

The Humanities in Asia 2

Evelyn T.Y. Chan
Michael O'Sullivan *Editors*

The Humanities in Contemporary Chinese Contexts



 Springer

The Humanities in Asia

Volume 2

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ISSN 2363-6890

The Humanities in Asia

ISBN 978-981-10-2265-4

DOI 10.1007/978-981-10-2267-8

ISSN 2363-6904 (electronic)

ISBN 978-981-10-2267-8 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016948229

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by Springer Nature

The registered company is Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.

The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #22-06/08 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

The original version of the book frontmatter was revised: The section Contributors has been newly added. The erratum to the book frontmatter is available at DOI [10.1007/978-981-10-2267-8_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2267-8_10)

Preface

Recent years have seen numerous invaluable studies on the humanities in universities published by commentators, teachers, and academics who argue for the importance of the humanities (e.g. Kronman 2007; Nussbaum 2010; Harpham 2011; Collini 2012). Such a need for a reconsideration of the humanities and the arts has come about because of changing educational conditions: one of the main challenges these disciplines have had to face is how to position themselves vis-à-vis utilitarian goals in education systems increasingly run on an explicitly commercial basis. These studies have principally focused on the humanities from a US, UK, or European perspective. Few, if any, studies exist which focus on the current role of the humanities in universities in Chinese contexts. Given the fact that the UK and USA are still regarded as today's university powerhouses, the predominant focus on these countries in existing discussions of the humanities is not surprising. However, this has also given rise to the necessity of including contemporary Chinese contexts in the debate.

This book brings together the perspectives of eminent and emerging scholars on contemporary issues relevant to the practice, pedagogy, and institutionalization of the humanities in the three Chinese contexts of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. It addresses the need to investigate how the above issues, almost exclusively drawn from Western contexts under the banner of the ever-popular "crisis in the humanities," play out in the present day in Chinese contexts, in which the humanities may or may not have different social and pedagogical roles. As one important example, historically, the Chinese concept of the humanities has taken a very different path from that in the West. We can choose to trace humanities education in China back to the six arts in Confucian education, namely rites and rituals, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and writing, and mathematics or prediction (Hsiung 2015, 1268), as well as the later Five Classics and Four Books based on Confucian teaching which became the canon for civil service qualification in imperial China (Hsiung 2015, 1268–69). This Confucian framework emphasizes the humanities as the development of moral virtues in a person, and the dissemination of these in society (De Bary 2007, 66). This is in contrast to the sources

Geoffrey Galt Harpham (2011) attributes to the modern humanities in *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, which he traces to the *studia humanitatis* of the fifteenth century and to Renaissance humanism. Through a return to classical and early Christian works, the *studia humanitatis* “sought to recall humankind to its divine origins” (83). The final purpose of such “extended meditation on ethics” was “personal salvation” and “manifestly Christian” (83). They developed in response to the work of the universities of the day that were seen to privilege “rationalism, the study of logic, and natural philosophy” (84). Without claiming a divide between the humanities in Western and Chinese contexts on account of this, the different traditions, although not sustained in later centuries, may have provided a different religious and/or philosophical underpinning to the study of the humanities in these places.

Such varying historical influences may have continued to influence humanities education in universities in today’s Chinese societies, leading to divergences in conditions in higher education which deserve closer examination. While there have been important works in English (for instance, Zhang 1992; Ames 2011) that have navigated the shared hermeneutic and intellectual histories of these traditions, it is timely that we examine the practice and philosophy of the humanities in these Chinese contexts in the light of its continuing dialogue with the more established Western humanistic practices and values. As Asian universities rise in the global rankings and as East–West university collaborations and partnerships become more common, it is important that the nature, practice, and institutionalization of the humanities in contemporary Chinese contexts are explored and described for English readers. Setting out to explore different perspectives from the ones provided above which an examination of the humanities in Chinese contexts may yield, this book does not aim at establishing a position of polarity for the book which would pit Western contexts against Chinese ones. This will help not only illumine the contexts in question, but also potentially shed light on how to rearticulate the importance of the humanities in Western contexts, creating an intercultural dialogue focused on the humanities. As universities around the world strive to move the Eastern and Western traditions of learning closer together, these locations of potential cultural exchange should be further explored.

In addition, the socio-economic conditions in Chinese contexts can also differ significantly from those faced in Western countries. To draw from the example of the two editors’ own context, Hong Kong, the “global city” whose government-funded universities and educational frameworks were all established while it was a colony of Britain, faces the question of how to balance its educational traditions as its universities prosper and expand. Although Hong Kong is not suffering similar higher education funding cuts as those experienced elsewhere, this does not mean the humanities do not face unique dilemmas of their own there, nor that questions of humanities’ social worth are not prevalent, since the university, as part of society and economy, is inextricably implicated in the liberal market ideology Hong Kong (and other Chinese contexts) operate under. Such specific conditions warrant separate investigation.

