

Interviewee: Angie Chau

Interviewer: Angela Lu

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Angela Lu (00:01)

Okay. Yeah, and you can introduce yourself now.

Angie Chau (00:03)

Okay. Yeah. My name is Angie Chau. I'm Associate Professor in Pacific and Asian Studies, and I teach Chinese literature and film. Right now, I'm also the acting associate director for CAPI, the Center for Asia Pacific Initiative.

Angela Lu (00:20)

All right, we will move to the first question then. How do you incorporate social justice work into your teaching and how does the diversity of the class or lack thereof play a part in how that goes?

Angie Chau (00:33)

Sure. In terms of social justice, I didn't really use that term much, but I know my students are very interested in that topic. So one of the most recent examples that came up in my class is in the past, I think it's called Pass 215. It's a class that's required for all the undergraduate majors in our department. In that class, I worked with a librarian, Liu Ying. I have been working on this project doing the Wikipedia editing. We tried that in a number of my classes. For the Wikipedia project for PAAS 215, we were trying to show students how they can use this open access platform to improve people's understanding about Asian culture and Canadian-Chinese communities locally. I heard a lot of feedback from students in terms of... They're very interested in social justice topics, in terms of racism in Canada and especially here in BC. We tried to give them access to different kinds of materials in the library. Then PAAS 315, they worked on translating some things, but it caused some different issues. I think the second part of your question was about the diversity of the classroom. I've been at UVIC for six years, so the classroom demographic changed a lot in that time.

Angie Chau (02:26)

When I started in 2018, That's when I came here. Probably, my classes generally will be anywhere from 40 to maybe 100 students. I would say 90 to 95% of those students are from mainland China, international students. Now my classes are very small. A lot of the international students didn't come back. Well, I sensed and also heard a lot of just concern about the classroom diversity or balance of students in terms of so many international students, not very many

Canadian students. Then I just try to do the best I can to have less division and more communication, I guess. But it's very challenging, actually. Yeah.

Angela Lu (03:28)

In recent years, international students, do you mean all of them are from mainly China or just Asian countries, like Korea, Japan, and etcetera?

Angie Chau (03:38)

For my classes, most of them are from China because I teach Chinese literature and film. The sense I get from students is that they maybe are majoring in Econ. This is very common. They major in Econ, they got bad grades, then they have to switch to PAAS. Then they look at the course offering and they say, What's the easiest class will be: Chinese literature and film? Because they think, Okay, I can speak Chinese, then I can take this course.

Angela Lu (04:06)

Then for the other students who are not international students, do they have a hard time catching up?

Angie Chau (04:14)

I think there's a lot of... The perception is that the Chinese students have some advantage. I actually heard some comments from my students. They said, Maybe you shouldn't speak Chinese to the Chinese students. Because not during the lecture, but if we're working in small groups or something, I go around. Sometimes their English is not perfect or they have some challenges in communicating. Then I would communicate in Chinese or before or after class, I will speak in Chinese. I didn't find it to be a problem. I think just promoting more communication is better than no communication. But I heard some comments from students saying, This is showing bias, or maybe the Canadian students feel like they're missing out on something. I don't personally think it's true, but I can see why they might have that idea.

Angela Lu (05:20)

Yeah, because I have friends doing TAs, and they're Chinese, so they speak Chinese during class, and they got reported.

Angie Chau (05:30)

What do you mean, speaking Chinese in class?

Angela Lu (05:33)

There's a Chinese student asking a question in Chinese. They know that they're not really allowed to answer, but they did, and they got reported.

Angie Chau (05:41)

But I don't think there's an official policy.

Angela Lu (05:45)

Really?

Angie Chau (05:46)

I'm not aware of that. I don't know. Maybe there is, but I never heard of that.

Angela Lu (05:52)

Okay, then. For the culture part, do you explain more to the ones who are not international students? Because they don't really understand and they don't have the background of that?

