

**Sinophone Studies 101:
Course Prerequisite—Curricular, Scholarly, and Translational Plenitude**

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I was sitting in my campus office one afternoon in early 2012 preparing for my next class when I received a call from the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs at my institution. I was a newly minted PhD in my first year of a highly prized tenure-track position, and my colleagues had repeatedly advised me—for the sake of my tenure profile—to not only meet all of my institution’s research and publication benchmarks as efficiently and effectively as possible, but to also cultivate friendly and collegial professional relationships with members of the university administration. For that reason, I did not push back when, on that phone call, the Associate Dean relayed the message that before approval would be granted for a new undergraduate class I had proposed, the undergraduate curriculum committee insisted that I change the course’s title from “Sinophone Literatures and Cultures” (deliberately pluralized) to “Global Chinese Literature and Culture.”

The request surprised me somewhat in that, until that moment, the committee had enthusiastically greenlit all my other course proposals. The Associate Dean assured me that the committee wholeheartedly endorsed the course content and structure. They just felt that the word *Sinophone* was too unfamiliar to most undergraduates and would likely alienate them, perhaps not drawing the type of popular interest among students that they expected as a return on their investment in hiring me. It should have been unsurprising in early 2012 that the administration was attracted to academic buzz phrases at the time like “global China,” especially since our university considered itself a preeminent Pacific Rim institution in the process of forging closer transpacific ties with universities in East Asia (especially in China) and our operating budget increasingly relied on the full tuition paid by a growing contingent of international students from mainland China. In persuading me to agree to the suggested change, the Associate Dean recounted a similar episode a few years prior when a new faculty member had proposed an undergraduate course on Lusophone literatures: “Can’t you just say Portuguese?” was the committee’s question for my unnamed yet likeminded colleague.

Perhaps this was a moment that called for assertive resistance, for me to explain why *Chinese*—although certainly a term relevant to the proposed course content—should not be centered as the all-encompassing category for the diverse cultural subjectivities explored in the class. Instead, I simply acquiesced to changing the course title to “Transnational Chinese Literature and Culture.” While understanding the position of the curriculum committee, I vowed to use this exchange as a teaching moment on the very first day of class, when I would recount the episode and explain the cultural capital and power dynamics vested in the terms we use, because the debate over naming points precisely to the critical stakes in Sinophone studies by reanimating (from an Anglophone-dominant North American institutional positioning) the reductionist ethnic, linguistic, and geopolitical connotations to which the field draws attention as part of its very mission. For a course that included texts by ethnically Paiwan and Tibetan authors; by authors from Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the United States; and by authors mixing Hakka, Cantonese, and Bunun words into their “standard Chinese” (read Mandarin) vernacular, *Sinophone* was unequivocally a descriptive reality that connected the disparate content. Yet from this experience, *Sinophone* more concretely came to embody for me a term

and perspective necessarily deployed to resist its own marginality, interloping with concepts and categories with which it overlapped but also produced friction and revealed tension. Once exposed, those frictions and tensions in the texts we studied in the course became more tangibly inter-animated by the context and position from which we were reading and interpreting them.

Introducing Sinophone studies (especially in the literature and cinema fields) in USC undergraduate courses—which are generally required to meet minimum registration quotas and expected to maximize their enrollments—typically requires the availability of literary texts in Anglophone translation or, in the case of films, the presence of Anglophone subtitles. In my experience teaching Transnational Chinese Literature and Culture (which became my “shadow” Sinophone Literatures and Cultures course), the increased awareness to translation that the term *Sinophone* compels has always prompted a robust discussion of whether what we are reading is indeed Sinophone literature, or whether our processing of onscreen dialogue via subtitles really constitutes an active or merely passive engagement with the film’s Sinophone components. I love having this conversation, as my students—with differing access to the original dialogue or the original literary texts which I also make available to those who request them—always offer incredibly insightful remarks. Our reading of the Anglophone texts and subtitles approximates with imperfect precision (or perfect imprecision) the experiences and processes of translation already at play in the original works themselves. Students measure the original against the translation, analyzing how the author, director, translator, and subtitler develop strategies to convey multilingualism, while gauging the ways in which these actors might self-exoticize (embodying otherness for an intended audience), self-translate, or claim opacity, leaving their texts only partially intelligible or inaccessible for their readers and viewers. Through this mode of engagement, the translator is not deliberately obscured as someone who should diminish their presence to virtual invisibility but rather is foregrounded in the co-creative process of textual (and self) production. To be Sinophone is, as E.K. Tan describes it so wonderfully in *Rethinking Chineseness*, to inhabit, embody, and perform the “translational.”

