

**Breaking the Narrative Arc:
Teaching Sinophone Studies as a PRC Studies Scholar**

**Emily Wilcox
College of William and Mary**

Where do the boundaries of China lie? How should we define what is Chinese? Whose voices and issues matter most for understanding the Chinese world past and present?

Every summer, when I am dreaming up new classes or revising old syllabi in preparation for the coming semester, these questions are often at the forefront of my mind. I would argue that all faculty who teach courses with the terms “China” or “Chinese” in the title should be asking these questions.

Regardless of our specialization and whether we identify with the positions advanced in the internally diverse and rapidly changing field of “Sinophone studies,” the questions and communities typically highlighted in Sinophone studies scholarship deserve our attention in the Chinese studies classroom. When students learn about China, their understanding should go beyond the cultural and political contributions of Han communities on the Chinese mainland. To comprehend the breadth and complexity of Chinese experience and to appreciate the full impact of China in the world past and present requires considering the communities foregrounded in Sinophone studies. This includes non-Han people in China, as well as people of Chinese descent in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere around the world.

The reason we should include these subjects in our courses is simple: throughout history, these communities have been constitutive creators of the diverse places and cultures we now identify as “Chinese.” Whether thinking of how Central Asian peoples contributed to medieval Chinese literature and performance, how the Yuan and Qing conquests transformed China’s economic and social history, or the roles of overseas Chinese and people in Hong Kong and Taiwan in modern Chinese nation-building, the importance of Sinophone contributions is clear. What are often called ethnic minority and diasporic communities have been deeply intertwined in the Chinese cultural imagination and participate directly in the formation of Chinese social, cultural, economic, and political life. Teaching about China in a way that neglects these presences and contributions flattens and distorts the realities of the Chinese world. It does a disservice to our students not only by depriving them of a full picture of Chinese life but by hindering their ability to draw connections and comparisons across a more diverse range of experiences.

Like many Chinese studies faculty, I did not always embrace the Sinophone in my courses. In one of my first teaching assignments, a course titled Modern Chinese Drama, I inherited a syllabus that was typical of many courses in modern Chinese studies. Organized chronologically, it offered a survey of plays primarily by mainland Han authors from the May Fourth Era to the 1980s. Apart from Lao She, the main exception was David Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, which came on the final day. Examining themes such as gender, class, and social change, the course used drama as a lens to map the historical trajectory of Chinese revolutionary and post-revolutionary culture in the twentieth century. At the time, I had few concerns about this course design. In fact, the two other courses I taught that same year—Chinese Popular Culture and China’s Socialisms—were similar to this one in structure. I liked how this design allowed for a single, linear narrative arc to unfold over the course of the semester, and I liked

how it divided conveniently into units based on period and theme. Moreover, as a scholar of PRC studies, I found the design aligned closely with my own research, allowing me to teach issues and material I already knew and enjoyed within the modern Chinese studies scholarship.

A week or so before the semester began, a colleague requested that I set aside one week in my course to teach on modern theater in Taiwan. She told me not to worry about the content, because she had received a grant that would pay for a guest instructor to teach those classes. Not wanting to challenge this request from a senior faculty (I was an adjunct at the time and still completing my PhD), I agreed to the request, though not very enthusiastically. I remember thinking begrudgingly about what I would have to remove to make way for this new content (*M. Butterfly* was the first to go). I also remember wondering where to put this “week on Taiwan” in the syllabus. No matter where it went, I thought, it would disrupt the narrative arc and generate incoherence with its alternative timelines. I ended up placing the Taiwan week between Xia Yen’s *Under Shanghai Eaves* (1937) and Lao She’s *Tea House* (1958). The only place Taiwan “made sense” in the modern China chronology, I decided, was during the Civil War.

When we came to the Taiwan week, the visiting professor, Dominique Liao from the Institute of Taiwan and Cross-Cultural Studies in Taichung, assigned chapters from Chung Mingder’s dissertation “The Little Theatre Movement of Taiwan (1980-1989)” and gave two fascinating lectures on avant-garde theater at the end of Taiwan’s Martial Law era. As it turned out, the little theater movement in Taiwan fit quite well into the larger themes of the course. Aesthetic experimentation, activist performance, censorship, and underground theater were all themes we had either already discussed or would be discussing in the course. Despite being out of sequence chronologically, the Taiwan week did not disrupt the flow or lead to incoherence. Rather, it provided an exciting additional context that showed the broader relevance of many of the course themes within a broader Chinese-speaking world. Students in the class who had family connections to Taiwan became activated during this week in ways they had not during other parts of the course. I personally found the material gripping and wanted to learn more.

