

**Institutional Commitments, Sinophone Disruptions:
Notes on Teaching the Sinophone in the South of Taiwan**

Mark McConaghy
National Sun Yat-sen University, Department of Chinese Literature

The Taiwanese classroom in 2020 is a profoundly Sinophone space. Take, for example, a seminar I taught last year entitled “Topics in the Global Chinese Humanities” (全球華文專題), which featured eight students in all. My oldest “student” was a retired professor who was born in Beijing before the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Taiwan is one of the most rapidly aging societies in the world, and in recent years universities have become spaces retirees return to after careers in other fields. The class also featured a civil-servant in his mid-50s from neighboring Pingdong county, whose native spoken language is southern Taiwanese Minnan. This student was working to increase cultural programming that raises awareness of the complex local history of the island’s southernmost county. There were also two students from Mainland China- one from Zhejiang province whose spoke the Wu dialect fluently and the other from far northern Heilongjiang who was conversant only in Mandarin. The class also featured four students in their twenties from Taiwan, whose native-places range across the island, and were themselves defined by a diverse set of professional occupations and intellectual orientations.

Our given task in the class was to understand the debates that were currently defining academic discourse in the humanities across the Sinophone world, and no topic was more complicated for us than articulating Taiwan’s modern history and contemporary condition. For example, one member of our class insisted that Taiwan was part of the larger cultural, social, and political category known as China (中華), and that in fact its long history as a “non-Communist” refuge for intellectuals, writers, and students meant that “Chinese culture” (中華文化) was truly valued on the island, to the point that it should be understood as the protector of a “legitimate and unified” (正統) China, far more so than the regime across the straits. Other students claimed that such a discourse made no sense, and that the Taiwanese people (台灣人) should be understood as a distinct social community, one who had created their own creolized island culture through hundreds of years of immigration and intermixing, a community that as one student put it had “nothing to do with Beijing, and not for a long time.” For my younger students from the Mainland, raised within a pedagogic environment governed by the Communist Party of China (CCP), the very notion of the Formosan island as a distinct nation- whether understood in terms of the Republic of China (中華民國) or Taiwan (台灣)- was impossible to accept.

This is the *differential terrain* of the contemporary Taiwanese classroom, whose heterogeneity is such that it comes to be defined by a most curious conceptual phenomenon: a lack of consensus on the very language one should use to describe the physical space one’s own body is situated within. Any choice of one given term over another is seen to index a political position regarding Taiwan’s undefined status. There is no neutral space, only double binds at every turn. Real material stress is laced through these ideological fault lines: at a time when higher education has been turned by maximal capitalism into a profit-orientated enterprise,

enrollment numbers in the humanities in Taiwan are facing an unprecedented crisis. Regardless of whether we can agree on how to teach the Chinese humanities, a critical question is: are students willing to listen? Taiwanese educators are faced daily with the disempowering image of hollowed-out lecture halls and rows of empty chairs.

The tensions that course through my classroom are echoed within my department's larger overall pedagogic orientation: the Department of Chinese Literature was originally one of the founding departments of the University (est. 1980), designed to be a harbinger of orthodox Chinese culture with a focus on the commemorative teaching of the Chinese classics. The twelve compulsory courses required to receive an undergraduate major are firmly grounded in the national studies (國學) tradition, with a distinct pre-modern focus. There are, however, more recently added elective courses in a pedagogic stream called *Taiwanese Culture*, which makes a notable attempt at engaging in more local narratives and materials. Like Taiwanese education as a whole, the department now situates itself between a largely humanistic claim regarding the value of "traditional" Chinese culture in the modern world, balanced against an island-centered historical vision that seeks to foreground Taiwan in linguistic and epistemological terms. Such a dual position is articulated in the five "Educational Goals" (教育目標) our department has, all of which can be found listed on our departmental website. The second of these goals is "the development of a broadly encompassing mode of thought" (宏觀思維), one that seeks to inherit and sustain "the excellent tradition of Chinese learning that integrates literature, history, and philosophy" (熔文史哲於一爐乃中國學人之優良傳統). Yet goal four gestures (in however subdued a fashion) to a more locally grounded sensibility: we also seek to "develop an international vision that remains grounded in Taiwan" (培養立足台灣的國際視野), a goal which is motivated by the belief that while students "enthusiastically develop an international perspective, they cannot forget their foundation" (學生積極拓展國際視野之餘，必不可忘本), and as such they should "participate in international undertakings with an attitude that maintains their roots" (應以「有根的」態度參與國際事務). What this foundation is, and where these roots lay, remains undefined in our public pronouncements.