My 2012 afternoon phone call with the Associate Dean became a clarion call to introduce the concept of the Sinophone—and insist upon a Sinophone component or unit—not just in the proposed course but in virtually every class I would henceforth teach: it would interlope with other concepts, subjects, disciplines, and fields in courses such as Southeast Asian Literature and Film, Thai Literature and Popular Culture, China and the World, Literary and Cinematic Translingualism and Translation, and Global Chinese Cinema and Cultural Studies. If I could not get an undergraduate class called “Sinophone Literatures and Cultures” approved, I would then ensure some aspect of Sinophone literatures and cultures would be an explicit, integral unit of every class I taught. A mode of “curricular plenitude”—the introduction and repetition of diversified Sinophone content across numerous, wide-ranging course syllabi—simultaneously demonstrates the intended interdisciplinarity of the Sinophone as a concept and constitutes a prerequisite for the creation of a single course subsumed under the *Sinophone*.

In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and Asian American literature scholar Viet Nguyen describes the privilege of “narrative plenitude” that the majoritarian culture enjoys, where it can represent in its cultural production the full experiential, psychological, and historical complexity it embodies, while the marginalized and minoritized cultures are compelled to live with “narrative scarcity,” a general absence from the mainstream culture’s dominant narratives or, even worse, an appearance only in the essentialized or one-dimensional form of caricatures. When living with narrative scarcity, minoritized authors, artists, and cultural producers who venture to tell one’s own stories are often shackled by the burden of collective

representation, a recognition that they are not just telling their own stories or that of a cross-section of their families and communities but are being judged as being a stand-in for a collective. Nguyen argues that beyond telling one's own stories, what is needed is a greater stake for minority communities in the ownership of the media channels of mass dissemination, as once narrative plenitude is achieved, the burden of collective representation falls away and one can just represent oneself.

For Sinophone studies (doubly marginalized by a North American humanities paradigm with a legacy of Eurocentrism and white supremacy as well as an area studies framework that centralizes the supremacy of the nation-state model) to take hold as a bona fide area of undergraduate study in North American universities, what may first be needed is not only curricular plenitude across a range of courses (the institutional channels of pedagogical dissemination), but also scholarly and translational plenitude, by which I mean a critical mass of widely accessible scholarship in Sinophone studies and, given the requirements of the North American classroom, the availability of a diverse corpus (not simply an elite canon) of Sinophone texts in Anglophone translation that showcase the Sinophone's true historical and cultural complexity. To my delight, these movements towards curricular, scholarly, and translational plenitude are well underway. With nearly a decade passed since I first saw my Sinophone Literatures and Cultures course proposal rejected, it may be a good time to now test the waters for an updated course proposal once again.

Further Reading:

Chiang, Howard, and Alvin K. Wong. "Introduction—Queer Sinophone Studies: Interdisciplinary Synergies." In *Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies*, edited by Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong, 1-15. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2020.

Klötter, Henning, and Mårten Söderblom Saarela, eds. *Language Diversity in the Sinophone World: Historical Trajectories, Language Planning, and Multilingual Practices*. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2020.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. "Asian-Americans Need More Movies, Even Mediocre Ones." *New York Times*, August 21, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/opinion/crazy-rich-asians-movie.html>.

Shih, Shu-mei. "Introduction: What Is Sinophone Studies?" In *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, edited by Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, 1-6. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Tan, E.K. *Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2013.