

Teaching Sinophone Literature and Film in the U.K. and Hong Kong

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As a modern Chinese literature and culture scholar who teach and research primarily on non-PRC literary works, I find the Sinophone approach relevant and useful to my course design in general. No matter whether one lines up with Shu-mei Shih's postcolonial imperative or David Der-wei Wang's loyalist-focused take, the Sinophone framework is effective in shying away from China-centrism and ensuring the multiple manifestations of Chinese culture and identity. In the U.K. where I taught for five years (January 2007 to December 2011), due to the existing area studies disciplinary division, Sinophone framework is not always highlighted in the curriculum of 20th-century Chinese literature and culture. The courses that are offered in the Chinese section of the Department of East Asian Studies, such as the University of Cambridge and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), are usually titled conventionally as modern Chinese literature, although non-PRC works are included and faculty members' research is not limited to PRC texts. However, under the big umbrella of "Chinese literature" in a broad sense, literary works from China proper, especially by those canonical writers from the May Fourth period, remain dominant.

In a typical ten-week course at SOAS, if non-PRC literary works (such as short stories from Hong Kong and Taiwan) are taught, they are usually unjustifiably squeezed into 1 or 2 weeks. Alternatively, non-PRC literary works are taught in a separate course, such as in a special Chinese reading course. In this sort of special case aiming to enhance students' Chinese reading ability, students read the original Chinese stories. The notion of Sinophone becomes an integral part of the text selection, as one of the purposes of this course is to expose students to different, and preferably "accented", Chinese writing as much as possible. Overall, for courses taught in English, the authors included are relatively limited. Often, the selection of authors does not reflect the instructor's literary taste. Rather, it depends on whether the work has been translated into English. From my personal experience, writers such as Bai Xianyong and Zhu Tianwen are taught more often than other authors. This is likely because Bai provides a salient example of Taiwan's post-war "rootless" generation and is an adroit modernist author, and Zhu's "Fin-de-Siècle Splendour" is a stylistically distinct piece that serves an apt introduction to Taiwan's postmodern condition.

While it is practical to teach Sinophone literary texts in English translation, it remains a pity that students cannot understand the selected author's linguistic subtlety. For instance, a Chinese text from colonial Taiwan may contain Japanese, Taiwanese, and quite literary Chinese expressions, such as the case of Lai He. Yet in English translation, this hybrid style is smoothed out. While the aforementioned special reading courses redress this issue, the texts are usually chosen from the oeuvres of established and canonical authors. Lu Xun is frequently the representative of Chinese May Fourth writers, whereas Huang Chunming of Taiwan's nativist writers.

For the film courses, Sinophone framework again is not necessarily spelled out in the course title in the U. K. To emphasize the diverse cinematic histories and socio-political conditions of different Chinese-speaking sites, the course may be named as "Chinese Cinemas" (as the case of King's College, University of London). At SOAS, film courses related to Sinophone studies are usually named with catchy words such as "Chinese diaspora" or

“globalization”. A coverage of films from (at least) Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan is common, especially those by well-acclaimed and award-winning auteur directors such as Jia Zhangke, Wong Kar-wai, Ann Hui, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Tsai Ming-liang. Ang Lee also appears often in the syllabus, mainly because his films offer a good case study for the transnational circulation and reception of Chinese cinemas. The third way of offering the Sinophone-related film courses is to teach Chinese-language films within the framework of East Asian cinema. At King’s College, “New Waves in East Asian Cinema” can, for example, include Taiwanese and Hong Kong’s new waves. This “East Asian” take is also found in the film course that was offered at the University of Cambridge. Despite the different naming, the selection of films and topics covered are wide-ranged. Taiwan’s trajectory of modernity, Asian American queer culture, and Hong Kong’s 1997 identity crisis are some widely taught topics.

Different from the U.K., Sinophone framework gains a greater momentum in Hong Kong. At the University of Hong Kong where I have been based since 2012, there are a few courses on the literature from different Chinese-speaking communities, such as those on Hong Kong literature and Taiwanese literature. There are also courses that employ Sinophone as a conceptual framework as an overarching structuring theme covering various Chinese-language texts produced from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and the West. For instance, in my own course entitled “Sinophone Literature and Film”, Taiwan’s indigenous literature is taught side-by-side with minority writing from China. Gao Xingjian’s representation of the Cultural Revolution, Guo Songfen’s writing about Taiwan’s White Terror, and works about Malaysia’s colonial past and Japan-occupied years by Li Yongping and Zhang Guixing, are compared in order to highlight the similarities and differences between writers when they tackle the past political and historical experiences in their own respective contexts.