[Insert figure 1 here]

Within such institutionnel dynamics, tensions abound: celebrations of an enduring Sino-tradition not only risks imparting essentialist notions of Chineseness onto students, but the curriculum's distinct pre-modern focus ignores the critical historical disjunctures (1895, 1911, 1919, 1949) that forced Chinese intellectuals to re-evaluate said tradition in light of China's violent integration into the modern world system of capitalist imperialism. A more particular focus on Taiwanese culture and literature remain open to the accusation of dovetailing with the Taiwanese nationalism of the recently re-elected DPP government, raising concomitant fears the department is participating in the "de-Sinicization" (去中國化) of the island, an ironic claim given the rigorous Sinological grounding of most course offerings. Still there are a whole areas of social and literary history- particularly the socialist movements that exhibited such propulsive force on the Chinese Mainland and Taiwan during the 20th century— that are largely absent from the curricula. This socialist amnesia is a consequence of the ideological legacy of the martial law period, where the repression of Marxist critique was institutionalized in Taiwanese schools, with profound consequences for education on the island as a whole. Between the

ideological towers that are Blue and Green discourses, materialist critique drops out of sight. Other plural forms of experience- Sinophone queer literature, Sinophone aboriginal literature, Sinophone writings in the Americas and beyond- are equally absent.

Within this ideological environment, the Sinophone as both organizing rubric and pedagogic method is of tremendous importance, providing the possibility for a qualitative expansion in the department's curricular landscape, and an epistemic lever to critically interrogate the double-binds that currently roil our thinking. In terms of curricula programming, a department that is organized around the notion of Sinophone language cultural production (華語語系的文化生產) rather than contested national ethnic signifiers (中國/台灣) would open curricula offerings up to diverse literary traditions across Sinitic heartlands and borderlands, including the Sinitic-Americas, Southeast Asia, and ethnic minority communities in the Mainland and Taiwan. The Sinophone as organizing concept enables educators to maintain what is of value in Sinological education- deep training in the diverse traditions of both classical and vernacular Chinese writing, close-reading of culturally formative texts, a textured intimacy with pre-modern philosophic and figurative language, a sense of historical narrative and allusion- while working to link such material with the modern historical transformations that have roiled Sinitic-peoples around the world over the last 150 years, including socialist revolution, the struggle for gendered and sexual equality, global imperial war, colonization and de-colonization, routes, roots, and the complexities of diasporic life.

A class taught within a Sinophone framework on the noted colonial-era Taiwanese intellectual Lian Heng (連橫), for example, could productively analyze both his commitment to China as cultural enterprise (Lian Heng was deeply steeped in Sinological learning) as well as his passion for the social and linguistic history of the Taiwanese island (including his own attempts at building an orthography for Taiwanese Minnan). A Sinophone framework would work to forestall Lien Heng from being appropriated as either a reified symbol of Chinese or Taiwanese nationalism. Rather, his work can become a platform through which one can trace such topics as the modern fate of *Kaozheng* studies at the margins of the disintegrated Qing empire; modern ethnographic knowledge production in colonial Taiwan; the history of modern orthography throughout the Sinosphere; and the emergence of a multi-layered historical consciousness on the island itself, which is expressed in such works as Lien Heng's *Elegant Words* (雅言, 1932), where Taiwan emerges not as a binarial zone of essentialist belonging, but as an ethnically diverse and linguistically plural space. Such a position was productively articulated by Lien Heng himself when, at the height of the fractious debate that broke out in the early 1930s regarding whether or not Taiwanese writers should construct a Minnan orthography as the basis for modern literature on the island, he insisted on pluralism as the ground for modern Taiwanese education, arguing that young Taiwanese had to engage with regionally powerful writing systems (Japanese, the Chinese Mandarin vernacular, and European languages) as conduits of modern knowledge, while also being vigilant in protecting local languages. The minor and the major are mutually imbricated here, with all the concomitant pleasures and pains that such a translingual position entails.

