The Chinese Writing Degree
Barbara Lam

Thanks to the generous Clinger Award, I was able to travel to China this summer to investigate the rise of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing programs throughout the country. I visited Fudan University in Shanghai, and City University and Hong Kong University in Hong Kong. I found a network of writers and teachers who were eager to speak about their experiences and expressed a love for writing that transcended language.I encountered extreme opposites in China, from underground poetry readings to the extravaganza known as the Hong Kong Book Fair, where reprints of ancient philosophical texts lay next to e-readers. In a trilingual biliterate culture, there's unprecedented space for literature to grow, and yet China hasn't seen a significant literary era for some time now. Is the proliferation of creative writing classes throughout the country some indication of a great age to come? In a country where so few students have the opportunity to go on to college, is this an appropriate time for such a degree? As a creative writing student in America, it was fascinating to see how and why the degree had spread halfway around the world.

The MFA in Creative Writing is old news in America—about 75 years old. The degree's availability has steadily increased over the decades and during its rise has created a catalog of stereotypes, including the "blind leading the blind" workshop, as Flannery O'Connor described it, the growing list of unpublished alumni, and the stifled writer stuck in the academic machine. There are heroes in the literary world that are graduates and advocates of the MFA systemthough, and universities have consistently transformed students into professors if not writers. For better or worse, MFA programs have flourished on the American academic landscape, growing from five in 1961 to over 800 today.

China has recently picked up on the trend: in the past three years, Hong Kong University began offering their MFA in Creative Writing, City University established their own low-residency version, and Fudan University launched their creative writing in Chinese MFA. This would not be the first time Chinese universities have followed in American footsteps, but these programs are not complete doppelgangers—the Chinese have different goals in mind.

The Hong Kong University MFA is most like its Western model, a result of the school's British colonial history. After the handover, Hong Kong's education system quickly evolved to adapt American practices like the credit system, and now, the four-year undergraduate degree. One of the oldest and most prestigious universities in Hong Kong, HKU's renowned English program is taught and run by experienced professors, many of whom were educated in the West. This constant cultural and educational exchange has helped the university propel forward and adopt initiativesliketeaching creative writing early on. Shirley Geok-Lin Limpioneeredcreative writing at the school over 10 years ago, beginning with foundingliterary magazine *Yuan Yang* (with the help of PK Leung) and the Moving Poetry program.City University and HKU are alike because they are in Hong Kong and are part of a society that has gone through different social, political, and

linguistic changes than those in mainland China. They face different challenges than Fudan but in other ways have more flexibility in their programs. The City and Fudan programs are unique however, in that City's MFA specializes in Asian writing and Fudan teaches creative writing in Chinese rather than English. Most significant though is that all three programs are the first of their kind, giving them the opportunity to become the Iowas of China.

Fudan University especially is in a first-come-more-prestige position. Already an esteemed school that is part of the "C9 League" China designated in 1998 in order to compete with the Ivy League, the Fudan name and the significance it carries means everything to China. Their school has a head start too; creative writing classes are difficult to find in mainland China regardless of program. Although they have existed at the university level for at least a decade—Alex Kuo cites 1996 at Baptist University as the first in Hong Kong and 2005 at Beijing Forestry University for Mainland China—the majority were taught in English and none led to a specialized degree.

The concept of teaching creative writing in a language other than English is foreign to most countries. First exported in 1970, the American-born MFA has long since spread around the world, but with English steadfastly attached. One of the few programs to teach in a different language is the MFA atDe La Salle University in Manila, where students are given a choice between writing in English or in Filipino.Teaching in different languages may become more popular however, with the creative writing programs in China acting as models.Fudan's Chinese program speaks for itself but City University is pushing beyond the boundaries of the typical MFA as well by emphasizing writing withAsian influences. Students hail from a variety of countries, and have represented everywhere from India to Malaysia to Australia. Their writing is spattered with nativedialects and language combinations (Chinglish, for example), and many confront the collision of two or more cultures.

