
English-language creative writing by Chinese university students

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The challenges and benefits of creative writing for university students in China

Introduction

In China, most universities have a school of foreign languages, where students majoring in English, German, French, Japanese, and other languages study the language for the first two years, and take introductory courses in the linguistics and literature of the language concerned, and then progress to higher-level linguistic and literary courses, as well as translation studies. English is the most popular foreign language in China, and, with the improvement of English teaching in high schools, the average student entering university now has a higher level of English proficiency than previous generations of students. However, students with high scores in English often choose to study ‘practical’ subjects other than English, such as business studies, computer science, economics, medicine, etc. Increasingly, a number of programs at universities in China are even being taught through the medium of English. Consequently, English majors have less and less advantage over non-English majors, and departments of English have had to restructure their syllabi to cope with the situation. Courses in translation studies, intercultural communication and applied linguistics have thus gained greater recognition because of their functional importance in the real world (see Qu, this issue).

A comparison between English programs and their counterparts in English-speaking countries reveals that creative writing is one course/program that is not commonly found in China’s universities. One reason for this is that, previously, creative writing was not considered an intellectual activity that could be taught. The award-winning Chinese

writer Zecheng Xu originally held this opinion, but has since altered his opinion, and has been a writer-in-residence at Creighton University in 2009, and attended the 2010 International Writing Program in Iowa City (Xu, 2011). Xu has been one of the first to promote creative writing in Chinese, alongside Jin, a professor of Chinese, and Diao, a professor of English at Renmin University of China. While Jin has emphasized the importance of creative writing for the creative industry (Jin, 2005), Diao has translated from English two of the four books in the first creative writing series ever published in China (Diao, 2011). The series – aimed at aspiring Chinese writers, for self-study – includes *Now Write! Fiction Writing Exercises from Today’s Best Writers and Teachers* (Ellis, 2006), *Now Write! Nonfiction: Memoir, Journalism and Creative Nonfiction Exercises from Today’s Best Writers* (Ellis, 2009), *Becoming A*



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Writer (Dorothea, 1981) and *Immediate Fiction: A Complete Writing Course* (Cleaver, 2009). In 2009, The Research Center for Literature and Creative Writing at Shanghai University was set up, and began to enroll undergraduates and graduate students for their respective creative writing programs in 2010, following Fudan University's first Master's program in Chinese creative writing in 2009. Faculty from the Research Center have carried out research on the teaching of creative writing in the United States and are concerned to apply such research to the Chinese context (Ge and Xu, 2011; Xu, 2011). This article reports on creative writing courses in English, which began in the Department of English of Sun Yat-sen University in 2009.

The teaching of creative writing in China

As discussed by Qu (this issue), the teaching of writing has caused concern at many universities in China, not least because writing is widely recognized as the hardest skill to master in language learning (Huang, 2006). However, most efforts to reform the writing courses at Chinese universities have not considered creative writing. For example, in response to students' anxiety about writing in English, Wu & Gu (2011) suggest a focus on different genres and topics in written English (see also Wen & Chang, 2012). One early effort in creative writing came from the 'Write to Learn' project led by Chuming Wang of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in 2001, which resulted in a collection of research papers (Zheng, 2004; Dai, 2010). To the best of my knowledge, the first creative writing course may well have been taught by Alex Guo, who taught for one semester at Beijing Forestry University in 2005. This was followed by a poetry writing course at Wuhan University by Ouyang Yu who taught for one semester a year from 2007 to 2009. In 2009, I started teaching creative writing at Sun Yat-sen University to sophomores, while a team of four teachers began a one-semester creative writing course for seniors at Sichuan University. The body of this article discusses my experiences, and my students' experiences, of creative writing courses at Sun Yat-sen University. Over the last three years, the aims of the course have remained constant, although there have been changes in the way the course has been taught (Dai, 2010, 2011). A central focus of this article is the role that creative writing has played in students' learning experiences.

