

Sun Yat-sen University

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Teaching Creative writing in a foreign language in China

Abstract:

Creative Writing courses have been running in the English Department of Sun Yat-sen University for more than eight years. Compared with similar courses offered by the few universities in China, the teaching of creative writing at all levels and beyond the traditional classroom at Sun Yat-sen University makes it the most vigorous, among Chinese institutions of higher learning, in promoting creative writing in English as a foreign language in the areas of teaching, research, outreach and international collaboration. This paper presents how the multi-faceted pedagogical framework of creative writing is incorporated into the goal of creative literacy and education, then moves on to outline the extracurricular activities including book club events, the National Creative Writing Competition in English, and in particular the Sun Yat-sen University Writers' Residency. The Residency brings in a teaching and educational element to the non-traditional classroom, and serves the purpose of improving students' English proficiency, creative literacy, interpersonal interaction, critical thinking and personal reflection, as well as providing literary and cultural experience for the writers in residency.

Biographical Note:

Fan Dai holds a PhD degree in Linguistics from SunYat-sen University and an MFA degree in creative writing from City University of Hong Kong. She is a published writer in both Chinese and English, and teaches English as a foreign language at Sun Yat-sen University. Since 2009, she has set up a pedagogical framework of creative writing for undergraduate students, then offered a graduate course combining stylistics with creative writing. She is currently supervising two PhD candidates who use creative writing as the entry point for the teaching of English as a foreign language. A major force in promoting creative writing in English as a foreign language in China, she is the founding director of the Sun Yat-sen University Center for English-language Creative Writing, under which she has run the twenty-eight-day Sun Yat-sen University Writers' Residency since 2015.

Ling Li is currently a PhD candidate in creative writing. She became involved in creative writing in 2013 when Dai organised various creative writing events and activities. In 2015,

she co-translated the craft book *The Art of Writing Fiction* by Andrew Cowan into Chinese, published by China Renmin University Press. She was one of the students working for the 2016 Sun Yat-sen Writers' Residency.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Pedagogy – Non-traditional classroom learning – The Sun Yat-sen University writer's residency

Introduction

Creative Writing as a subject in higher education first took root in the United States during the last quarter of the 19th century, when the traditional literary study was broadened into more humanistic pursuits, such as that exemplified by the ‘educational experiment’ by Barrett Wendell (1908). Wendell held that the ideal way for literary study was the making of literature rather than just the enjoyment of it. Then Hughes Mearns (1925) offered the first course of Creative Writing in New York University in 1925 which later flourished in Iowa. This trajectory maps out the origin of creative writing as one way to reform literary education in the US (Myers 1993).

In a different context, the paper’s principle author Dai Fan offered one of the first creative writing courses in 2009 to students in the Department of English at Sun Yat-sen University as part of the reforms undertaken in the teaching of English in China (Dai 2010). Renmin University of China offered a creative writing program in 2006 followed by China University of Petroleum in 2014. In addition, a few like-minded teachers in a number of other universities have come to teach creative writing courses either because they had been exposed to creative writing classes outside of China or because of their love for the writing of literature. In fact, several academics have taught creative writing on and off since the late 1990s at Xiamen University and the Beijing International Studies University. Since creative writing in a foreign language is less of an obvious choice of career, none of the aforementioned universities has more than one teacher with professional training background. The teaching of creative writing at Sun Yat-sen University, so far, has been the most comprehensive and Sun Yat-sen is the only university that teaches creative writing at all levels.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the pedagogical framework of creative writing at Sun Yat-sen University and how it has been incorporated into the goal of education, then moves on to examine how the Sun Yat-sen University Writers’ Residency is run to benefit both writers and students to serve the ultimate purpose of literary and cultural exchanges.

