

THE STATUS OF CREATIVE WRITING AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE: WHERE IT THRIVES AND DIVES – WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON JAPAN AND ITS “KATAIZED” CULTURE

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“Culture is a prism through which we view the world” – Anonymous.

The purpose of this paper is to address the reasons why there are so few Creative Writing Programs in Asian Universities, especially Japanese ones. With the exception of success stories regarding popularity of creative writing programs in two Asian countries, there is a dearth of major programs leading toward a B.A., M.A. and/or Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, and only a small number of classes in Creative Writing are offered in literature departments in most Asian universities. This stands in sharp contrast to American universities where Creative Writing has long been an academic discipline and several noteworthy breakthrough writers have come out of MFA programs in the U.S. (the list is long). The latter half of the paper addresses theoretical concerns and practical applications concerning how to teach writing to advanced EFL students in Japan.

In an April 9, 2015 article in the International New York Times entitled "Why Writers Love to Hate the M.F.A." Cecilia Capuzzi Simon wrote that in 2015 the Iowa Writers' Workshop reported a 10 percent surge in applicants to 1,380, despite 2015 being a year with a strong economy in the U.S. She went on to write that "explosive" is the best word used to describe the growth of MFA programs in creative writing in the U.S.

While the MFA at the University of Iowa was established in 1936 as the first university to offer the MFA, by 1994, there were 64 MFA programs. By last year, that number had more than tripled, to 229 in the U.S. (with another 152 M.A.

Programs in creative writing), according to the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, which added that between 3,000 and 4,000 students a year graduate with the degree; last year, about 20,000 applications were sent out.

The implications of these facts are clear: American universities lead the world when it comes to the teaching and nurturing of emerging writers.

I. A RISKY AREA IN JAPAN

Former visiting professor of Tokushima University and award winning novelist Suzanne Kamata, also a graduate of an MFA program, said that there are various factors, including economic ones, on why MFA programs are almost nonexistent in Japan. Based on her many years as an educator in Japan, she said MFA programs have proliferated in the U.S. over the past 20 years or so, while Japan has been struggling with a recession. Young people have been having a harder time finding jobs.

She went on to say that the MFA is a risky degree. It doesn't guarantee publication of a book with a high advance. It doesn't guarantee publication at all. In the U.S., many MFA candidates may think that they have the option, if not the expectation, to teach in one of the many MFA programs in the country in order to support themselves while writing. In Japan, there are few such teaching positions. Japan is generally speaking a risk-averse society, she said, adding that young people are generally very practical when making career choices. Few Japanese parents tell their kids to "follow their bliss," as was the American parental maxim up to fairly recently.

She also thinks it's a PR issue. The idea that talent is innate, and that writers can't be created in a classroom may persist here. "Big Japanese literary prizes often go to writers with little or no formal education," she said. "A few years ago, a 19-year-old won the Akutagawa Prize, and last year it was a comedian. In the U.S the flashy big money book deals often go to graduates of MFA Programs." She said she assumes that advances in Japan are low and wondered if publishing houses here even pay advances.

Concerning the existence of creative writing at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, Professor Gregory Strong of the English Department there said he was clueless as for the lack of creative writing programs in Japanese universities other than that there was no explosive growth in the field and no phenomena of professional writers setting up and teaching nonexistent creative writing majors.

He did address the lack of popularity of courses in creative writing in English departments at Japanese universities via a comparison to creative writing in the U.S., saying that American students would be loathe to take creative writing classes in Spanish, e.g.

As for EFL Creative Writing, he said at Aoyama they've offered only one class for over 20 years, and interest in that class has been steadily eroding. "The problem with creative writing courses in EFL is straightforward. The course is open to Juniors and Seniors. Students don't like writing in a second language and we've always had trouble running the class. The numbers have never gotten higher than 20. In 2015, there was only one applicant and the course was cancelled, much to the anger and disappointment of the teacher giving it. In 2016, there were about 14 students in the spring semester and eight in the fall. Some of the students in the spring were foreign students at AGU on a year long exchange. For them, most Americans that is, it's an easy credit while studying at a Japanese university."