Fudan's MFA website acknowledges their unique position in mainland China and also describes a long tradition of literary greatsthat gained respect for their work long before the writing program's existence. But now famous names can be attached not just to Fudan, but also to their MFA. The program doesn't need to claim that they can teach writers—they simply need to recruit great writers and house them under the Fudan name. Not only would this help build recognition, it would also signify the literary potential of China to the rest of the world. The political upheaval that pervades Chinese history took its toll on literary growth. Now could very well be thetime for a revival, with the help of MFA programs creating and encouraging strong writing communities.

Having a program backbone also gives students access to the literary prizes, fellowships, and publishing deals that exist in the network of MFA programs. Despite the stigma associated with the "literary masturbation" of prize-creating and prize-giving, as David Starkey described it at the 2011 Hong Kong Book Fair, national prizes could help bring Chinese writers into the public eye. This could lead to international recognition, which is important in for bringing Chinese literature to a global stage. China has not had a Nobel Peace Prize winning author ever in its history. The only writing in Chinese to win a

Nobel Prize in Literature is that of Gao Xingjian, who spent most of his life in France. But bringing creative writing into the academic setting may also subject writers to criticism and censorship, especially in mainland China. On Fudan's website, they define a good applicant as not only being a strong writer, but also a dedicated party member. And in a time when a writer like Han Han has become one of the most popular celebrities in China, it's clear that the public wants to read something both brave and honest.

Creative writing may be slow to break into Chinese culture through the university setting, but it is certainly becoming a force from the bottom up. In a country that consistently makes headlines for increasing waistlines and pocketbooks, a lot of newfound money is being spent on the youth and their education. Chinese society largely believes in filial piety, which emphasizes a tradition in which the parents care for their children until they in turn can care for their parents. Before that time comes though, every penny is put towards the child, and more specifically, their education. This practice has created a generation of overworked youth who move from classroom to classroom throughout the day. Even for those of lower means—poverty still exists in a majority of the country—education is a priority because it is seen as the most reliable path out of economic hardship. Doing well in school has become synonymous with security and happiness, and children from poorer families have even more pressure to excel academically.

To a Chinese parent, an optimal education translates tomastery of the English language. It is introduced as early as preschool, and children are required to take the foreign language all the way through high school. They are tested on their knowledge frequently, and most importantly in entrance exams like the well-known and pitiless *GaoKao*. Similar to the SAT in America—except the *GaoKao* can only be taken once—the scores are so vital that high school seniors spend their entire last year studying for the exam. Regular classes are disbanded and new material is put on hold while the students practice. *GaoKao*'s Hong Kong sister is the A-levels, and almost every student takes the accompanying AS-level Use of English exam. Pressure is high: *GaoKao*and A-level scores not only determine which colleges students are allowed to apply to, but also which majors.

This heavy emphasis on English has created a booming market for foreign language acquisition techniques, and one of the most cutting-edge methods is creative writing. Teachers have espoused the benefits of using creative writing to learn a new language for some time. The innovation and critical thinking skills that are needed to create novel combinations of words produce a student that is not only fluent in the language but also confident. Poetry especially, because of its rhythm, is used to teach memorable grammatical structure and the stressed-unstressed patterns of the English language.

Creative writing also addresses a concern the Chinese have had over the last few years: their students' perceived lack of originality. Frequently labeled an imitative rather than innovative country, China's recent education mandates have all strived to add critical thinking skills to courses. Adding creative writing helps schools feel like "difference engines." In Mark McGurl's book *The Program Era*, he describes the "difference engine" as feeling capable of producing original thinkers. This is part of the intent behind the three university's MFA programs.The transition to creativity is a more difficult one at the

high school level, however, because of the way the college entrance exams are constructed. Built like any other standardized test, their defining role in a Chinese student's lifemakes any education that doesn't lead to acing the exam obsolete. This has worked directly to encourage rote memorization in classes. But there is more flexibility with younger students, and middle and elementary schools have begun implementing creative writing classes in both Chinese and English.