Second/foreign language creative writing and education

From the perspective of learning, Hanauer advocates that creative writing (SL) positions the learners and their ‘personal experience, history and social contextualization at the center of the learning experience’, in which students focus on ‘authentic, meaningful, personal expression (Hanauer 2012:110)’. Harper (2006) proposes that creative writing encourages students to investigate, explore, articulate and speculate, crucial abilities required for academic research. A combination of creative and critical intelligence, creative writing fits well into the aim of liberal arts education, which can be defined as ‘deepening self-understanding through critical awareness.’ (Disney, 2014:10)

From the perspective of teaching, creative writing in a second/foreign language is a meeting point of three academic disciplines as indicated by Zyngier (2006): literary studies and cultural studies (content and context of literature), learning of language

through literature's phonology/grammar/lexis such as TESOL and TETL, and creativity studies (language manipulation after exposure to exemplary literary models). However, previous research on the teaching of writing in China has focused mainly on the benefits of writing in improving proficiency in English as a second/foreign language (Dai 2015a), which is too lopsided a view and far from comprehensive.

In creative writing in a second/foreign language, the boundary between linguistics, stylistics, culture, literature and creativity is obscure and constantly crossed and explored by ESL/EFL writers (Disney 2014). Second/Foreign language creative writing pedagogy should 'remain plural/ multiple/ polyphonous, and sensitized to relative cultural settings (Disney 2014:3). This intention will be illustrated later by the pedagogical framework provided in this paper of creative writing at Sun Yat-sen University and its activities beyond the traditional classroom such as the writer's residency and international collaboration.

The pedagogical framework of creative writing at Sun Yat-sen University

Regular courses

The first course of creative writing was offered to second-year English majors at Sun Yat-sen University in 2009. Since it was only one course within the Department of English, it needed to run in a holistic way, integrating components of reading as a writer and writing workshops. Today, these two components are occasionally punctuated by guest lectures from visiting international writers. There are other out-of-classroom components in the pedagogical framework, which include assessment by two other teachers who give comments and suggestions to each student for revision purpose, a summary lecture following each writing assignment to showcase the best craft from students, informal peer correction and discussion of each other's work in a class of fifteen to eighteen students (Dai 2015b).

The graduate course 'Stylistics and Creative Writing' grew out of the course 'Stylistics'. In addition to reading as a writer, workshops and guest lectures for a class with six to fifteen students, there are four lectures focusing on the craft of a storytelling, using excerpts from the work of established writers, including the principle author Fan Dai and previous students. Particular attention is given to the use of rhetoric, the part of stylistics that overlaps with the concern of a writer.

At the PhD level, two courses are conducted. One is 'Theory and Research Method', which requires students to read extensively on the research, teaching and practice of creative writing, and to compose four to five book reports. In addition, the students spend one week in the Sun Yat-sen University Writers' Residency working closely with guest writers (outlined in detail below) and they relate these experiences to their own research in creative writing. For the final paper, the students are asked to reflect on their readings during the semester, and relate them to their experiences of creative writing in terms of theory and practice, as well as to their interaction with writers during the residency program. This study occurs before they orientate their attention to the production of their creative thesis.

The second PhD course is 'Reading and Writing Workshop' in which each student in

the class gives five in-depth presentations on the books concerned, and workshops two to three of their own stories. This course focuses not only on understanding craft and the use of craft in literary works, but also how to teach craft.

A bilingual course of creative writing is also offered to fifteen non-English majors. Literary works in both Chinese and English are examined and each student has the chance to have his/her work workshopped. Students are required to write one story in English and self-translate it into Chinese. They are encouraged not to do word-to-word translation as they know best what they want to express in both languages. The purpose of the course is for students to learn the craft of writing and to think about the reasons (often due to different cultural contexts) behind the in-equivalent parts of the two versions. The course fits into the general scheme of general education in the university.

The regular courses delivered through lectures, seminars and workshops exploit pedagogical strategies from the literary class, the English Language class and the craft workshop (Kroll & Dai 2013). The teaching not only covers all levels from undergraduate to PhD English majors, but also benefits non-English majors who are interested in literature and writing in their spare time.

Creative writing activities outside the classroom

In the field of learning theory, Kuh (1994) pointed out that institutions can enhance student learning by using its existing resources more effectively. The Sun Yat-sen University Center for Creative Writing organizes a number of activities ranging from book club events to national creative writing competition, the Sun Yat-sen University Writers' Residency, and the international collaboration with other universities. Book club events run roughly once a month. Visiting writers from Australia, mainland China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Macau, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States have shared their works through the discussion on various parts of their creative processes. In particular, the book club events have featured writers from the Australian Writers' Week since 2014.