One prominent issue that reappears across all chapters is the unique vulnerability of the humanities in higher education to the specific external conditions found in three places, most significant of these the wider economy and managerial administration. Educational bureaus are increasingly concerned about the economic effects of government higher education policy. Fundamental questions are being posed by the governments in the region: How and what does higher education contribute to individuals' lives professionally and personally? How can we understand and analyse the impact of higher education on people's lives as a factor in national or regional economy and society? Should we continue to support the humanities as a social good when their practical contribution to the economy and the public good is less clear than is the contribution of other university sectors and faculties? All the chapters in this book engage with such questions in disparate ways and using different approaches. Although there are at times varying viewpoints on the same geographical region, a complimentary picture emerges: a greater understanding, both by insiders and outsiders of the field, of the humanities and the unique roles they can play in these contexts is needed, so as to revitalize the humanities, for the benefit of the field as well as for the societies they are ensconced in.

This book is divided into three parts that are dedicated to three contexts. The first part on Hong Kong looks at the unique characteristics and challenges faced by the humanities there. The opening chapter by Leo Ou-fan Lee, who is well known and has been at the forefront of moves to revitalize the Asian humanities in Hong Kong and elsewhere, returns us to a discussion of the word "idea" in the titles of such major works on the university as Ambrose King's *The Idea of a University* and John Henry Newman's work of the same title. In a rich discussion of the history of the modern university, Lee reminds us of how Karl Jaspers and Wilhelm von Humboldt saw the university as an institution that privileges the "intellectual community," the "organic whole," and research as a practice that involves open-ended exploration and learning as well as "character building." Lee questions the motivations and goals of the new managerial university that focuses on "practical skills," evaluations, and a system where the "new trinity of research/assessment/ranking has become a 'holy Bible' of higher education." Referring us back to the work of sociologist Edward Shils, Lee relates how Shils saw the academic as embodying an "intellectual calling" where the three basic realms of university education are "the realm of the spirit, the realm of scientific and scholarly truth, and the realm of the power of reason." Lee also compares and contrasts the managerial approaches and administrative and research practices of the different universities he has worked at (Harvard, Chicago, UCLA, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong). He argues that the humanities can lead the way in challenging the "instrumental rationality" and audit culture of the new managerial university by reminding us of how important error and risk are to the work of academic enquiry and scientific exploration.

In the second chapter in this part, Michael O'Sullivan examines how the important concepts of meritocracy and individualism are being negotiated in the Hong Kong humanities context, one that at the university level has grown progressively more politicized over the last number of years and particularly in the

wake of the Umbrella Revolution (UR). The chapter draws from recent works in the humanities from scholars working in Hong Kong and elsewhere and from the responses of students to a course entitled “Literature and Politics” that O’Sullivan taught at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2016. Hong Kong has always practised a style of humanities education that combines aspects of both a UK- and US-inspired liberal arts tradition alongside some of the most vibrant international centers for the study of Confucianism and neo-Confucianism (New Asia College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong). Hong Kong institutions must therefore negotiate on a daily basis, both epistemologically and institutionally, the challenges and the rich insights thrown up when these rich humanities traditions come together. However, O’Sullivan argues that a strict “two cultures” approach to the negotiation of the practice of the humanities in Hong Kong and other Chinese contexts can lead to generalisations and cultural misunderstandings. He also discusses how online creative writing journals in Hong Kong such as *Asian Cha*, poetry open-mics, and new bilingual creative writing resources are helping students of literary studies in Hong Kong to connect their college work in the humanities with cultural events in the community.

The last chapter in this part by Evelyn Chan takes on a different methodology, using interviews with eight mature students in full-time employment who voluntarily took up a self-paid part-time master’s course in English literary studies in order to rethink the question of the value of the humanities for Hong Kong from the perspective of the students themselves. These students were not under the common social pressure in Hong Kong to obtain a first undergraduate degree for better future career options, having already received one, and their responses could therefore be a better measure of the value of humanities studies in Hong Kong beyond for this reason. Chan found that despite obvious relevance to students’ careers emerging from the interviews, half of the respondents maintained a deliberate distance from such pragmatic reasons, elevating the personal meaning of the subject above all else. Chan thus warns against diminishing this personal aspect in positioning humanities programs in favour of highlighting career pragmatism in the face of market pressures. The expected finding of personal interest was also explored in greater depth by the method of “transformative interviewing,” whereby Chan treated the interview as an educational experience and challenged students to think of social uses for their studies. The responses that emerged indicated that the anti-pragmatism of English literary studies in Hong Kong lead precisely to its relevance and use in society as a valuable resource that could counter pervasive commercialism and materialism, not least in its educational sector. Chan thus argues for a renewed, instead of oppositional, understanding of the “pragmatics” of humanities studies, which programs can use to position themselves in Hong Kong. The success in the reconfiguration of the value of a literary studies degree in the process of the interview, Chan suggests, can be replicated by adding a metatextual, self-reflexive dimension to the humanities classroom, through which students are challenged to think more deeply about the values of their studies without threatening the integrity of the subject.