There is a significant lack of capable teachers, however. The current teachers are products of the Chinese education system; they have likely never seen creative writing in the academic setting. If they did, itwas not in an interactive, discussion-based style, making it difficult to understand how to teach such a class. And creativity is not inherent to any subject, even creative writing, which can quickly turn into formulaic essay writing in the wrong hands. Training creative teachers is not a priority, though. Even at the university level, some teachers will use a creative writing class as an ESL class because their students struggle so much with the language. These teachers see English communication skills as a more applicable skill they can equip their students with when they are facing the world of international job interviews.

Outside of schools, creative writing has overtaken extracurricular activities and American-style summer camps. Longfeifei, a summer camp in Shanghai, has creative writing classes in English as well as literature classes in Chinese. Founded by Fanghua Jiang in 2008 when she perceived a lack of personal development summer camps in China, she saw the opportunity to encourage immersion, confidence, and creativity to help both students learning Chinese and those learning English (expat children make up about 50% of the camp). The goal is the same regardless of which language is foreign: introduce students to the creative side of the language in order to interest them in furthering their speaking, reading, and writing skills. These independent camps and programs have more flexibility and resources for hiring, allowing them to recruit Western-trained teachers who have experienced small, discussion-based classes. These teachers frequently carry either English or MFA in Creative Writing degrees.

An MFA in Creative Writing has become the most direct way of expressing familiarity with how to teach creative writing. The open communication of a workshop class may be obvious to American students who have seen the style implemented for several years of their education, but it is still a mystery not just to China but to many other parts of the world. Xu Xi cites one student currently enrolled in the low-residency City MFA who wants not only to improve his writing, but also to learn how an MFA program is taught so that he can bring the concept back to his own institution, Stockholm University. Another student, Fan Dai, is similarly as interested in exploring writing in English as she is in learning how to teach creative writing to her students back at Sun Yat-sen University in SouthChina (Dai, a professor of English, has written several papers noting the lack of creative writing classes and counseling resources on Chinese campuses and how writing can help with both.) The MFA is no longer just an experience for writers, but also a degree for teachers. With an increasing demand for capable teachers not just in schools but also in private programs, more students will be able to turn to the creative writing degree as a solid credential.

The changes can also be seen at the undergraduate level, more so in Hong Kong than in Mainland China. The bustling island has more and more jobs that are demanding creative training as well as English—cultural and lingual—fluency. In response, City University revamped their undergraduate English degree program to encompass two streams: the BA in English for Professional Communications and the BA in English for the Professions. Minors include English Language and Literature, Professional Communication, and Creative Professions. The website states that the "goal of [a BA in English for Professional Communications] is to train students to be innovative and creative users of the English language in a globalized society." Despite the tinge of business that pervades so much of Hong Kong society, the shift towards creativity is visible.

This pragmatic application of English and creativity can help revive a currently faltering perception of the humanities. "As [Hong Kong] accumulated wealth," Xu Xi writes in *Pop Goes The Idol*, "more opportunities emerged for young people to indulge their desire for sports, the arts or other such 'trivial pursuits' as reading and writing…[but] the mandate remains: any life-long endeavor that meets 'parental approval' is one that must have a practical outcome, i.e.: making a living." English studies are typically seen as back-up majors to something more practical like a degree in business. But the humanities are now getting a pragmatic spin. Even with the proliferation of programs that teach creative writing, they don't advertise the writing—instead they emphasize that they teach *English*, that they enhance *creativity*, buzz words for the young Chinese parent.

In the end, it's a good thing that China, with its unsentimental eye, has picked up the MFA in Creative Writing. The programs may not create a generation of writers but they can create a generation of teachers who will go on to inspire students with the beauty of the craft, and in this way a new Chinese literary culture will have the opportunity to grow.