

The Blind Spots in the Feminist Classroom: A Hong Kong Example

By Amy Lee

Before getting into the critical and analytic mode concerning this specific case of a Hong Kong classroom and gender issues, let me just adopt the descriptive mode to introduce myself and my working environment for the past four years. I believe that the specific set up, the personnel, and the culture where I work have direct and indirect impact on the politics of learning in our programme, as education is our work.

I am a female academic staff in a small academic programme within the arts faculty of a medium-sized university in Hong Kong. Similar to many other universities over the world, our arts faculty mainly consists of female students, for two reasons which are connected to each other. Firstly, in our culture, the arts and humanities are considered to be the domain of female sensitivity. Secondly, and probably a statistical reality, female students in our culture have proved to be more advanced in the development of their language and communicative capabilities at the age of university entrance, thus performing better in general in the subjects within the domain of arts and humanities. The staff body, however, has a very different combination and structure. I am one of the four core staff in the small academic programme I teach, and the gender distribution is even within our programme, with a female head. Within the arts faculty, which is headed by a female dean, most of the heads of departments are male, exceptions being the English Department, the Translation Programme, and the Humanities Programme of which I am a core member.

Having set the scene, let me draw your attention to the specific example I would like to share with you. For the past three years I have been co-teaching a subject titled Gender Studies with a more senior male colleague. The subject is offered as a compulsory subject for our major students, open also to out-of-discipline students from other departments. On top of our own cohort of 40 students, every year we offer another 25 places for these students of other disciplines, but this subject is one of the most popular one to other disciplines, and is frequently oversubscribed by at least 50%. Students are attracted to the study of gender issues, especially in their cultural manifestations, and thus usually the biggest group of non-major student taking this subject comes from the department of Cinema and Television. We do regularly have a small group of students from social sciences, for they realize the importance of this subject but cannot find anything equivalent in their faculty. Yet the overall teaching strategy is more geared towards a cultural and literary interpretation and analysis of the issues of gender.

In my part of the semester, I focus on the introduction of feminism(s), feminist literary studies and miscellaneous female writing, mainly in the western tradition, but drawing connections to local phenomena and cultural products whenever the occasion arises. Students have to write a short paper and do a group oral

presentation on any issues or themes they find interesting. The following will be a brief report and a personal reflection on my observation in these classes: how students behave during discussions, what their major concerns are, and their views on gender issues in our culture. Although during these three years the student combination, syllabuses, and topics of interest have changed, I have noticed a general common response from these young people towards feminist studies, which I believe is a particular result of the blind spots in our time, our place, our culture, and our society. After identifying these features, I would hope to suggest possible directions with which we may tackle these blind spots.

"Hong Kong is an advanced international city, financial centre, and a focal point of communication and exchange between different cultures." This is one of the favorite ways of identifying Hong Kong, whether it is the Tourism Board luring international travelers, international offices at local universities welcoming foreign exchange students, or even newspaper features pondering on the future of Hong Kong in the face of acute competition from neighboring cities and countries. Besides this convergence of diversity, Hong Kong's Chinese background and recent reincorporation into the mainstream Chinese culture are always mentioned as signs of the subtlety and sophistication Hong Kong possesses on top of the international outlook. In other words, we are in the best of the possible worlds, because there is a balance between the outgoing, aggressive and urban global mindset and practices and the reflective, tolerant traditional Chinese values.

While I am not in any way trying to deny the truth of this perception of Hong Kong, I do feel that this picture of the best of the possible worlds may have to do with the students' general feeling that feminism has no place whatsoever in either their studies or in the Hong Kong community of Hong Kong. At the end of the semester, when asked whether what they have learned in the semester has changed or will change their behavior or attitude to life, most of the students (80% in a class of 65 students) claimed that there was no obvious impact that they were aware of. Many of them pointed out that the condition of gender equality in Hong Kong was already one of the best in the world, and far exceeded that of nearby regions. To support this view, they would quote figures of female participation in the labor force, the average education level acquired by women, the distribution of female labor in different ranks and profession types. Not to be left out would be the famous female CEOs, politicians, high-rank government officials, movie stars, singers and models.