He went on to say that there are some courses where students do art-filmmaking and script-writing. One is in the English Department; it's a "performance" class where students do readers' theatre, and perform sketches. He added that there are some difficulties bridging the boundaries of writing and theatre.

He concluded that the real point is that EFL students perceive it as a hard course to take. Easier credit can be found in a lecture course, for example, he said, adding that there's more interest among students for license-granting type courses, i.e. those that lead to a teacher's license.

II. THE LACK OF CREATIVE WRITING AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

As answer to my query regarding creative writing classes in the English Department of the National University of Singapore, the department head, Professor John Richardson, said there is no full creative writing program there - and not a minor either.

“In the English department, we have two playwriting modules. Their enrolment is capped at 15, and quite a number of plays produced in the modules have been produced commercially- some of them professionally. There’s also one creative writing module in the University Scholars Programme, and some -- I’m not sure how many -- in Yale-NUS college. There’s a one-semester writer-in-residence programme in USP and the English department, and Yale-NUS brings writers in, too. I think that’s about it.”

Here he hedged, saying, “My own feelings about undergraduate writing programs are ambivalent. I know they enroll large numbers in the U.S. and Australia and possibly the UK. But presumably only a small minority of their graduates become writers. What happens to the rest I don’t know. It seems to me that the range of transferable skills from such a course of study is likely to be narrower than that from a program like, say, English literature. On the other hand, I do see real benefits from writing residencies, writing classes and a writing culture.”

III. BRIGHT SPOT: HONG KONG

Professor Page Richards of Hong Kong University addressed the popularity levels of creative writing programs in Hong Kong and obliquely China.

Said she, “I can speak most specifically of my experience in Hong Kong. As I arrived from the U.S. more than fifteen years ago to HKU, I arrived to an envelope of articles cut from the SCMP and other local publications in English waiting in my new mailbox at the university. They outlined the relative absence of creative writing classes, workshops, or programmes with major and local institutional support in Hong

Kong. There were already, of course, many and notable strongholds of the arts and creative writing across the city, both in Chinese and English languages, including the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts for undergraduates; Lingnan University's long history of support to creative writers and writers in residency; Professor Shirley Lim's Moving Poetry Programmes launched in 2000; local poetry and storytelling circles, such as the Hong Kong Writers Circle; and radio broadcasting of stories and local life writing, as we now call it, at RTHK, for instance, on the programming of "Songbirds," just to name only a few. Many of the articles, relating especially to education to the tertiary curriculum, however, outlined combined forces of history of impediment here to a flourishing climate of professional expansion of offerings especially toward degree-granting programmes in Hong Kong: including a range of issues, from British and Chinese exam-based practices and models of assessment, to overstated and outworn clichés of mixed-language use, to postcolonial racist attitudes toward local aptitudes and creativity. The many disturbing articles marked, at the same time, a major shift of perception back in 2000, already growing; a deep raising of the awareness for a still relatively egregious scarcity of professional degree-granting contexts and encouragements, open to students and writers or all who are now in what is often earmarked as the 'creative industries.'"

She went on to say, "The urgent need to address and redress this situation was a call to arms. And, skipping ahead now fifteen years, this period has marked a major change in the region. I was hired at HKU to help contribute to this expanding turn-around of perception and practice. And the growing support beginning in 2000 was already in full swing: from colleagues in the School of English and at the other local universities; to writers and artists in the community; to international and visiting writers and artists joining us throughout the years to expand and catalyze new dimensions. My work at HKU included, upon arrival, for instance, reanimating local drama study and practice at HKU and in the community; building on local foundations for what is now the thriving Creative Writing Studio in the School of English, a Studio that now offers home to the Writers' Series; the Drama Series; the internationally circulated literary journal Yuan Yang, with a focus on local writers; the HKU International Poetry Prize and First Book Award with HKU Press; writer-in-

residency programmes, and much more.

As for finding a job after graduation, I discussed, is such a field of study considered too high risk for conservative, by contrast, Asians who tend to gravitate to the sure thing of STEM majors (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math)?