Creative writing as a way to understand

The students at Sun Yat-sen University have largely been writing non-fiction. They write about their lives and what has been important for them. But, in this process, they often find that their engagement in writing requires them to confront or evaluate their own difficult or even painful experiences. As one student puts it:

Although I feel extremely uncomfortable writing stories, I've always thought it a wonderful class, because in this class we read a lot and we experience a lot. Some classmates wrote something that has touched the deepest part of my heart. Some classmates wrote something that gave me so much to think. I have to say that creative writing class helped me grow up. I really enjoy these moments. (Wen, female)

Another student writes about her classmate's difficult decision about studying abroad. While studying abroad is very tempting for students, the financial costs of it were a hindrance:

I called my fourth CW [creative writing assignment] 'God and life' the most painful CW ever [...] I wrote about 'Yuwei, who struggles for Denmark'. I sent my work to Yuwei and she didn't reply to me for a long time. Later, she told me this writing made her think a lot about the whole thing of studying abroad. She never looked at it from the third person's perspective [...] I wrote something really personal and it is some kind of betrayal to my intimate friend.

But if I didn't write this article, I won't see how many secrets we shared and I won't know why I appreciate her. (Ting, female)

This story was written in response to an observation assignment, with Ting writing an observation about Yuwei's dilemma about studying abroad. The story played an important role in Yuwei's decision making, and also helped both students learn about each other.

Like everyone else in the class, Ting read stories written by her peers, and was emotionally touched by them, moving her to comment that '[w]e get to know each other better and it makes me feel we are really a big family'. Ting's comment was echoed by other students in their reports on the course, as follows:

We know about each other and understand more about each other. Maybe through this course, what we learn most is that all of us have a different life from what is apparent in life and everyone is special

in some way because we all have our own stories. We learn to respect others more. (Di, female)

Xing's experience and writing provides an exemplification of Di's comment. Xing wrote about her hearing impairment, a condition that might lead to deafness. This story was the first piece of writing to be workshopped in the class. Xing also wrote an account of what happened afterwards:

It (the course) gives us a precious opportunity to share our own stories with others. People see your article and you get strength from them in return. After I wrote my first story, I felt much better. And after that workshop, many classmates send me messages to encourage me, which is really touching. From that day I began to know, I am not alone. Yes, our class is a warm family. Just because every time I write with my heart, I want to do better and better. (Xing, female)

Many students also reported that they came to know themselves better through writing, as one student explained:

Creative Writing allowed me to recall the past, pick up valuable memory and express ideas about life. I noticed that there were many things I had never thought about clearly. However, as I wrote down about those things, answers appeared naturally. My past has no longer been like a mess. Writing is like a comb, helping me tidy my experience in the past and stimulating me to look forward. (Die, female)

Another student wrote that she had gained self-knowledge through the course:

[Writing is] a challenge to discover something worth reading and thinking in my plain life and to write it down in a way that makes it not plain any more, which is also what I believe 'creative' – not the actual event itself but the unique view you have and the writing techniques you use. (Ying, female)

This reaction to the course was shared by another student as follows:

The stories from my fellow classmates make me know them better; the stories I've written make me know myself better. (Yang, male)

Writing and workshopping as a way to reflect and grow

Again, in my experience, students not only come to know themselves and each other better through creative writing, but they also report a measure of

positive self-development throughout the process. Huan writes about a boy who proposed to her in front of the class when they were 10 years old. For her, this was a humiliating experience, but after writing about this experience, and workshopping the story in class, she reported a sense of closure:

My workshop is about my desk mate in primary school, which is a very bad memory for me. I've never told my friends about that. Writing the story helps me to know more about myself, which is helpful for the built of my characters. We should know how to tolerate and forgive others, instead of making revenge become our daily necessity. When we were young, we didn't know how to deal with others. We were easily to get hurt and easily to hurt others. We need to treat others well so as not be regretted when we look back at what we have done. (Huan, female)

Pan spent one semester at Sun Yat-sen as an exchange student from a university in Beijing. He wrote a story about how he rudely rejected a girl in high school, and reported that his workshop on this story had helped him see how immature he had been:

I started to change my stubborn mind on the emotion issue. I know I should be responsible for what I have done, and more importantly, be kind to people. Therefore, now I am trying to find the girl I hurt deeply in middle school and do something for her, as well as for me. (Pan, male)

After returning to his home university, he wrote to me to say that he had found the young woman and had apologized to make amends, reporting that they have now become good friends.