This Sinophonic emphasis on the difficult imbrications of the minor within the major should be an epistemic fulcrum that structures course offerings- which means not just *highlighting* the multi-lingual, scripturally-complex nature of the Sinosphere itself, but also emphasizing the presence of female, indigenous, and queer authors within pre-modern and

modern Chinese tradition. Educators can focus on the strategies by which such writers challenged, in and outside of their creative works, the patriarchal, Han-centric, and heteronormative discourses that made up such traditions. Nationalist heroes should be submitted to withering examination: Lien Heng, for example, was at times notoriously blind to the Han settler-colonial rhetorics of his own depictions of the Taiwanese island, a point that should be discussed extensively in class. In terms of the particular double-bind that Taiwan currently finds itself in, caught in a seemingly perpetual battle loop between Sino-centric and Taiwan-centric pedagogies, the Sinophone emphasis on the *non-contiguous relations* that have often existed historically between linguistic expression, ethnic-identity, and national affiliation is a powerful means of de-centering the claims of both Chinese and Taiwanese nationalism, which allows us not to transcend such discourses into some putative realm of objectivity (as if a position outside of ideology and politics was possible), but rather fosters a critical rather than passive relationship to them. In-class close reading of case studies of *disjunction* (be it on the ground of class, language, gender, sexuality, political orientation, or other) with larger state and national-cultural formations are particularly valuable, and Taiwanese history offers no shortage of examples for such case studies, from Xie Xuehong to Qiu Miaojin, Chen Yingzhen to Chen Fangming, Lin Hayin to Ye Shitao.

If in the future cultural discourse on the island can come to be defined not so much by competing essentialisms, but a vision that learns to read the irreducibly plural nature of modern community formation, while also giving full voice to the real material struggles that defined class, gender, and sexual politics on the island throughout the 20th century, then we will have made some progress towards moving beyond the blue/green/red ideological whirlpool. Perhaps the Sinophone's most important contribution to pedagogy in Taiwan is to enable educators to productively hack endlessly rehashed avenues of inquiry, represented by such question as: is Taiwan part of China? Is the island culturally Chinese? How can it be culturally one thing and politically another? Because Sinophone theory takes difference to be both historically formative and cultural productive, the binarial, disciplining logic of such questions is disarmed at the outset.

There are, of course, great challenges to institutionalizing this pedagogical program, and they mainly revolve around the question of whether individual professors, departments chairs, and faculty administrators would be open to reforming fields of knowledge grounded in national-ethnic signifiers, replacing them with a pedagogy geared towards linguistic articulations analyzed across differing spatial-temporal units. While a slew of workshops and conferences have popularized the concept of the Sinophone in Taiwan in recent years, there is marked difference between putting on academic events and building entire departments grounded in Sinophone studies as a field. This gets down to the nitty-gritty of curricula planning and approval, an exceedingly bureaucratic and hierarchical process in Taiwan, one in which roadblocks can emerge at every level of the university's four-tiered system of institutional review.

One means of opening up conversations around the Sinophone with colleagues whose pedagogical moorings are insistently national in nature is to remind them that a Sinophone approach enables a broader and more encompassing vision of *Sino/Hua* (華) to emerge from our course offerings, one that links the long Sinological tradition as it developed in Mainland China to overseas communities around the world, who have never stopped re-imagining what *Hua* means, and whose modern struggles against racial, economic, and political injustice deserve a place within our pedagogical programs. Insisting on this enabling dimension of the Sinophone

may help one convince colleagues that there are other avenues of pedagogy available than a commitment to national-ethnic essence. Indeed the island of Taiwan, with its illustrious modern Sinological institutions of learning, along with its storied history of popular democratic resistance to hegemonies near and far, seems a particularly productive space to foster Sinophone Studies as the field enters its second decade. To those who would insist upon ethnic-essentialist fantasy, one can only rebut: deconstruction is also a form of reconstruction; plurality is amplification, not attenuation.

Further Reading:

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