Since the hangover of Hong Kong in 1997, Hong Kong identity has become a prevalent research topic. How to understand and appraise Hong Kong’s unique literary trajectory throughout the 20th century, especially vis-à-vis Mainland China’s literature, is widely trodden terrain. Depending on the researchers’ ideological stance, Hong Kong literature can be conceptualized as part of the Chinese literature, but perhaps more often, as an important site of Sinophone literature that harbors a vigilant attitude toward the hegemonic China-centrism. Shu-mei Shih’s definition of the Sinophone as the Sinitic-language communities and cultures outside, and on the periphery, of China as well as ethnic minority communities within China where Sinitic languages are spoken or imposed becomes slightly complicated due to Hong Kong’s post-1997 political status as a China’s special administrative region. Still, Hong Kong’s cultural “extraterritoriality” makes the Sinophone framework productive in investigating Hong Kong’s Chinese-language literature and films, particularly the Cantonese-inflected flavour embedded in them.

However, it is important to note that Hong Kong literature is not merely written in Chinese. Anglophone writing has a long history in Hong Kong too. In this regard, I find Hong Kong literature and Taiwanese literature quite comparable in several aspects. Both encountered an “improper” state of postcoloniality in which Mandarin Chinese was imposed after the former colonizer left (the British rule in the case of Hong Kong, and Japanese colonialism in the case of Taiwan). The Government of the People’s Republic of China’s anticolonial rhetoric, contradictory to its despotic measures directed at Hong Kong especially after the 2014 Umbrella Movement, resembles the Nationalist Party’s “enslavement” discourse aimed to eradicate Japan’s legacy in postwar Taiwan, which is in conflict with its own authoritarian nature. The nostalgia held by so-called “southbound writers” (*nanlai zuojia*) is similar to that of the first-

generation émigré writers who arrived in Taiwan with the Nationalist government. While the lifting of martial in Taiwan may be taken as a convenient and symbolic end of Taiwan's "decolonizing" process, this practice lingers in present-day Hong Kong literature with writers' distinct use of pastiche, hybrid language, and political parody, and in contemporary Hong Kong films in which the (post-)1997 complex is often featured.

Another intricate point to ponder is the relationship between Sinophone writing and the colonial governments (the British and Japanese). If the use of Chinese can be taken as an anticolonial gesture in British Hong Kong (and also in post-1997 Hong Kong if Cantonese expressions are regarded as "de-colonial"), Sinophone writing under Japanese rule was not entirely incompatible with Japan's colonial governance. Classical Chinese poems were initially encouraged by the Japanese colonizers to deceptively alleviate the exploitative nature of their colonial enterprise. Even when the ban of using Chinese in newspapers and magazines was implemented in April 1937 in Taiwan, certain Chinese publications survived and some Taiwanese writers contributed to the Chinese newspapers circulated within the Co-Prosperity Sphere created by Japan, such as *Huawen daban meiri* (Chinese Osaka Daily). Given "phone" is about speaking, one may debate about whether Hong Kong literature should be taught exclusively in Cantonese, and Taiwanese literature must be written in Hokkien (or even in indigenous peoples' languages if one wishes to sustain a postcolonial stance more completely). But this, to me, is to fall into the snare of extreme and potentially hegemonic nativism.

With the recent tightening socio-political control in Hong Kong, the lens of Sinophone studies, which stresses Hong Kong's (and also other Sinitic communities') situated particularity in order to differentiate Hong Kong literature from Chinese literature from Mainland China, probably would risk being inevitably politicized. What is important is perhaps to recognize the inherently fluid and changeable essence of what constitutes Hong Kong literature accumulatively over the past few decades. If diaspora has an expiration date as Shu-mei Shih posits, then the term "Southbound writers" that accentuates those writers' "origin" will immediately lose its conceptual rigour, just like the appellation of "émigré writers" in Taiwan.

All in all, an open-minded and pluralism-embraced vision as well as a locally engaged and committed sensibility are, in my view, the key prerequisites of doing and teaching Sinophone studies in Hong Kong. Rather than eschewing the outmoded national literature and film paradigm per se, it is also illuminating to reconceptualise the production and circulation of Chinese-language literary and filmic texts through the prism of Sinophone studies, which invites not only a fresh perspective of writers and their works (such as Xiao Hong can be part of Hong Kong's Sinophone literature, Lao She Singapore's Sinophone literature, and Kubo Tokuji Taiwan's Sinophone literature) but also new possibilities of intra-ethnic or transnational comparisons such as that between "minor literature" written by Taiwan's indigenous and China's ethnic-minority authors. In a nutshell, while Sinophone studies in the West, genealogically speaking, seems to spring out as an academic stance that aims to question Western-centric knowledge production and call attention to the Chinese-language literature's peripheral visibility on the world literature map, it is an ongoing everyday reality particularly in places like Hong Kong where articulations of Chineseness are always plural and mostly situational.

Further Reading:

Shu-mei Shih, “The Concept of Sinophone”, *PMLA* 126(3) (2011): 709-718.

David Der-wei Wang, *Houyimin xiezu: shijian yu jiyi de zhengzhixue* 後遺民寫作: 時間與記憶的政治學 (Postloyalist writing: the politics of time and memory) (Taipei: Ryefield publications, 2007), particularly pp. 23-70.

Special issue on “Hong Kong Connections across the Sinosphere”. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 20, issue 8 (2018).