suffered greatly, losing their land and receiving punishments, sometimes as severe as execution.¹³ In addition, those descended from landlords were denied leadership positions.¹⁴ In place of this social injustice, today’s economic inequalities cause psychological problems for the poor and middle classes. China has an increasing economic gap, in which an extremely small proportion of the population own a major proportion of the wealth.¹⁵ The majority of urban salaried workers and rural labourers feel “angry” and have a sense of injustice due to high income inequality.¹⁶ Despite relative financial equality in Mao’s day, landlords and rich peasants suffered social injustice, while currently those who are less well-off suffer psychologically from the widening economic gap.

Despite overall improvements to China’s healthcare system, the dismantling of communes had negative consequences for the rural poor in the area of healthcare.

Although poorly educated, ‘barefoot doctors’ were once paid for by the communes.

⁸ Ebrey, China: A Cultural, 288.
⁹ Ibid., 299.
¹⁰ Ibid., 288; Jonathan D. Spence, The Search for Modern China (New York: Norton, 1990), 583.
¹² Ebrey, China: A Cultural, 283.
¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁶ Ibid., 224.
“Many of the free public health services provided to the rural population have disappeared, and healthcare has become largely a private fee-for-service industry.”¹⁷ Because of this, many peasants cannot afford even basic medicine or treatment, and must borrow money to pay a deposit before being admitted to hospital.¹⁸ Although in general China’s healthcare has improved, the rural poor have suffered due to unaffordability.

The communes brought education to the countryside, improving the literacy rate, but education nevertheless suffered during Mao’s time, and was not as established as it is today. During the Great Leap Forward, children were forcedly taken away from lessons in order to produce steel for ‘modernization.’¹⁹ Later, during the Cultural Revolution, schools were closed for the “revolutionary struggle,” and teachers were brutally attacked.²⁰ The government now runs a nine-year compulsory education programme.²¹ However, there is still “uneven access to education between urban and rural areas.”²² Many people struggle to find enough money to send their children to high school or university. This struggle contributes to the continued economic inequality. While education today is more accessible than during much of the Mao period, it now presents a problem to the poor, who struggle to afford education.

During the Mao period, Chinese workers experienced the stability of the iron rice bowl, whereas today workers have more freedom but less stability. Workers were assigned to jobs in state owned enterprises, where they had guaranteed life time job security and steady income, as well as health insurance, housing, pension and other benefits.²³ Private enterprises, which are very common today, are less stable and do not provide the same benefits as state owned enterprises do. However, the security and benefits of the iron rice bowl came at the expense of personal mobility and job choice, due to controls over travel and the difficulty of changing assigned jobs.²⁴

¹⁷ Shu, The Quality of Life, 194.
¹⁸ Ebrey, China: A Cultural, 302
¹⁹ Ibid., 283; Alan Lawrance, China since 1919: Revolution and Reform (London: Routledge, 2004), 170.
²⁰ Spence, The Search, 605.
²¹ Shu, The Quality of Life, 194.
*Migrant labourers are sometimes even charged 'mandatory donations' for sending their children to primary school.
²⁴ Spence, The Search, 547.
Because jobs are no longer assigned by the state, workers have greater flexibility and choice in employment, with more freedom to work in different cities.

Although unemployment was dealt with in Mao’s time, there were major difficulties for rightists, while today the unemployed struggle. Millions who disagreed with government policy, or were simply labelled as such, had no influence at their jobs, or were sent to hard labour in the countryside.²⁵ China’s rapid shift towards private enterprise has brought about many new challenges, not for rightists, but for both rural and urban workers. These challenges include the stress of job-searching and unemployment, which can reduce mental health, and lead to dissatisfaction and a lost sense of security.²⁶ While many workers experience more freedom today, employment difficulties have shifted from the rightists to the unemployed, who suffer from instability and frustration.

Leisure in Mao’s time was limited and tightly controlled, especially during the Cultural Revolution, but today’s entertainment opportunities are abundant. With highly structured, long working hours in Mao’s time, people had little time to experience entertainment.²⁷ Today, people have more time for leisure, due to the promotion of two-day weekends, and longer national holidays.²⁸ In Mao’s day, meals took place in public mess halls, and tea houses were destroyed, whereas today many people have the freedom to eat at home, buy street food, or dine in any kind of restaurant at their leisure.²⁹ Books and artwork were put to flame, and “foreign music, art, literature, and books … disappeared from stores,” replaced only with revolutionary works such as Jiang Qing’s model operas and the works of Communist leaders.³⁰ While some creative leisure continued underground, it was limited and punishable. Today, all kinds of foreign and local news, writing, music and artwork are available in stores or at the click of a button. Shopping in malls and browsing online stores is now prevalent as a form of entertainment. Restaurant dining, theme parks,

²⁵ Ebrey, China: A Cultural, 287.
*The older unemployed find this stress particularly challenging, as “all [they] wanted was an iron rice bowl.” Price, “Beyond the Iron Rice Bowl.” 113.
²⁸ Ibid, 414.
²⁹ Lawrance, China Since 1919, 162.
and travel holidays have become affordable for many Chinese, not just the wealthy in urban areas, although some leisure activities are far beyond the reach of most Chinese.³¹

Consumer goods were greatly limited throughout Mao’s time, whereas a variety of consumer goods from necessary to luxury are widely available today. In Mao’s time, spending focussed on essentials, such as food (over two-thirds of total spending), clothing and fuel, with minimal amounts left to “purchase other items.”³² Necessities such as rice, flour and oil, were “rationed and distributed by the state,” and other consumer goods were often not available.³³ Even among middle and lower class Chinese, an extensive range of consumption has now become common place. Even consumer services, such as personal training and language classes abound today.³⁴ This increase in options for consumer is a great improvement for Chinese consumers, who now have more freedom.

