



Teaching Creative Writing in Asia

Md Mujib Ullah

Shanghai Jiao Tong University

mdmujibullah@gmail.com

Review of

Whetter, Darryl, ed. *Teaching Creative Writing in Asia*. Routledge, 2022. 228 pages.

With the decline of humanities, especially in the west, at the edge of the contemporary techno-scientific revolution, institutional teaching and practice of creative writing lose their momentum not only in the Anglo-American sphere but also in some places in contemporary Asia. There is a silver lining, though, in Asia due to the flourishing state of humanities in East and South (East) Asia, especially in vibrant India and rising China, in a growing and transforming realm of creative and cultural industries. Consequently, creative writing pedagogy becomes a crucial cutting-edge issue within the institution. In such a context, Darryl Whetter's edited volume, *Teaching Creative Writing in Asia*, curating essays from 14 well-known writing professors, is a highly engaging and dynamic book exploring the pressing issues in contemporary creative writing education in multi-lingual Asia in the wake of a knowledge-based economy.

Daryl Whetter notes that there are numerous recent books written on the issues of creative writing. Despite this high volume of publications, teaching creative writing in the mostly monolingual American classroom is under severe scrutiny. So, creative writing pedagogy scholarship becomes boring, and creative writing study requires more than a massive re-examination by echoing Ezra Pound's modernist slogan "making it new." Although the number of creative writing programs has increased to a staggering number in the USA, the future of it seems gloomy there not only for the technological boom but also for the crisis in the humanities, the job placement crisis after graduation, and limited funding opportunities for creative writing programs in academia. However, the model of teaching creative writing institutionally has gained momentum in recent years in several regions in Asia as "novel, unique, and expanding" and still "thriv[es]" in the writing classroom (2). This trend signifies rapid cultural hybridity in creative forms in institutional landscapes and markets in some places, such as the "neo-liberal" economic and cultural

globalization in India, Philippines, and Singapore and the opening up of China, in particular in East Asia. Whetter thinks, “the empire is writing back *again*” with the rise of the transformative Anglo-American English educational systems in Asia (3). He describes his teaching experiences in Singapore. After teaching creative writing for 16 years at four different Canadian universities, he has been initially a skeptical professor about teaching in Singapore while serving as the inaugural director of the first full creative writing master’s degree in Singapore at LASALLE College of the Arts because of his limited speaking skill in Singaporean language and the existing nature of multilingualism and code-switching among the writers. He finds Singlish as a “truly ubiquitous language,” yet one of the writers whom he knows through his attendance at SingLit Station fails to write his poems in Singlish for his undergraduate thesis due to his professor’s lack of speaking ability in Singlish (18). Whetter’s experiences in Singapore suggest that knowing the local main language and using that in a creative writing classroom can be handy.

Xu Xi refers to some problems in teaching creative writing in Asia. She opines, “[d]ialect is a loaded nomenclature as well as a problematic linguistic concept in many languages” (47). She is also concerned about the less exposure of not well-known writers of Asian origin. However, she finds that poetry graduates are more successful in publishing their works and winning accolades. Her view is that teaching fiction and non-fiction writers in Asia is more challenging than teaching poetry for linguistic reasons. She experiences teaching transcultural and translingual issues to Asian writers as problematic. Besides, she finds amorality in teaching creative writing in Asia in English because of English’s disconnection from the local languages and literatures. She is a supporter of having a writing faculty with great publication records over academic degree holders with less or no publication. She expects that creative works should have great connections with writers’ languages, histories, and cultures: “[t]he point of creative writing is to break rules, disrupt the comfort zones of language, society, culture in order to create art” (54). Saikat Majumder discusses the history, reality, and prospects of teaching creative writing in India. He prefers teaching English creative writing as a minor at the undergraduate level to give students wide options to choose their careers. English is used as the bridge language in India, a country with many indigenous vernaculars. Majumder rightly states, “our English writing derives much life from the speech, dialect, and literature of the local vernaculars, often carrying their shadow in the syntax” (58). He raises his concern about the practical and critical aspects of creative writing. He thinks of criticism as a genre of literature like prose or poetry. He is open to helping a writer during the editing phase and says, “[w]riting is a lonely affair” (62).