And that creates an interesting feeling within the classroom: all the girls are very happy and proud of themselves, and the boys feeling a bit grumpy because they feel that they are suffering doubly. On the one hand they are already the minority within the classroom, feeling every bit of being threatened, and yet they are learning about political and cultural movements that aim at gaining more power and better treatment for women! Especially with me in the classroom leading and facilitating discussion (and finally grading their work and examination!), some of

the male students do feel that they are given the double oppression unjustly. And that feeling of feminism not being relevant to their lives, and indeed not even relevant to Hong Kong as a whole, comes out every time at the end of semester evaluation and reflection meeting. Why are we still talking about feminism in Hong Kong when women are having a wonderful time?

Yes, why indeed? To my students, they see a female faculty dean, female department heads, and a female teacher giving them grades which will have an impact on their future. They look at their fellow classmates and they see groups of girls reading glossy fashion magazines, which feature young slim and beautiful female millionaire models and stars. The girls are busy copying the latest dress styles, make-up styles, and even talk styles and wondering whether their part-time job earnings can buy them the shoulder bag which is ever so fashionable. Reading the magazines and admiring the giraffe-like figures of the models, girls are happy that there are so many diet products available for their choice, for all that matters is making a wise choice. The boys may be openly jeering at them for the time and effort these girls spend on their looks, but secretly they enjoy consuming the prettiness and perhaps hoping their own girlfriends know how to do the same. Our consumerist society is running perfectly. We have commonly agreed standards of beauty, and there is a fix for every blemish you care to correct.

Yes, there is a fix for everything we care to improve. The ability to provide "answers" is very frequently taken as a quality of an advanced society, so much so that we are seeing not only answers but problems being created at the same time. For those of us who have paid some attention to the mass media, the phenomenon is almost a daily occurrence. In the 1970s Hong Kong, when the city was just years away from the riot, the poor economic condition and the rather undesirable hygiene condition, people suffering from consumption was not an irregularity at all. There were queues lining up outside special clinics on a daily basis waiting for their regular consumption shot. In those days we would hear TV advertisement blaring about a weight-gaining product, claiming that people who take it will "gain weight and be pretty", which is quite unthinkable today. When I talk to students born during the 1980s, they either do not believe me, or simply think that people "in those days" are so backward that they cannot tell what is pretty. They cannot imagine that it was just another of the long line of "fixes" that our society has been churning up all its life.

The distance between these yesterday fixes and our students' imagination shows that they have lived entirely in the present moment of the media. When they walk into the MTR (HK's underground transport system) what they are looking at are larger-than-life posters on the walls, showing women who are modeled like Barbie dolls, and different methods to become them. Day in day out they are shown no other images or models to become. Interestingly, on the one hand, they would construct an oral presentation for their studies, talking about the marketing strategies and the coercion built into the massive advertising

campaigns; yet their data collection comes from their own experience. The team of girls would have tried all the different brands they mention, and the oral presentation would basically be an academic analysis of how they, as consumers, have been doped into using the product. The revelation, however, will not be the end of their relationship with this kind of product, or even with the urge to make themselves pretty in the common sense. They will go on to try others.