However, the open availability of luxury consumer goods has also brought problems for those who see luxury, but cannot afford it. In Mao’s era, some officials could buy items not available to the common people, but this was only

³² Ash, Squeezing the Peasants, 990.
³⁴ Ibid., 414.
done in secret stores.³⁵ Today 'luxury spending’ on items such as expensive cars, villas, and designer clothing is not only widely available, but openly observed by all citizens through the media.³⁶ Since urban residents are exposed to wealth and “commercial advertising, they tend to be more negative in their ... evaluations of life quality,” and less satisfied.³⁷ While even luxury consumption is more accessible today, it also brings dissatisfaction for those who cannot afford luxury items, especially urban residents.

China has a dramatically lower poverty and malnutrition rate than during Mao’s day. Though quite poor, people once experienced better economic equality. Despite improvement in wealth, today’s widening economic gap has brought a sense of injustice for the poor. Although healthcare has improved, it is no longer provided by the government for free, so it presents great difficulties for those who cannot afford basic medicine or hospital treatment. Education is more predominant today, but the poor struggle to afford education for their children, which increases economic inequality. People have more freedom of job choice than in the Mao period, but instability is a challenge, especially for the unemployed. New forms of leisure and consumption

³⁵ Ebrey, China: A Cultural, 287.
³⁷ Shu, The Quality of Life, 219-220.
provide pleasure for all Chinese, but a negative result is dissatisfaction, especially for urban residents who cannot afford the signs of wealth they see around them. Overall, today Chinese people experience a better quality life than in Mao’s time, especially those in coastal cities, but old problems have been replaced with challenges resulting from instability, inequality and insufficient finances, especially for the rural poor and the unemployed, but even for urban residents.

Word count: 1,642
Essay writing

The above text is an excellent example of an academic essay. This particular essay was written for an Asian Studies course assignment and achieved a high grade because careful consideration was given to the following:

Structure and coherence

As this example illustrates, essays must be well-structured and coherent so that each idea clearly links to the one that precedes it and the one that follows. Essays normally have the following sections: introductory paragraph, body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. The introductory paragraph provides the context, introduces the topic, and defines the thesis (point of view). The body paragraphs give the writer the opportunity to address each subtopic in turn. The concluding paragraph provides the opportunity for the writer to signal that this is the end of the essay, sum up the argument, and restate the thesis.

Within the broad structure of an essay, it is important to develop a coherent argument that clearly links one idea to another. This can be done in a number of ways:

Signposting

One way to develop a coherent argument is through "signposting", through which the writer signals to the reader what is coming next in the essay or how the essay is being organised as a whole. For example, the writer clearly signals the overall essay organisation in the introductory paragraph:

This essay will discuss the benefits and challenges of changes to Chinese poverty, nutrition, economic equality, education, healthcare, the iron rice bowl,¹ leisure and consumption.

Through this sentence, it is possible to see the subtopics that will be addressed in the essay in the order in which they appear (with the exception of education and healthcare, which are addressed in the reverse order).

Transition signals

Coherence can also be achieved through the use of "transition signals" or "connecting words" that smooth the transition from one idea to another and provide logical links between sentences. Such transitional signals include these adverbs: however, while, whereas, and although; e.g.,

Despite improvement in wealth, today’s widening economic gap has brought a sense of injustice for the poor. Although healthcare has improved ...

An additional way to signal transition is to use a pronoun such as “it”, “this” or "these". If using a pronoun, however, check that the meaning is clear as in the following example where the pronoun "it" is used in the second half of a sentence and clearly represents "healthcare“:

Although healthcare has improved, it is no longer provided by the government for free, so it presents great difficulties for those who cannot afford basic medicine or hospital treatment.

Otherwise, if the meaning of the pronoun is not clear, it is preferable to repeat the noun or use a synonym or a noun phrase, as shown in this example:

China’s rapid shift towards private enterprise has brought about many new challenges, not for rightists, but for both rural and urban workers. These challenges include the stress of job-searching and unemployment, which can reduce mental health, and lead to dissatisfaction and a lost sense of security.²
Clear expression of the writer’s opinion or “voice”

The writer’s “voice” or opinion is clearly expressed in this essay even though the essay is written in the third person. Indeed, as this essay shows, it is not necessary to use “I” to make your opinion clear. Rather it is possible to express your views by using words that express certainty (thus making a strong claim) or uncertainty (thus making a weak or tentative claim).