Nandini Dhar feels the need for formal teaching of creative writing in a revised model in India. She finds a positive side to creative writing as “CW becomes a significant element in the students’ interdisciplinary, liberal education” (71). However, she observes that class and economic status

become issues in the corporatized culture. In contrast to Majumder, regarding the prospect of creative writing in India, Dhar states, “[i]ndeed, in almost all of the private, liberal arts campuses like ours, there is an increasing demand for creative writing classes” (72). Page Richards investigates the history of creative writing and the contemporary rise of multilingual writers and demands reframing the field according to 21st-century contexts. He suggests students need to study extensively and gain knowledge “to keep pace and to lead” in an era of scientific developments, fluidity, and artificial intelligence (97). He proposes to support multilingual writers worldwide in the contemporary phenomena of creative and cultural industries.

Fan Dai and Ling Li offer a comprehensive account of the state of creative writing in mainland China. The creative writing course/program either offered in Chinese/English in China is a recent phenomenon. As creative writing is one kind of “self-translation,” it is necessary to disseminate the cultural contents in a comprehensible way. The workshops become useful for the writers to get feedback in such a context. Dai and Li suggest that writers should be familiar with the needs of international readers.

James Shea thinks teaching poetry writing in Hong Kong is unique as translation methods are crucial in a creative writing classroom due to the usage of several languages there. Multilingual instruction helps international students in such an environment. While discussing the implication of various translation strategies in the poetry workshop, Shea finds, “[s]elf-translation is a promising way to teach writing among multilingual students, because they start to see their language abilities side by side, rather than as one shutting out the other” (121).

Jose Dalisay Jr. explores the Philippines’ long tradition of creative writing in the institution. Although English is the second colonial language in the Philippines, teaching creative writing has a long history of over 50 years there initiating the first program of creative writing in Southeast Asia. Dalisay Jr. hopes that Filipinos English writing will earn its proper merit in the future. Creative writing workshops are as important as classroom activities in the creative writing program in the Philippines. Although creative writing flourishes a lot in the Philippines, its career prospect is not bright. Dalisay Jr. expects, “[t]eaching CW in English to Filipino students will certainly continue if not in fact grow in the near future, ensuring a constant replenishment of writers for generations to come” (144). Robin Hemley finds women from the upper classes write more memoirs in the Philippines and suggests that the term “autofiction” should be used instead of “memoir” in that region. Pointing out the problems of writing a memoir in the Philippines, Hemley says, “[a] memoirist doesn’t necessarily have to write about the fissures of family life for the family to lose face— any private disclosure, good or bad, risks the loss of face” (148).

While teaching creative writing in Taiwan, Robert Anthony Siegel finds students highly skilled in memorization and “open, expressive, curious, playful, and observant” and “[hard]-working” (159). The Taiwanese writers experiment a lot in their creative writing which may be used as a frequent classroom model elsewhere in Asia.

Barrie Sherwood says, “[c]reative non-fiction demands humility, or at the very least, a sincere awareness of one’s own arrogance” (172). He believes the writers in Singapore write in the same ways as others do around the world, but differing in subject matters. He thinks good writing or bad writing is universal in the writing classroom regardless of its location. Stephanie Burrige explores the issues of writing and dance in the Asia-Pacific region. Self-narration plays a pivotal role in dance to offer the view of an artist. Burrige opines, “[t]he body is a powerful means of dialogue that, through embodiment, encapsulates signs and symbols of place and belief. In the Asia-Pacific, choreographers utili[z]e this embodiment with diversity, dynamism, and conviction that encompass culturally diverse populations and dance traditions” (176). After giving a lucid account of the different aspects of dance performance, she suggests, “[t]he spontaneity of the artist’s voice should be valued along with an appreciation for borderless contexts, interdisciplinary, collective, and collaborative ways of working, where multiple voices contribute equally to the narrative of the research” (185) Sreedhevi Iyer shifts her turn to the philosophy of cosmopolitanism as per Kwame Anthony Appiah in creative writing pedagogy exploring the first-person narrative point of view and existing contradiction in cosmopolitanism based on craft. Culture is always changing and fluid in the cosmopolitan world. Iyer finds, “[i]n a socio-literary environment where the authenticity of individual lived experience is considered to be of paramount value, what you identify as authentic about yourself becomes the thing with which you wield your offen[s]e— in terms of racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and more. This phenomenon becomes especially relevant in CW pedagogy” (197).

The contributors to this volume cover a wide range of issues of teaching creative writing in Asia and elsewhere from several historical and pedagogical perspectives. They offer insightful and critical comments, suggestions, and real-life experiences of teaching creative writing in the classroom. It is safe to mention that the prospect of creative teaching, education, and multilingualism in Asia are sanguine. Hence, this volume, the first one of its kind, will be of great interest to writers and academics for many years to come.