The second part of this book explores the current conditions of the humanities in Taiwan. Using the incident in May 2014 when Zheng Jie, a 21-year old university student, went on a killing rampage on the Taipei Mass Rapid Transit as the starting point for her discussion, the first chapter by Chin-jung Chiu analyses the situation of the liberal arts in Taiwan, which she finds in a perilous situation. The lukewarm state of the Taiwanese economy in the past few years has found humanities graduates being labelled in society as the lowest earners. Demand for liberal arts education has been continuously dropping, both globally and in Taiwan, and the liberal arts are in real danger of being seen as obsolete in a globalized world that emphasizes practical value in education. Yet liberal arts education is vitally important. For instance, the age of the Internet has brought the rupturing effects of cyber-addiction, dehumanization, and cyber violence that could be countered with a liberal arts education, with its crucial characteristic of nurturing the capacity, as Martha C. Nussbaum has pointed out, for “narrative imagination.” Although this chapter starts with the perils of the Internet for society, Chiu also sees hope in the Internet for revitalizing liberal arts education, naming successful examples of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) offered by the National Taiwan University (NTU). Sharing further examples from her own teaching and administrative experience at NTU, Chiu argues that the liberal arts can find renewed significance in three ways. Firstly, it can best serve society by rethinking its relationship with outside industries so that it neither merely capitulates to capitalism nor rejects business communities. Secondly, it can rethink its teaching strategies by refocusing on its strengths in traditional methods and works. Thirdly, it behooves the field to think more broadly about its relationship with wider society, and its educators to ask whether they are harnessing the interdisciplinary energy of the liberal arts to nurture thoughtful students able to lead fulfilling lives. The interconnectedness which the liberal arts foster may then thrive in society and in turn allow human beings to thrive, so helping isolated individuals like Zheng Jie regain their sense of belonging in human society.

We can find close echoes of some of Chiu’s points in the second chapter by Kirill O. Thompson, which discusses the situation and challenges faced by the humanities in higher education in Taiwan based on his own extensive experience as a faculty member and research administrator. Although until recently the humanities in Taiwan were flourishing in a supportive atmosphere, the past two years have seen trends emerging in both Taiwan and Asia that have presented them with headwinds. Thompson takes a critical look at the development of the humanities in China, which has viewed educational investment and national development and security as interlinked, and has chosen to prioritize science and technology for the concrete returns in those areas they offer. Modelling the humanities after these fields, and as a form of thematic and ideological control, China has promoted the joint research model in the humanities. Some of these influences have blown across the strait. Taiwan has followed the path of pushing collaborative research in the humanities, to the detriment of its advanced humanities research. Its National Science Council was renamed Ministry of Science and Technology, a shift from the Germanic use of the word “science” for all learning and knowledge, including the

humanities, to a much narrower focus. New policies mean similarly that only research leading to the creation of patents and products will lead to funding. In the face of these trends, like Chiu, Thompson argues that a balance is needed in educational visions between social productivity, on the one hand, and the critical thinking, civic-mindedness and responsibility on the other which the humanities foster. A reconsideration of the value of the humanities, and concrete plans for its revival, is then necessary. The humanities should not become more like the fields of natural sciences and technology, in the sense of pushing towards greater specialization and compartmentalization, but less so, reorienting the humanities' traditional approaches for the new challenges that human society now faces. This chapter ends with a section on the fate of the five Institutes for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences set up in Taiwan over a decade ago, which Thompson sees as a barometer of the situation of humanities research there. The only extant one is now at NTU, and even this institute is facing funding pressures despite its success in research productivity and collaborations.