The National Creative Writing Competition in English was introduced in 2014. The number of submissions and participating universities increases with each year. The competition is judged by two interns who visit Sun Yat-sen University for two weeks from the graduate program in creative writing at Miami University, United States. This is not only to make sure that the judging is independent of any one from the Sun Yat-sen University program, but also to provide an opportunity for the interns to use their expertise in helping Chinese students with their work through one-to-one workshops, which in turn, provide an entry point for the American students to get to know China, its people and culture.

The Sun Yat-sen University Writers' Residency runs from the mid-October to mid-November. The Residency promotes the reading, discussion and writing of world literature by providing the space for visiting writers to read and write; by giving them the opportunity to engage with Chinese literature, culture and people; by creating the occasion for students to interact with internationally renowned writers and by

showcasing the creative writing of Sun Yat-sen University's faculty and students.

The following section focuses on how the residency operates in honoring the traditional practice of writing while bringing in a teaching and educational element to the non-traditional classroom, thus serving the purposes of gaining the 'valued outcomes' (Kuh 1993:285) of higher education for students and providing literary and cultural experience for the writers in residency.

The Sun Yat-sen University writers' residency

The idea of the Sun Yat-sen University Writers' Residency grew from the fact that there has not been a residency in China that combines writing with literary and cultural exchanges in an educational setting. In fact, this is something rarely seen on this scale in other parts of the world. The residency is also designed to address the concern that Sun Yat-sen University does not have enough teachers with professional training in creative writing, and that the writers in the residency, like other visiting writers who have given lectures, seminars and workshops, act as professional resources for students. The role of the residency can be understood with reference to Kuh's research on the contributions of out-of-class experiences to valued outcomes of post-secondary education (Kuh 1993:285). It includes: (a) cognitive complexity (e.g. critical thinking, intellectual flexibility, reflective judgment); (b) knowledge acquisition and application; (c) humanitarianism (e.g., interest in the welfare of others); (d) interpersonal and intrapersonal competence (e.g., self-confidence, identity, ability to relate to others); and (e) practical competence (e.g., decision making, vocational preparation). The five 'valued outcomes' of higher education are useful indicators for the quality of the out-of-class creative writing activities in Sun Yat-sen University.

Components of the residency

a. Writing

The main activity of the residency is writing for at least three weeks. During the first two residencies, writers spent about two weeks in an exclusive accommodation in Yangshuo, Guilin in Guangxi Autonomous Region, and one week in a hot spring hotel in Enping, Jiangmen City, Guangdong Province.

In Yangshuo, writers write either in their rooms, the open area in the accommodation, or outside with the Yulong River and the continuous karst mountain ranges as a backdrop. Their writing time is sandwiched between meals for which they can choose to go to local restaurants with students from Sun Yat-sen University there to provide language assistance and to translate the work of the writers for one of the three public readings. In Enping, writers write in their rooms and have communal meals. They can use the private hot spring in their room or the public pools in the hotel compound. Students from Sun Yat-sen University are also there to provide language assistance.

b. Cultural events

Each week, writers participate in one local cultural activity to gain more exposure to China. For the last two years, writers visited the Mountain Song Fair in Yangshuo

which meets once every ten days. The Mountain Song Fair features singers from villages around Yangshuo dressed in colorful minority costumes. They often sing in pairs or as a group of four against the same number of other singers, conversing through four lines the group composes seconds after their counterparts have sung theirs. Such impromptu creativity has proven to be a very inspiring element during the residency, in addition to it being a rich cultural experience.

Writers also visit the Kaiping Diaolou, a UNESCO world cultural heritage site, in the Jiamen part of the residency. Diaolou is a fortified multi-storied watchtower found mainly in the Kaiping area. Built throughout the 1920s and 1930s with money sent home by emigrants working overseas, Diaolous were the means for protecting villagers against flood and bandits. The designs often incorporate local style with that of the country the emigrants lived in.