Pan was not the only one who mended a relationship through the course. Two other students reported that Pan's workshop made them aware that they had hurt someone's feelings in the past. Their experience in the course had also prompted them to apologize and make amends. Such high school relationships were a frequent topic for students' creative writing. In China, such 'puppy love' relationships are usually frowned on or laughed at by their peers, and also draw disapproval from the adults. Wen wrote a story about a youthful relationship that she had when she was 13 years old, a relationship that she had been compelled to end, as 'Only bad students did that, and I was not. I was not.' As a university student, she reflected on this early experience:

Was there love between us? We both thought so [...] I still think so. It doesn't mean we really loved each other. If he is beside me right at this moment, we might both laugh at our silliness then. But it was the 'love' that made our childhood so beautiful and memorable. It was something vague, something subtle, and something terribly warm and sweet. Sometimes I wonder why nobody let us stay silly at that time. Then I would never lose a friend in that way. In all my life, I have heard so many right and wrongs. Every day people keep telling me what is right and what is wrong. However, the older I am, the more puzzled I become. 'The right thing for a girl to do is to never accept presents from boys'. 'The right thing to do is to never fall in love too early'. [...] I did all the right things. They made me want to cry. (Wen, female)

Wen's story of her high school days resonated with many of the students in the creative writing class, with a number of them claiming that the process of writing about such experiences provided them with a sense of closure, as it enabled them to come to terms with such emotionally-loaded formative experiences. Another student achieved a different kind of closure by writing about her Adam's apple, the size of which she had felt was an awful physical defect.

I must thank this course, because of it I have overcome my biggest both physical and psychological problem, which has haunted and irritated me for several years [...] Before I wrote about this, I had seldom told anyone [...] I even had no courage to tell my dear sister. I harbored it and kept it to myself, which resulted in my intolerable misery and some kind of loneliness deep in heart [...] I finally realize this is not a very big problem indeed, and not so many people care and be curious about it as I thought, seldom people will laugh at me or something. Some of my classmates shared their problems with me after they heard about my story, and I suddenly realized that everybody had their own problems; some of those problems were much bigger than mine. (Feng, female)

In the program, Feng agreed to let another group of students read the story, which proved to be inspiring for at least one student who subsequently wrote a very personal story about being flat-chested. She confronted this issue in her writing, and revealed subtle inner feelings that she was reluctant to discuss with others. Through this process, she reported, she learnt to deal with her feelings, and not to judge herself by the size of her chest, writing that:

I can't change what others think of me [...] Instead, I change what I think of myself [...] My confidence and happiness should belong to myself, my heart, my soul, not my breast. (Lan, female)

Lan confesses that she still needs to work on the problem, as she falters once in a while. But she knows she will prevail in the end.

Reading to write

As the course evolved, the reading materials were chosen according to the country being discussed, the writing techniques being practiced, and a variety of subject matter. The themes of a number of the readings were often about hardship, so that students learnt not only about creative writing but also about life. One student noted that one text entitled 'Stories Matter' had drawn him to non-fiction:

I thought non-fiction is just another name for (auto) biography and memoir [...] I thought that kind of writing was boring. But the first lecture of the course changed much of my stereotype. Yes, non-fiction tells true stories; but they can be as interesting and edifying as fiction. I particularly love 'Stories Matter' [...] which shows the true power of storytelling (Yong, male).

'Stories Matter', by Jacqui Banacyszynski, is about the 1985 Ethiopian famine and is a piece that showcases the power of story-telling. Another reading, 'In Bed', a short story by Joan Didion about migraine, valorizes a positive attitude to life, a text that Feng found inspiring for her to face the Adam's apple issue:

If I had not been given this chance to write an article about my reflection on *The Bed*, I could not imagine when I would have the courage to face the fact and accept the reality. (Feng, female)

As shown in the last section, Feng's story then inspired Lan to write and reflect on her personal issues, and so such a snowball effect gives storytelling a life of its own in the creative writing class.

Learning to tell stories

Throughout the course, students demonstrated their ability to tell good stories. In terms of structure, Lan told a story about her and her sister sharing the same bed until the latter got married. The story evolves with the sister's habit of making Lan scratch her back as the two shared intimate details of life night after night. It ended with Lan

missing the sister in these lines: ‘You are always my bedtime story. If only you are beside me again.’