Besides the body shape, the other most sort-after fix is a fix for color - the right complexion. The yellow Chinese-women in Hong Kong have come to be obsessive with the white/pale/snowy/translucent complexion because their natural yellowness is categorized as a skin problem in our consumerist-materialist-glamour-oriented society. They are trained to have the yearning to be snow white, literally and metaphorically. This attention to the complexion, however, does not reflect a consciousness to one's racial identity. Wanting to be white does not mean that Hong Kong women want to be Eurasian or that they hate their own Chineseness. Fortunately, or unfortunately, this consciousness of color is only skin deep, totally detached from an understanding and even awareness of the impact of racial differences and sophistications. Alice Walker's *Color Purple* does not capture the interest of young Hong Kong university students, nor does the Spielberg adaptation because it does not feature glamorous movie stars. Although in many ways an international city, Hong Kong to the local residents can remain racially homogenous at its day to day existence. Let us imagine what kind of world the city is for a typical Hong Kong university student. For almost one-third of their time each day, they will be hanging out with their friends and classmates, attending lectures, discussing and preparing for their tutorials, and probably going for a movie or something with their friends. If they are not living in the student halls, they will be going home for dinner with their family. The dishes will be the same dishes that their mothers have been cooking for the past twenty-something years, or an interesting combination of Cantonese and Philippine cuisine created by their domestic helpers. After dinner, the family may sit in front of the television and watch the series 5 nights a week, or the students may retreat into the study and get online to chat with their friends. Quite frequently, these online communities are active until well into the middle of the night, and it will be just hours before they will meet each other in person again. Over the weekend, they may have dim sum with their family but probably will go out on their own, or with their friends again. Then back to the routine again from Monday onwards.

What I am trying to draw here is the rather restricted domain of a typical Hong Kong university student, not as a criticism, only a factual observation. In Hong Kong, about 18% percentage of form 5 graduates (equivalent to o-level) students can be admitted to a local university, thus the competition is quite keen, and the entrance is often seen as a key to success. University students can apply for government sponsorship if they are in need, and they can also enjoy a variety of subsidies in attending cultural events and public services. Most students' study

schedule allow them to take up part-time jobs, and many of them work within the university (e.g. helping in the library or the computer centre). The majority of them will give private lessons to junior secondary or primary students because the education system in Hong Kong is extremely competitive all the way through. Working parents will feel safe only when they have engaged at least one private tutor to take care of their children's studies when they are earning their wages.

So that is the reward to university students in Hong Kong; after years of hard work in memorizing their books, these young people can enjoy the pleasure of pursuing knowledge, being respected by the general public, having a good time with fellow classmates, and finally getting the degree which is a ticket to a path of possible success. As a local-born resident, they are free from racial discrimination; they may not have a financial burden, and they probably will not be discriminated because of their social class or their religious affiliation. Although there are different classes in Hong Kong as there are in any other cities in the world, the differentiation manifests itself in the differences of lifestyles more than in open conflicts between the different classes. Religious affiliations are also tolerated and different communities live quite well alongside each other. One can see that the mental life of an average university student in Hong Kong may not be troubled by racial, class, religious, and age discrimination because these factors are well beyond the life of this student.

Thus in my classroom when I try to engage students to examine issues of feminism, they find it difficult to feel engaged. How does one get a 20-year-old to understand the kind of pressure our society is giving to a woman who is going through menopause? How can she relate to the double jeopardy a black woman is going through in her society? How does she understand "the love that dare not speak its name" felt by local domestic helpers for the famous Chinese opera actresses in the 1950s? How do we create an environment for our university students so that they can at least be aware of their blind spots?

Gender Studies is a subject that appeals to students in the Faculty of Social Sciences, and it is right that it should be so. But I think it is also very important that it should have a literary and cultural base, because this is the most direct way to give students a bit more exposure to cultures other than their own, which means that they also get to see problems and issues that they are so fortunate not to have to face. A literary or cultural base also provides a platform for students to identify with different positions. They may not have the experience of being an unattractive middle-age female who is practically invisible and voiceless in a society where youthfulness and sexual allure are the currency; but reading and discussing stories containing marginalized characters such as these will create entry points for these students to get into the picture.

The choice of literary and cultural texts will take care of one side of the learning experience. To enhance, or to give some "real" support to the fictional rendering of experiences, it may be a good idea to design assessments/assignments so

that students have to get involved in real life situations where they get to see women experiencing problems day in and day out because of their gender. Community-based learning has become a part of the curriculum in many social sciences subjects, and it is a very good way to link the book knowledge and the real world. Establishing a link between the study programme and some community service groups would be one way to let students see the real world and to ponder how their book knowledge, no matter how far fetched it is to them in the form of words, can actually take up a place in the reality of their lives. The fictional plus the practical: I hope this is one way to amend the blind spots in the feminist classroom in Hong Kong and classrooms with similar conditions.