Part III of this book looks at the humanities in the large context of contemporary China. Yangsheng Guo's and Limin Su's chapter begins with the rather sobering pronouncement that in Chinese universities today, the humanities, if defined in "Western terms," are "undoubtedly in deep crisis." Guo and Su explain that the humanities in China are "cursed" because of the "divided" nature of academic enquiry in universities in China and because of political reasons whereby the humanities in China are "doubly dependent" on "both domestic sociopolitical needs for survival and prosperity and international (Western) academic methods and standards for qualification." However, they argue that there is some light at the end of the tunnel. One possible method for enhancing, or saving, the humanities in China is by gaining a "clear sense of historicity" in relation to what is meant by the humanities in Chinese universities today. In order to begin this process, Guo and Su look at the history of translation studies in China. They give a wide-ranging examination of the politics of the Chinese translation of the West and of early Western translations of classic Chinese texts by missionaries eager to evangelize the Chinese. They argue that since translation is "at once the 'midwife' of the humanities in their modern sense, and itself part of the humanities," it is able to reflect as a subject the "various forces at work in the establishment, development, and ongoing collapse of the humanities in general." They take readers on an intercultural journey through the different political and historical contexts of such texts as Matteo Ricci's *Tainzhu shiyi* (The True Idea of God) that was written for the Jesuit missionaries, and through such developments as the Westernization Movement in China and the movement to translate communism, which influenced ideology in China as well as the shape of the humanities. Their chapter asks the important question whether the "Western norms" as taught through the traditional humanities subjects and then translated in these early attempts for Chinese students and educators can ever be "applicable to the non-West" "through [such] politically loaded translation." In a hard-hitting paper that describes "modern Chinese translation" as both a "builder" and "destroyer" of the humanities, they say there may

only be some “faint hope” for the “Westernized humanities” if they take up the work of retranslating the “indigenous and silenced values of humanity.”

The second chapter in this section by You Guo Jiang examines the current state of the humanities in leading Chinese universities (Fudan, Shanghai Jiaotong, and East China Normal University). After the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in China, many of the core values of humanities or humanism and liberal arts have been absent from university curriculums. However, after the Open Door Policy of 1978 Chinese educators began to acknowledge that institutions of learning in China had been too quick to describe universities as “instruments for economic development and personal success.” Jiang therefore employed quantitative and qualitative methodologies (surveys and interviews) to discover how important and relevant the humanities and the liberal arts are for students, faculty members, administrators, and policy makers working in leading Chinese universities today. His findings revealed that many of the traditional aims of the humanities in a liberal arts educational program are still upheld by universities but that they are often cloaked by the new managerial language of these institutions. Jiang’s chapter reminds us of the importance of spirituality and moral reasoning in humanities programs. The Chinese Communist Party mandates a program of moral education centered on a commitment to nationalism and patriotism “through ideological-political courses that are at variance with personal development,” but Jiang believes that the purpose of traditional Confucian education was to nurture students “to take an active role in society as morally upright and politically mature individuals and sage leaders.” He therefore stresses the importance of Chinese culture as a factor in educating students to be creative, critical thinkers who have “innovative skills, moral sensitivity, and spirituality.”

The third chapter in this section by Donald Stone records an extraordinary career of teaching and engaging students in what he calls “intercommunication between cultures” through English literature at such universities as City University of New York, New York University, Harvard University, Peking University, Beijing Teachers College (now called Capital Normal), and Tianshui University in western Gansu province. Stone returns to Newman and “his disciple” Arnold in reminding us that they too were writing at a time, very much like today, when utilitarian thinkers were questioning the “usefulness” of the old learning institutions. However, as Newman stressed, a university education was always meant to be about forming a “habit of mind,” with the attributes of “freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom,” which lasts through life. Stone describes in often warm and humorous anecdotes how the students in his 1982 class at Beijing Teachers College, the first students to enter college in China since the closing of the colleges during the Cultural Revolution, responded to literary texts by Shakespeare, Keats, Dickens and others. He was also possibly the first English literature professor to introduce such works as *Middlemarch* into the university curriculum in China. Focusing on everyday values that are found in both Chinese and Western texts, Stone reminds us of the possibilities for sharing and understanding to be gained from reading such classics. It is through the humanities that we can really gain an “awareness of our universal concerns as human beings.” Stone also

describes how his students have responded to the exhibitions he holds annually in the Sackler museum at Peking University. This university museum holds possibly the largest collection of Western art at any university in China, all due to Stone's donations from his personal collection. He ultimately expresses the hope that universities in China will continue to allow its students in the humanities to become at home in as many cultures as possible, giving rise to rich "intercommunication between cultures."