She said, “We do recognise, all of us global travellers, cultural imperatives in major cities of business, such as New York or Hong Kong, bending a path toward immediately recognisable financial awards and degrees. Having grown up in the U.S. in major cities, I recognise such encouragement toward visible success, especially in relatively young cities on the historical map, earmarked by drives toward immediate position and global performance. Such pressures of course exist in Hong Kong, too, for instance, as they did and do in the U.S. At the same time, the risks of pursuing the creative fields, high as they are anywhere in the world, are met in Hong Kong with the equally high drive to take the risk. The spirit and drive here of creative writers and artists, in fellowship with their peers worldwide, happily, is taking full stride, forging a new path here in Hong Kong, as the degree-granting and creative writing programmes and communities of writers grow. While programmes such as the Iowa Workshops began more than fifty years ago in the U.S. to take hold and to offer alternatives at the academy for the writers and artists, so too Hong Kong in its unusual postcolonial politics is now establishing the MFA degree in creative writing, and other professional proliferation, unique to its multi-language and regional uniqueness.

“Briefly, the field of ‘creative industries’ is taking off, so to speak, and the potential and interest in ‘creativity’ across all jobs and markets has never been higher here in the last fifteen years. The HKU MFA in Creative Writing, for instance, has already offered its writers professional opportunities for its graduates that give chances not only to new openings but also to promotions and repositioning of field. One of our MFA graduates, for example, found that the MFA studies and degree ignited his latent compositional talent in music, and transformed his life: he changed fields after graduation to his professional calling in music after graduation. Others discover more about their convictions and find their professional field sharpened, not to mention their continuing work as writers, as they pursue their craft and field in drafting, revision, and publications.”

IV. ANOTHER BRIGHT SPOT: THE PHILIPPINES

Professor Conchitina Cruz of the University of the Philippines said that one of her dissertation chapters focuses on the founders of the Silliman University National Writers Workshop, which is said to be the oldest creative writing workshop in Asia. She added that it is definitely the oldest workshop in the Philippines, expounding, “I trace the American colonial origins of the workshop and link its aesthetics and politics to American cultural diplomacy post-colonization. I haven't done any comparative analysis with regard to creative writing programs in Asian countries so unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to help in that matter.”

V. WHY CREATIVE WRITING IS SO OBVIOUSLY LACKING IN JAPAN

Now for my own thoughts on the matter in the Land of the Rising Sun. First, I need to explain the dynamics of the writing workshop and how they run counter to the teacher-centered Japanese classroom. The creative writing workshop is a student-centered seminar type class where the students sit in a semi-circle and the professor sits in front, rounding out the “circle.” In fiction, the professor usually appoints two student critics of the piece under discussion to lead off the critique then the professor gives his or her take before whole class discussion of the work ensues. Since American students are encouraged to speak up in class there's no shortage of opinions and discussion of the work under review.

In Japan we have what I like to term Confucius Confusion where there's a blind respect for authority to the point that the only person speaking in the classroom is the teacher. Questions and/or comments from students are virtually non-existent. This teacher-centered classroom was suited to feed programmable robotic employees into a manufacturing based economy with its factories and super hierarchically aged-based, old-boy ruled offices. But now that the Japanese economy is becoming more diversified and IT and AI saturated, critical and creative thinkers with leadership and/or innovative skills who can take individual initiative and generate new ideas for

commodification are essential to the success of the given enterprise.

The teacher has absolute control and is loathe to give up that absolute power to empower his charges and at the same time fears the “chaos” (a Japanese colleague’s term) that could ensue should students be encouraged to contribute. It must be pointed out here the huge sway that “kata” or strict ways of how things are done are taught from an early age in Japan. This shikata or yari kata cultural norm across Japanese culture accounts for the fact that Japan leads the world in terms of “Strong Uncertainty Avoidance.” This is based on the research of Geert Hofstede, of the Institute for Research on Intercultural Cooperation in the Netherlands as described in an article in the *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, which surveyed people from 67 countries working for 90 of the largest multinational corporations. The answers to his questions showed that people from the same country tended to have very similar attitudes.

Indeed. Japan has the strongest uncertainty avoidance because it follows rigid “kata.” In fact, one of the reasons why Japan was so slow to surrender in WWII was that a “kata” for surrender in Japanese culture didn’t exist.