Strong claims are made by using adverbs that have a strong meaning (e.g., dramatically, extremely). These adverbs along with their adjective counterparts (i.e., dramatic, extreme) are sometimes referred to as “boosters” or “intensifiers”. As the following example shows, when making such a claim in the essay, the writer provides evidence for the claim she makes:

Today nutrition in China is significantly better than it was during Mao’s time. Robert Ash’s study on rural living standards reveals that, “Even... at the end of Mao’s life food consumption for most farmers remained within the subsistence range.”⁷

Weak or tentative claims can be made by using “hedging” devices such as “perhaps”, “may” and “tends”. Hedging is a way that writers can express uncertainty, avoid drawing unjustified conclusions and acknowledge that they are not experts; e.g.,

Since urban residents are exposed to wealth and “commercial advertising, they tend to be more negative in their ... evaluations of life quality,” and less satisfied.

Careful attention to verb forms

Writing an excellent essay requires the writer to give careful consideration to tense (present, past), aspect (simple, perfect, progressive), voice (active and passive) and use of modals (e.g., might, could). Each of these serve a variety of functions in academic essays. Indeed, the writer can switch between different verb forms even within or between sentences for specific purposes. Verb forms used in the essay include the simple present and simple past, present perfect, past perfect, modal verbs, and passive voice. A brief overview of the reasons why different verb forms are used is given below.

Tense

The most frequently used tense in this essay is the present tense. The present simple is used for:

(1) describing something of current relevance; e.g.,

Today nutrition in China is significantly better ...

(2) referring to generally accepted ideas e.g.,

China has a dramatically lower poverty and malnutrition rate than during Mao’s day.

The past simple tense is used to refer to events that have been completed in the past; e.g.,

The state took over trade, and ended rural markets ...

There are constant shifts between the tenses in this essay as the writer contrasts the past situation (landlords and rich peasants suffered social injustice) with the present (currently those who are less well-off suffer psychologically):

Despite relative financial equality in Mao’s day, landlords and rich peasants suffered social injustice, while currently those who are less well-off suffer psychologically from the widening economic gap.
Aspect
The present perfect refers to an action which started in the past and is still of current relevance; e.g.,
Chinese lives have changed dramatically since the Mao period.

The past perfect refers to an action which started and finished in the past before another action took place in the past:
The state took over trade, and ended rural markets which had contributed to peasants’ incomes.⁴

Modal verbs
Modal verbs are used for a number of reasons which include:

(1) showing the intention of the writer; e.g.,
This essay will discuss the benefits and challenges of changes to Chinese poverty, nutrition, economic equality, education, healthcare, the iron rice bowl, leisure and consumption.

(2) Indicating the possibility of something happening; e.g.,
Because of this, many peasants cannot afford even basic medicine or treatment,

(3) Indicating necessity
and must borrow money to pay a deposit before being admitted to hospital.¹⁸

Although not used for this purpose in this essay, modal verbs such as “may” or “might” can also be used to make tentative claims or statements.

Voice
The active voice is often used in essay writing because it places the focus of the sentence on the doer or performer of the action (“Chinese workers”) rather than the receiver of the action (“the stability of the iron rice bowl”); e.g.,

During the Mao period, Chinese workers experienced the stability of the iron rice bowl...

The passive voice is used when the writer wants to focus on the result of the action (closed for the revolutionary struggle) rather than on who did it; e.g.,

Later, during the Cultural Revolution, schools were closed for the "revolutionary struggle,” and teachers were brutally attacked.²⁰

Sometimes, however, the actor (“the communes”) is identified in the passive:

Although poorly educated, 'barefoot doctors’ were once paid for by the communes.

Specialised vocabulary

As this example shows, an important feature of a well-written essay is that specialised vocabulary is correctly used. Indeed, as an essay for Asian Studies, this essay includes a number of subject specific terms; e.g., "Great Leap Forward", "barefoot doctors" and "iron rice bowl".

Using specialised vocabulary means that the word’s (or phrase’s) correct form is used in an appropriate collocations; that is, with words that frequently combine together; As shown in the following examples, the term ‘iron rice bowl’ can be described in terms of ‘stability’ and ‘benefits’:

During the Mao period, Chinese workers experienced the stability of the iron rice bowl...  
However, the security and benefits of the iron rice bowl came at the expense of personal mobility and job choice ...
Given the importance of correctly using specialised vocabulary, you may find it useful to build a glossary with these words and focus on learning their meaning, the words they frequently collocate with, and their various forms.

**Referencing style**

Also of importance is the need to pay special attention to referencing and to ensure that you consistently follow the referencing style of your discipline. In this essay, the Chicago referencing style is used. Numbered superscript figures are used within the text to refer to the full reference; e.g.,

> Necessities such as rice, flour and oil, were "rationed and distributed by the state," and other consumer goods were often not available.³³

The full reference is given on the same page below the text in the footnotes; e.g.,

³³ Latham, "Consumption and Leisure." 412.