The students’ stories had no lack of good titles. One story, entitled ‘A Hot Bottle of Love’, tells the tale of the writer’s father who tried to cheer her up though she would not tell what bothered her. The turning point came when the daughter called from the boarding school wanting to go home. The father went to pick her up in the bitter cold, armed with a bottle of her favorite drink, unavailable around the school area, having wrapped the bottle in five layers to keep it warm. Another student story had the evocative title of ‘The Rocking Chair on the Balcony’. This featured the writer’s father, whom she last saw in a rocking chair before he died of a heart attack. This student reported that writing the story helped her to appreciate the father she had used to fear and had not understood.

Students also demonstrated a good understanding of the importance of the openings of stories, as in this example:

That night, nearly eight years after her death, I finally knew who she really was. (Ying, female)

Ying then proceeded to tell the story of a poverty-stricken distant relative who was her nanny for ten years. The writer took her presence for granted until her relative committed suicide because no one cared about her when she suffered from cancer. At the funeral, it occurred to the writer that she did not know anything about this old and frail woman who was maltreated by everyone in the extended family. The story ends with the name of the woman that the writer got to know for the first time.

Another student, Xin, opened the story about a secret lover as follows:

I have known him for seven years. I knew his every friend’s name and his ex-girlfriend’s name and the size of his pants and the brand of his socks. Yet I had never met him even for once. (Xin, female)

The writer chose these details to draw the reader into a story about the unlikely love between a good high school student and a bad one.

In deploying the English language, many students used rhetorical devices very effectively. One student wrote:

When I was in the swimming pool, I would always loop my dad as if I was a Koala and he was the eucalyptus (Chen, female).

Another student named Chen described her grandfather’s laugh as ‘like a Santa Claus’. Later on,

Chen described her grandfather’s hands losing their strength, referring to them as having ‘weaved his affection and tenderness into my childhood’, metonymically indicating the grandfather’s love for the writer.

Another student used repetition to describe the unrequited love she had for a young man in another university course:

I have sat behind him for twelve Wednesdays. I know he skipped class on the fourth Wednesday. I know he dyed his hair chestnut on the eighth Wednesday. I know he wore a silver ring on his right hand on the ninth Wednesday. (Fei, female)

The students’ work also displayed a great deal of subtlety. Yan wrote about her house, which had been damaged by a fire. Her father, who had worked hard to rebuild it, took her to the damaged house when she came home from university, and she described her experiences on returning home:

[N]or did I dare speak a word of comfort to the man who was standing front of me with his back to me. *You can keep your shoes on.* He uttered. And the smoke-stained indoor slippers explained why. I took off my shoes, however, and put on the slippers. It didn’t seem to bother him. As he walked in, left were his muddy footprints. Following behind him, I wiped out them with my feet (Yan, female).

The first touch of subtlety comes from the father being referred to as ‘the man’, setting a distance between the writer and the father, so as to distance the writer from her pain. The father’s speech is in italics, used to convey a sad low voice. Further subtlety comes not only through the writer putting on the slippers, but also from her wiping out the muddy footprints of the father. The writer’s seemingly objective narration reflects her love for the father and her sadness for the damage to the house.

Students were also able to use the language creatively, both in English and in negotiation with Chinese. For example, student Lu used *fan tong* in her story to mean that she ate a lot of rice, where the two Chinese characters denote *rice* and *bucket* respectively. She also used *lailailai* to present her mother’s speech:

‘*Lailailai*, a fat chicken wing [...] *Lailailai*, a savory pig feet [...] *Lailailai*, one more bowl of rice [...] *Lailailai*, another’. (Lu, female)

The word *lai* means *come* in Chinese, and the repeated *lai* shows that the mother is very keen on giving her daughter her best home cooking,

all of which helps give a Chinese flavor to the story. Another student, Wei, described herself and her boyfriend thus:

I used to study with him, eat with him, share everything with him. I thought him my *soul mate*. Now the only thing we keep doing is to eat together. I feel that he is my *meal mate*. (Wei, female)

Wei neatly captured the decline of her relationship with her boyfriend through the use of *meal mate*, a comment tinged with sad humor.

Coda

Over the last three years, the creative writing course at Sun Yat-sen University has been evolving to motivate students to write their own stories instead of writing for the sake of an assignment. It is a platform for students to improve their proficiency in English, but also to showcase their ability to write creatively. It has also become a way for students to understand not only themselves but also their friends and families, and, hopefully, to change their lives for the better. Or, as one of the students, Qing, puts it:

If life is a computer game, then creative writing is the big boss in it. You never know what you are going to come across, and you never know how it will affect you. (Qing, female)

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