This positive experience convinced me to experiment further with incorporating Sinophone material into later courses. In my Modern Chinese Literature course, I added readings on Taiwan and Inner Mongolia. In my East Asian Cultures Through Film course, I started with a unit on immigration and Asian American actors in Hollywood. In a course on Global Chinese Cities, I included Tang-era Chang’an, highlighting the Central Asian presence and cosmopolitan culture, and placed Hong Kong and Shanghai side-by-side as divergent but interconnected models of China’s colonial modernity. In a class on Controversies in Contemporary China, I added units on bilingual education and ethnic relations in Xinjiang, which in turn were connected to other course topics, including Internet equity, domestic migration, and natural resources.

One of the courses I now teach regularly is a class called Contemporary Chinese Performance Culture, and the Sinophone has from the beginning been an integral component. We start with the 2008 Olympic Opening Ceremonies as the first case study, thinking about how the concept of “China” as a modern nation-state has itself been constructed in the context of highly globalized performance interactions. We then move on to popular music with Taiwan superstar Jay Chou as the second case study, thinking about how performance culture creates flows and networks across different parts of the transnational Sinosphere. The third unit examines ethnic minority dance with a focus on Yunnanese Bai dancer Yang Liping’s *Dynamic Yunnan*, thinking about how ethnic diversity is a key component of modern China’s national performance culture, as well as an integral part of domestic and international flows through tourism. Finally, the class ends with two forms of intercultural theater—Meng Jinghui’s

European avant-garde-inspired experiments with ironic and humorous urban youth culture, and Huizhu Sun and Faye Chunfang Fei's adaptations of early twentieth-century social problem plays by Ibsen and Strindberg into all-female Yue opera. Among the five case studies, two are explicitly Sinophone (Jay Chou and Yang Liping), while all five engage critically with the concept of what is "China" and "Chinese" through diverse modes of transcultural performance and reception. This course completely abandons the structure of historical chronology. Yet, it offers, I feel, something equally important: a genuine engagement with the diversity and dynamism of Chinese culture, by presenting it as essentially transnational, internally diverse, and highly intercultural.

Last spring, I launched my largest Sinophone studies teaching experiment to date—a graduate seminar called Sinophone Studies: Borderlands and Border Crossings in the Chinese World. I created the course to complement my other main graduate seminar, Rethinking China After 1949: New Approaches to PRC Cultural Studies. The Sinophone Studies course began with *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* edited by Shu-mei Shih, Brian Bernards, and Chien-hsin Tsai and ended with Ge Zhaoguang's *What is China? Territory, Ethnicity, Culture, and History*, translated by Michael Gibbs Hill. Over the course of the semester, we discussed work by Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo, Xiaoyuan Liu, Sanping Chen, Wen-chin Ouyang, Uradyn Bulag, Christopher Peacock, Thomas S. Mullaney, Emily Wilcox, Yizhuang Ding and Mark Elliott, Alison Groppe, Shelly Chan, Evan N. Dawley, Eloise Wright, Justin Jacobs, and Jing Jing Chang. The goal was not to give a comprehensive overview of the field of Sinophone studies, but rather to take seriously the questions and challenges posed by Sinophone Studies as a starting point for future thought. As I state in the course description, "the course seeks to investigate and reconsider what Sinophone studies is and could be, including the many ways in which it might inform and enrich the broader field of Chinese studies."

The class brought together students with a range of interests, including Taiwanese popular religion, Hong Kong cinema, May Fourth language reform, PRC sound culture, early Chinese thought, medieval Chinese phonetics, Cantopop, modern Japanese literature, and contemporary PRC politics. About half of the students grew up in mainland China, one in Taiwan, one in South Korea, one in Singapore, and two in the US. Among this diverse group, the inquiries of Sinophone studies sparked extremely rich and challenging conversations. Although I worried the topics might be divisive, they in fact drew people together, because they created the opportunity for exchanges that had not happened in other classes or settings. I believe everyone left the class with more complex reflections on China and the Chinese world than they had gone in with. Even more importantly, I think everyone took away broader and more creative ways of thinking about how to undertake research and conceive of their subjects of study. By breaking down standard operations in the way we understand what it means to do Chinese studies, Sinophone studies opened up for them novel methodological pathways and possibilities for new research. It modeled a spirit of critical inquiry and challenging boundaries that the students found inspiring. In this way, teaching Sinophone studies benefits their work and, in the end, the field as a whole.

For links to the complete syllabi of all courses discussed here, visit:

<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/ewilcox/teaching/>