The Diaolou visit is not only about a multicultural phenomenon but also a way to see how the world was connected at the economic level during the 1920 and 1930s. The money sent home depended largely on the local economy where the emigrants were living, and building materials often came from the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and other countries. Accordingly, very few Diaolous were built during the Depression.

c. Lectures and readings (teaching)

The Residency goes to the Guangzhou and Zhuhai campuses of Sun Yat-sen University after Yangshuo and before Jiangmen. This is the section of the program in which every writer makes a contribution by offering a lecture or a workshop either in English or in their own languages which are taught in the university. The Mexican writers in 2015 and 2016 respectively gave a talk on Mexican literature in Spanish to the Spanish majors in the School of International Studies. The German writer of the 2016 Residency talked about writing to German majors. Other writers either gave an introductory lecture to freshmen who would take the creative writing course in a year's time in the Department of English, or ran workshops for students who have taken creative writing courses. For the 2015 and 2016 residencies respectively, about fifteen literary events took place in and around three universities in Yangshuo, Guangzhou, and Jiangmen.

Three public readings, hosted by local universities including Sun Yat-sen University, are held in the three respective cities the residency goes to. Writers also had the opportunity of talking to high school students and college students. In Yangshuo High School and Xinhua College in Guangzhou, students met many writers for the first time. Writers enjoyed visiting students in their own classrooms, an occasion they do not expect to have in many traditional residencies.

On the part of the organiser, the residency offers lectures on contemporary Chinese literature, sometimes by a scholar of Chinese literature, sometimes jointly by a scholar of Chinese literature and an overseas scholar who brings his/her insight to Chinese literature. Such knowledge of Chinese literature is further strengthened when a Chinese writer is introduced to one of the public readings. For example, the eighty-year-old writer Jiang Shumei joined the reading at Sun Yat-sen University in

2016, sharing the story of how she was married to a man she had never met until the wedding day. She started learning to read at sixty years of age, wrote her first book at 76, and has been publishing one book a year ever since. Meeting her in person gave the writers a first-hand taste of a Chinese writer who came to writing after rich life experiences as an illiterate person. When her husband died in a car accident her life changed.

Other events such as visiting a school, participating in local literary events with Chinese writers are also arranged depending on occasions and schedules. Overall, the residency aims to expose writers to Chinese people and culture in addition to uninterrupted writing time, so that they feel in touch with the country they used to know largely only through reading.

Writer selection

Writers are recommended by the first core group of writers invited in October 2014 to Yangshuo, Jiangmen and Guangzhou to experience all the events of a potential residency. Their feedback as consultants helped to shape the residency. Potential writers should have gained some national recognition and have published at least three books/collections of fiction or nonfiction or poetry, and preferably have been translated into other languages. Emerging writers with one very well-received first book may also be eligible.

More importantly, translators have equal standing as writers. In accordance with the mission statement of the Sun Yat-sen University Center for English-language Creative Writing, which is to promote the reading and writing of world literature, the residency welcomes writers who also translate or professional translators in recognising the important role of translators in promoting world literature.

The 2015 Residency, as the inaugural residency, invited fifteen international writers/translators and five Chinese translators. The writers/translators came in two groups, the first ten were there for the full residency of twenty-eight days, another five joined them in Guangzhou where they participated in teaching by giving one lecture or workshop, along with the five Chinese translators who were in the residency for three days to interact with the international writers for potential translation projects.

The 2015 Residency proved to be successful yet stressful on the organiser's part. Therefore, the 2016 residency invited nine writers for twenty-eight days. The number proves to be right for writers' interaction, writer-student interaction and management. So far, writers have come from Australia, Canada, Egypt, Germany, Iceland, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and the United States. The 2017 residency will include writers from Israel, India, Poland and Slovenia.

Students

The residency brings students who have taken the creative writing course as English majors in their sophomore year, or the bilingual writing course as a non-English major, or as an MA or PhD candidate with a focus on creative writing. Students take part in

the residency for two purposes. One is practical – they can assist writers with language and other practical issues. The other aspect focuses on cultural exchange. Writers from the 2015 and 2016 residencies have agreed that students were one of the best characteristics of the residency. Each student spent one week at the residency. By the end of the program writers will have gotten to know at least twelve to fifteen students very well, as the two groups tend to have at least one or two daily meals together.

