

## Teaching Queer Sinophone Cultures Transnationally

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The publication of Shu-mei Shih's 2007 book *Visuality and Identity* inaugurated the field of Sinophone studies. The Sinophone refers to "a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries." Shih powerfully challenges the methodological assumption in area studies that has traditionally privileged the centrality of the People's Republic of China as an object of study. Conceptually, "Sinophone studies disrupts the chain of equivalence established, since the rise of nation-states, among language, culture, ethnicity, and nationality" in the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, where Mandarin (or *guoyu* in Taiwan) as written and spoken language buttresses Han-centrism of various kinds. In cases where Sinitic-language communities and cultures occupy the cultural margins, Sinophone Malaysians, Koreans, Australians, and Chinese-Americans often remain "the foreigners within" in their place of birth due to internal ethno-nationalism and racism. Furthermore, they are often expected to speak Chinese when traveling or residing abroad, especially in Europe and North America where enduring Orientalism and racism conflate all Sinophone subjects under the hegemonic sign of "Chinese." This linguistic and ontological burden of "Chineseness" marks a condition of what Ien Ang termed "not speaking Chinese." Given the burden placed on Sinophone subjects across the world to attach to the mythic homeland of China and gravitate toward the political call of Sinocentrism, Sinophone studies thus alternatively provides a flexible and deconstructive position to disidentify from Chineseness through sometimes explicitly resistant measures and at times *non-relational* tactic. It is this materialist and deconstructive approach that connects Sinophone studies with queer theory, as both academic knowledge formations challenge essentialist assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, and nationalism.

The recent emergence of queer Sinophone studies can be attributed to the 2013 volume *Queer Sinophone Cultures* coedited by Ari L. Heinrich and Howard Chiang. In particular, Chiang demonstrates that "the notion of queer Sinophonicity suggests that both Chineseness and queerness find their most meaningful articulations *in and through* one another. When brought together, the Sinophone and the queer promise to denaturalize each other continuously." My reflective essay here is informed by my experiences of teaching queer Sinophone literature, film, and media in diverse transnational locales in Los Angeles, Seoul, and Hong Kong and at both public and private institutions. I argue that the coevalness of the Sinophone with the queer as well as their mutual denaturalization can be brought out most clearly in how both terms signify and re-signify continuously across different transnational spaces. In turn, my students in these various transnational locations who enrolled in courses on gender and sexuality in modern Chinese literature and film, Sinophone literature, transnational feminism, and Hong Kong literature and culture offered provocative insights on Chineseness, racialization, and feminist and queer politics. I provide some vignettes here to demonstrate how these pedagogical experiments continue to impact my scholarship and teaching.

When I taught a course called "Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese Literature and Film" in Fall 2012 at UCLA as a postdoctoral fellow, my ambition was to guide my students

through the canonical literary texts and visual cultures of Republican China leading up to the contemporary moment. As a queer and feminist scholar deeply committed to the critiques of heteronormativity, patriarchy, and racism, I find it impossible to question the categories of sex and gender without calling into question the symbolic and geographical boundary of “China.” That suspicious impulse led me to “include” more literary, cultural, and scholarly texts from Hong Kong and Taiwan that challenge what counts as “Chinese” while exemplifying the global reach of queer and feminist Sinophone cultural expressions. One handy queer Sinophone text is Chu T’ien-wen’s 1994 classic novel *Notes of a Desolate Man* (荒人手記). The novel narrates the loving memory of Ah Yao, the childhood friend of Shao who died of AIDS, while Shao confronts his own aging queer body as the 20<sup>th</sup> century draws to an end.

The Millennial affect of the novel, Shao’s obsession with anti-aging beauty regimens, and Shao’s remembrance of Ah Yao’s participation in queer activism in North America all point to the global reach of postmodernism as a literary aesthetic as well as Taiwan’s place as the pioneer of Sinophone sexual modernity in the post-Cold War era of American exceptionalism and queer liberalism. The fact that we are reading this novel at UCLA near the mecca of queer modernity, the district of West Hollywood, demonstrates the importance of Los Angeles and Taipei as transnational and relational sites that generate discrepant queer knowledge and modernity. As we immersed in the textual reference to AIDS, aging, and mortality, our class also reflected on how the narration of Ah Yao’s death in fact resonates with queer visibility and narratives of AIDS mourning from Los Angeles, especially *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (1993, dir. Tom Joslin). Reframing Chu’s *Notes of a Desolate Man* as not simply a classic of queer Sinophone literature but one that is constitutive of the global culture of AIDS and its afterlife suggests that the spatial and temporal assumption of any given Sinophone text must be queered again and again.