Here I quote a well-respected Japanologist: “The country’s newly organized Western-style military forces, made up of commoner soldiers and sailors, usually commanded by former samurai, were formidable examples of kata in action. The armed forces were taught how to fight and how to die – but not how to surrender. The end of World War II was probably delayed by several weeks because there was no kata for doing something that was virtually unthinkable. Some officers, quoted by Japanese author Hatsusho Naito in *The Thundergods – the story of Japan’s World War II kamikaze corps* -- who wanted to end the carnage bemoaned this lack, exclaiming ‘We don’t know how to surrender!’” (DeMente 44).

Here I go on to quote DeMente: “Shikata is one of the most used and most important words in the Japanese language. It means ‘way of doing things,’ with special emphasis on the form and order of the process. The root meaning of shi is a combination of ‘support’ and ‘serve’ in the sense of an inferior supporting and serving a superior. Kata, by itself, is usually translated as ‘form.’

“Some of the more common uses of kata include yomi kata – “Way of

reading, tabe kata ‘way of eating,’ kaki kata – ‘way of writing’ kangage kata – ‘way of thinking’ iki kata ‘way of living.’ ... In fact, there is hardly an area of Japanese thought or behavior that is not directly influenced by one or more kata” (DeMente 1).

He goes on to say, “Doing things the right way was often more important than doing the right things! Eventually, the proper observance of kata was equated with morality. One was either ‘in’ kata – kata ni hamaru – or ‘out’ of kata – kata ni hamaranai. Being out of kata was a sin against society, and in form-conscious Japan could be fatal” (DeMente 2).

Regarding kaki kata, there’s kata in spades in Japanese poetry, specifically haiku with its 5-7-5 syllabic pattern and the essential season word as listed in a dictionary of such. There are hundreds if not thousands of haiku societies in Japan and haiku by their very nature are the most aesthetic resonant form of literature in the world, given, again, the rigid kaki kata and season words built into them.

VI. FINALLY: PEDAGOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS, PROVISIONAL PRINCIPLES

Literary writing is an intimate venture. The more ambitious the work the more there is at stake. It almost goes without saying, then, that a guiding principle in teaching writing or any imaginative discipline is not to talk down to students. By listening to them with seriousness and responding to their writings carefully and respectfully, the conscientious writing instructor helps win trust and in turn creates an environment where the young student writer can do his or her best work. The student writer feeling both secure and flexible is thus empowered, but in an imaginative rather than in an institutionalized way. Empowering the young student writer means encouraging her to conceive of the writing class as being unconditioned by history, with what went before in college or high school having been, most often, courses concerned with left-brain quantifying functions not to mention World History and Japanese with all those kanji, but in ESL classes, alas, grammar translation teaching methodology (bunpo honyaku) as preparation for the all defining university entrance examinations is the overarching heuristic.

That the talented imaginative writer can fantasize and dream but cannot always deliberate signifies that imaginative writing is often unreasoned and sometimes unreasonable. Often enough, a fertile and original imagination resides in an otherwise ungovernable and even slightly backward-seeming intelligence. Every young imaginative writer of talent is not uneducable, however. Far from it. Nor is the imagination meant to be over-mystified here. However, in this time of homogenized media(ted) consciousness, it is crucial not to under-mystify the imagination. Another provisional principle and useful pedagogical assumption is that each writer has his or her own voice and range. The function of the instructor is to uncover something of that voice, and once, uncovered, to help the student refine, cultivate and perhaps expand his or her voice. (Note that voice is not exclusively a language function but the totality of a writer's personality, experience and expression.) Put another way: the instructor can help the beginning writer uncover her arable acre, which can then be enlarged and cultivated. Concerning the student who has no arable acre, she will, often enough, be a student who does well or rather well in her other courses. Nonetheless, she should be dealt with honestly but delicately.

From conducting a tea ceremony to the proper way to write a literary and imaginative work, kata –prescribed routines, rules and patterns of behavior – guide every-day living in Japan. This likely makes following “standard work,” an important element of learning, a seemingly more natural process for Japanese people.

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