Students have benefited tremendously from the time spent with writers. Getting to know published writers in person demystifies writers and writing. Many students have received comments on their work by some writers. Such comments are not only helpful but also very inspiring. As a result of having participated in the 2016 Residency, a few students submitted their work to *Ninth Letter*, an American literary magazine which organises a special issue to feature writers of the Sun Yat-sen University Writers' Residency, and the works by two undergraduate students and two PhD candidates have been accepted.

Learning in the residency

a. Daily interaction

The residency starts in Yangshuo where writers and students first meet. The way the Yangshuo part of the residency is set up makes it easy and natural to interact. During the two-week period, the accommodation is kept exclusively to the residency. Participants are housed in a three-storey building, with rooms on all three floors and a spacious dining area detached from the rooms on the first floor. The accommodation is of the traditional Chinese style with brown window frames, the dining area is bright with a glass ceiling, and with windows instead of walls. The wooden tables and chairs provide spaces for meals, conversations and writing. The area can seat twenty people comfortably.

The one-hour breakfast period is a time when everybody is downstairs at some point thus the dining area plays an important role in bringing everyone together – a setting where the topics of conversation know no bounds, helping to create a sense of community and building rapport. Naturally, the students enhance their interpersonal and intrapersonal competence particularly regarding self-confidence, a stronger sense of identity, and the ability to relate to others.

b. Translating

In addition to helping writers at the practical level, students have two tasks: one is to translate an approximate twenty-minute story or excerpt for each writer for their public reading, the other is interviewing writers at various stages of the residency on topics related to writing and the creative process. In the translation of works for public reading, each student is responsible for one writer. The genre can be poetry, fiction or nonfiction. The content may not be something the students are familiar with, therefore, the translation task may be daunting, especially when it comes to poetry, some of which is not translatable. With the writers' presence, students have the advantage and privilege of asking the writers to explain the language and the culture behind points

they find difficult or even incomprehensible. The writers are not only the best resources but also the most encouraging in helping students get a grip of the language and meaning, as well as the intended message.

The student-writer interaction gives the students confidence for the translation project in that they know their understanding of the original text is accurate. It also gives them room for creativity – they can work on creating an image or meaning closest to the original when it is not literally translatable. They can also back-translate to the writer to make sure the latter knows how the difficult parts have been treated and how close the translation is to the original meaning. This involves students deeply in knowledge application and decision making. The translation process and project delights both the student and the writer, especially when both the original text and the translated version are projected onto the screen next to each other during the public reading and attributed accordingly. This instills a lot of pride in the translator, and helps the audience to comprehend the original text. The public reading is an occasion when the student translator sees the fruition of his/her labour and years of learning, a demonstration of how knowledge in literature, linguistics, cross cultural communication is integrated through a translation project.

There may be further translation of a similar kind depending on a particular writer's need for interaction. For example, a few writers have written about the local people, or the physical/human landscape, and then wanted to share their work with these relevant people. So they ask students to help with the translation. This process allows the students to learn not only through translation but also through their own understanding of the local elements and the experience of how they are being represented by the writer.

c. Interviews and documentary-making

Another aspect of learning takes place when the interviews begin. Students have to design questions of interest in relation to why the writers write, what research they have done, and how they write. The interviews will be used for the documentary the Sun Yat-sen University Center for English-language Creative Writing is making to demonstrate that the teaching of creative writing beyond the classroom is necessary and indispensable. The questions are gathered after students' discussion, then approved or improved with the help of the author Fan Dai director of the residency and producer of the documentary. Each writer is given the questions beforehand so they can think through their responses. The student who conducts the interview is responsible for the English and Chinese subtitles of his/her part of the interview, included in the documentary after editorial. In this process, students enhance their ability in terms of decision making, interpersonal interaction, interview skills, knowledge acquisition and application.

Furthermore, students are interviewees themselves and are invited to reflect on how they have benefited from the residency. They learn by comparing how they conduct themselves in front of the camera, how they sum up their learning experiences, and then they work on the English and Chinese subtitles themselves. In self-translation

they can be flexible as they know what they want to express and can choose to translate the meaning rather than the exact words. Students can learn a lot during this process via reflection. If they start with the questions, then the responses from the writers, then digest the questions and answers through subtitling, they would be able to sum up a personal version of many aspects of creative writing. Students' cognitive complexity is involved here – they have to think critically, react flexibly and judge reflectively.