My subsequent position took me to South Korea. When I arrived in Seoul in the Fall of 2014, I found that I was in fact one of the only three faculty members at Underwood International College (UIC) of Yonsei University who specialize in “China.” The other two colleagues work on modern Chinese history and international relation and the history of ancient China. My identity as the only faculty member who works on modern Chinese literature and film at UIC, not to mention Sinophone studies and queer theory, certainly put me in an interesting position. Reflecting on my four years of teaching at an English-speaking international campus (UIC) at Yonsei University, itself an elite private research university in South Korea, I realize that I have always tried my best to critically balance the institutional demand to offer courses on modern China while testing the waters with my students on the Sinophone, who by and large hold very progressive outlook on such issues as the rise of China, Hong Kong, and queer and feminist politics. It is worth mentioning that South Korea is often caught between the international conflicts of US-China relation. In classes on modern Chinese literature, Sinophone literature, and Hong Kong cinema, I have time and again turned to such texts as *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (甜蜜蜜, 1996, dir. Peter Chan), “Losing the City” (失城) by Wong Bik-wan, and Wong Kar-wai’s 1997 film *Happy Together* (春光乍洩). All three texts in one way or another thematize the ever-shifting transnational and existential dilemma of Sinophone Hong Kong subjects. These are all widely taught materials in courses on Chinese cinema and Hong Kong culture, so I will skip over lengthy plot summaries here. In *Comrades*, the migration of Mainland Chinese subjects Li Qiao (played by Maggie Cheung) and Xiao Jun (played by Leon Lai) to Hong Kong and their eventual transformations into “Chinese-American” subjects demonstrate the ever-morphing signifier of “Chineseness.” Namely, the film shows how both Chineseness and Hong Kong-ness must be re-signified within each transnational location of Tianjin, Guangdong, Hong Kong, and New York City. In all three texts

by Peter Chan, Wong Bik-wan, and Wong Kar-wai, the Hong Kong-ness and Chineseness of the main protagonists continually come into tension as these stories emphasize transnational modes of flexible citizenship, belonging, and even loss.

My current position as Assistant Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) brings me full circle with my intellectual and pedagogical engagements with queer Sinophone studies, Hong Kong studies, and postcolonial theory. When I arrived in the Fall of 2018, I found myself on an ever-shifting transnational position vis-à-vis Sinophone studies and the question of China and Sinocentrism. I no longer feel as much burden of wearing the professional hat of teaching modern China (as in my previous position at Yonsei University) as there are many other colleagues who offer courses in this area. I find my expertise and teaching interests in Hong Kong culture, Sinophone studies, and queer theory strongly encouraged as Comparative Literature at HKU seems to be a perfect place to carry out this kind of interdisciplinary research and teaching agenda. My students, who are mostly born and raised in Hong Kong, nonetheless come from a very diverse background. Some are new immigrants from the Mainland, some are “local” Hong Kongers, and others are South Asian minorities who grew up in Hong Kong. Their material presences in the classroom contribute local, regional, and multiracial perspectives of what Hong Kong and the Sinophone signify under the increasing threat of China-centrism in the postcolonial, post-Umbrella Movement moment of neoliberal precarity and global health crisis. Despite these formidable challenges, my students often offer insightful queer Sinophone perspectives on Hong Kong culture. For example, when I assigned Yan Yan Mak’s 2004 film *Butterfly* (蝴蝶) for my course on queer theory in Fall 2018, I emphasized how the local Hong Kong narrative of lesbian desire and the protagonist Flavia’s queer adolescent memory of her high school girlfriend Jin as a Hong Kong pro-democracy activist must be rethought through the lens of translation and what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih termed minor transnationalism. Mak’s film is itself a Sinophone adaptation of the queer Taiwan writer Chen Xue’s 1994 novella “The Mark of the Butterfly.” The film also casts the Macanese Hong Kong actress and singer Josie Ho in the leading role of Flavia, thus implicating Macao within a minor transnational network of queer Sinophone articulation between Hong Kong and Taiwan. The students loved the film but also found it to be both “local” and “foreign” at once. The queer articulation of Hong Kong-ness in a film like *Butterfly* demonstrates the pedagogical necessity of reading minor-to-minor formations of queerness and challenging even what “locality” and “local” might signify in a global city like Hong Kong.

My own transnational journeys of teaching queer Sinophone studies in Los Angeles, Seoul, and Hong Kong demonstrate that Chineseness is more a shifting signifier than an ontologically and linguistically given category attached to a fixed territory and nation-state. Queer Sinophone studies deconstructs mythic and diasporic longings and obsessions within China and Chineseness through transnational perspectives on language, ethnicity, race, class, gender, and sexuality. The field of queer Sinophone studies is still in its early inception, and my own transnational pedagogical journey might humbly showcase the far-reaching potential of the queer and the Sinophone across global geographies and temporalities.

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