The closing chapter by Stuart Christie examines the evolution and promise of the "Chinese *humanitas*" in universities in Hong Kong and China from both an institutional and values-based perspective. The "Chinese *humanitas*" as a branch of learning and educational practice are a viable "afterlife" and "growth market" for the Western humanistic tradition, while their unique blend of neo-Confucianism and post-Marxism may also serve to act as a "limit condition" to the seemingly inevitable expansion of the neoliberal university. To shed light on these possibilities, Christie explores the contemporary context of international university partnerships in mainland China. The Chinese educational market has been well-tapped by UK and US educational institutions which are eager to sign up Chinese students willing to pay the hefty international fees at home while these institutions also rush to establish collaborative satellite universities on the mainland itself. Christie documents how the Chinese government has facilitated this process of establishing collaborative institutions with the aim of producing a "blend of strengths" between institutions by creating the legal entity known as the "Chinese-foreign co-operatively run school" (CFRS). He argues that "globalizing and neoliberalizing forces" will have to "be held accountable to Chinese values" and that the "borrowing/localization" model for pursuing transnational education is most likely to prevail for these collaborative institutions. In order to suggest a way forward for a "values-based" approach for the Chinese *humanitas* in these institutions, Christie draws from Irving Babbitt who looked to educators such as Confucius in offering a version of "New Humanism" in the early twentieth century, and whose Chinese students at Harvard returned to China and set up *Xueheng* (*The Critical Review*) where they "reified different aspects of the 'West'" for a new "humanism." Christie echoes Jiang's chapter in arguing that any new humanities today must privilege "indigenous values for humanistic enquiry, and primarily Confucianism" so that they can be retained and "brought forward." Many of the values which produced the Tiananmen protests such as "the legitimacy of dissent, [and] the promise of a more efficiently distributed prosperity" are the same values that are driving the success of top Chinese universities today. Christie therefore argues that the "institutionalization of humanistic learning and critique in the Chinese academy" is the most fitting legacy to these protests.

This collection shows the humanities in the three Chinese contexts to be a vibrant field of enquiry with unique, if not solely Chinese, characteristics, and existential moments of crisis of its own. The contributions stress the need to integrate indigenous and silenced values for humanistic enquiry that have often been overlooked, mistranslated, or simply misunderstood in traditional humanities practices. They focus on the unique benefits the humanities in these contexts still

bring to the lives of students, and teachers, whether it be in nurturing thoughtful students able to lead fulfilling lives, in challenging students to think more deeply about the values of their studies, or in educating students to be creative, critical thinkers who have innovative skills, moral sensitivity, and spirituality. They speak pragmatically of the need for the humanities in these places to evolve and change and of the importance to maintain academic freedoms essential for any kind of future collaboration. They show that the humanities in these Chinese contexts can develop an irreplaceable blend of strengths by rethinking its relationship and collaboration with wider society and by remaining open to a new humanism. This book looks forward to the new humanism that lies ahead.

Hong Kong

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Acknowledgments

Both editors would like to thank the staff at Springer for their extensive support and Pauline Liang for her help in formatting parts of the book.

Michael O’Sullivan would like to thank his colleagues at CUHK, especially those in the Department of English over the years, for helping him see that the humanities are bigger than he had ever imagined. He also thanks his students at CUHK, most recently those on the course “Literature and Politics”, from whom he continues to learn so much.

Evelyn Chan is grateful to the Department of English at CUHK for providing such a supportive environment throughout the years, and to her students for being the driving force behind her wish for a greater understanding of the humanities using social research methods.

Contents

Part I Hong Kong

- 1 **The Idea of a University: Some Polemical Reflections** 3
Leo Ou-fan Lee
- 2 **Meritocracy and Individualism: Negotiating Cross-Cultural
Humanities Values in a Politicised Hong Kong Context**..... 15
Michael O’Sullivan
- 3 **The Value of English Literary Studies in Hong Kong: Insights from
Interviews with MA Students**..... 37
Evelyn T.Y. Chan

Part II Taiwan

- 4 **Cultivating a Humanistic Mind: A View from Taiwan**..... 57
Chin-jung Chiu
- 5 **The Humanities in Higher Education and Research in Taiwan:
Current State and Challenges**..... 77
Kirill O. Thompson

Part III China

- 6 **Problems with the Humanities in Mainland China:
A Translational Perspective** 91
Yangsheng Guo and Limin Su
- 7 **Humanities and Liberal Arts in the Chinese Universities:
A New Connection and Dialogue** 113
You Guo Jiang

8 Reflection on Teaching the Humanities in China 133
Donald Stone

**9 International Glow: The Contemporary Reinvention
of a Chinese *Humanitas* 143**
Stuart Christie

Erratum to: The Humanities in Contemporary Chinese Contexts E1
Evelyn T.Y. Chan and Michael O’Sullivan