The documentary will showcase the residency and act as a teaching tool. Instead of having one teacher lecturing, the documentary will give students access to a variety of writers talking about various aspects of their work. In turn, the documentary will also promote the writers' work and exegetical intentions.

Summary: the residency as a unique meeting point

To sum up, the residency is essentially an occasion that gives writers from different parts of the world the time and space to write. There is no requirement for the writing project and writer selection is based on merit and participant recommendations. All other activities and events are organised to enrich the writing experience in China in short or long intervals. The longer interval between the Yangshuo and Jiangmen residencies brings the writers to the educational setting, the shorter intervals tend to be half day or full day cultural and literary activities such as a site visit or a public reading. The residency aims to expose writers to the larger Chinese context where their writing takes place. Writers have a lot of freedom to decide how much exposure they want to have by arranging more local activities with the help of students if they wish to do so. On the student's part, the interaction with writers, the translation project and interviews and subsequent production are intense learning experiences may take time to digest. The residency is a unique opportunity – the impact of which may not be felt until years afterwards.

International collaboration

International research collaboration began shortly after the introduction of the first creative writing course at Sun Yat-sen University in 2009. There have been subsequent joint research projects in the reading aspect of the teaching of creative writing (Kroll & Dai 2013) and in the different treatment of cultural and ethical issues (Kroll & Dai 2011). There have also been joint research projects conducted with Flinders University, University of Wollongong, University of New South Wales and RMIT University, sponsored by Australia-China Council.

The Sun Yat-sen University Center for English-language Creative Writing has hosted students from University of Wollongong and Flinders University who visited through funding from the Australian Federal Government's New Columbus Plan. In December 2014 and April 2015, two groups of students of ten and nine visited for ten days. Most were undergraduates of creative writing and each acted as mentor for five students at Sun Yat-sen University. They ran workshops to give extensive advice to the latter on how to improve their works.

The Sun Yat-sen students, in turn, became the local guides for the visiting students.

Such interdependent relationship created a bond between students of the two countries. The more formal activities included talks given by the Australian students ranging from topics such as ‘Why I Write’, ‘How I Write’ and ‘What I Write’, as well as ‘My Favorite Australian Writer(s)’. These served as one way for Australian students to share their experiences of doing creative writing and to introduce Australian writers with a focus on craft. Such sharing gives a personal touch to the discussion of issues that are of general concerns for students in the creative writing classroom.

In November 2017, a group of eighteen students of creative writing from RMIT will visit Sun Yat-sen University for ten days. It will be the largest scale in number and activities. There has also been online student interaction with University of Glasgow, University of New South Wales and RMIT University. The graduate students of Glasgow gave detailed comments to Sun Yat-sen students to help with their revisions, the UNSW students and Sun Yat-sen students wrote stories on the same themes and sent comments to each other. RMIT students worked as editors to put together anthologies for Sun Yat-sen students after interacting with them to give suggestions for improving their work.

The student interaction has worked well for the Sun Yat-sen students, the majority of whom spoke highly of their Australian peers who in turn learned a lot about life in China through the Chinese students’ writing. Such online student exchange will continue to evolve, as more teachers from more countries have shown interest in working together.

Conclusion

The teaching of creative writing at all levels and beyond the traditional classroom at Sun Yat-sen University makes it one of the most vigorous programs among Chinese institutions of higher learning in promoting creative writing in English as a foreign language, in terms of teaching, research, outreach and international collaboration. The Sun Yat-sen University Center for English-language Creative Writing has become a platform for introducing and promoting international writers in China through regular book club events, international teaching and research collaboration, and the Sun Yat-sen University Writers’ Residency.

The Department of English at Sun Yat-sen University witnessed the acceptance of the first graduate student for creative writing to University of Leeds in 2016. Three more students have applied to do graduate studies in creative writing in British university in 2017. This is a good indicator for the success of the teaching of creative writing in English as a foreign language. The Sun Yat-sen University Center for English-language Creative Writing will further its effort in promoting the reading and writing of world literature by publishing students’ work internationally so authentic voices from Chinese students can be heard.

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