Angie Chau (06:05)

Even a lot of Chinese students think they have a background on something. Then they find out that maybe the way we teach about Chinese literature and history here is very different from the education they had in high school in China. I think everybody should be able to learn something new, I think. That's my thought. I would also say In terms of social justice, I would try to... In my classes, I do focus a lot on gender and women authors and women filmmakers and things like that on the syllabus. I also heard some comments from students. They said, Oh, if you take her class, you know she's just obsessed with the female writers or the female characters or something. But it's like... Most of them, most of the authors and directors are not women. You would never hear the same critique saying, Oh, all the texts we're reading are by male directors. If you do something that's not that, then all of a sudden people think it's some really crazy thing.

Angela Lu (07:21)

Yeah, exactly. I think that moves us to the second question. What are the factors you evaluate when choosing the proposed reading list for the course? Because I went online and found a description for the course, and there's a reading list. I'm just really curious, what do you think when you choose the readings? Do they represent different aspects inside of Chinese culture?

Angie Chau (07:43)

Yeah, I would try to at least provide different viewpoints. I think this idea of China and Taiwan and Hong Kong, and then some people will call it Greater China or global China or something. Because I'm Chinese-American, I grew up in the US. Some people might say, Oh, that's not very Chinese or something. But I think those borders are not that clear. I think the more we can expand our understanding of what Chinese is, or there's many different versions of what that Chinese means, I think it's better to have different kinds of voices. So I do think about that when

I put together the reading list or just the list of films or even the secondary readings, a lot of the scholarly work. I would try to include some Chinese scholars whose work is translated into English. I guess that's the main challenge is everything has to be available in the English translation. Otherwise, the students who cannot read it feel like they don't have access to it. It's hard to do it.

Angela Lu (09:00)

Because I mean, in gender studies and sociology, we evaluate intersectionality and diversity a lot. Which part of Chinese culture will students comprehend from the selected reading? Like China's economy, or the gender equality part?

Angie Chau (09:21)

Is most of the scholarship going to be by North American scholars?

Angela Lu (09:28)

Oh, gender studies? Mm-hmm. Yeah. Mainly Western scholars, I think. Because I'm also doing sociology, the US is a big part. I'm not really sure about Asian literature though. Also, in your reading list, there's this little tiny time, the film.

Angie Chau (09:53)

Oh,.

Angela Lu (09:54)

I think that varies a lot from the other selected readings I saw.

Angie Chau (09:58)

Okay. Yeah. It's funny because they will want us to, like, market our classes to make it more attractive. So for a while, I thought, oh, everybody likes Guo Jingming and Xiao Shidai (Little Tiny Times). So that but actually some people are really turned off by that Yeah. Because people feel very strongly either they hate it or they love it. Some people don't wanna admit that they like it. So it might not be good actually for the course description. And, that's actually for the class I'm teaching this semester. It's the one I just had this afternoon. It's the past 357, which is about the film adaptation of Chinese literature. So I think it's related to the earlier question about like yeah. I mean, I don't wanna think like literature is only this one kind of Chinese literature. So I tried to show that Guo Jingming is also like another form of popular literature, but Tiny Times did not get translated into English. So there's, like, a fan website that is translated into English. So I can include it on my syllabus, but, and then also, you know, some a lot of people will argue, like, he's misogynist, his characters are not very, kind of like good characters. So it's also problematic in a lot of ways. He also got accused of a lot of things. So, actually, this semester I

did not teach it anymore. I thought about it. So I replaced it actually with, do you know Annie and it was called Qiyue and Ansheng. So I'm teaching that instead of Tiny Times. I switched over to something else. So I guess, like, in terms of the question, it's like, I'm always thinking about this, You know? If my feelings change, I can always move to something else.

Angela Lu (11:56)

That's about the diversity of culture. Alright then, do you wanna move to the next one?

Angie Chau (12:01)

Sure.

Angela Lu (12:03)

Alright. How have your students contributed to your understanding of social justice, like, relating to their work or assignment?

Angie Chau (12:10)

Mhmm. Yeah. I guess, like, related to what I was saying earlier, I wasn't. I guess I didn't, like, think about social justice and how it fits into my own work, until probably, like, COVID during the pandemic. I really sense that I got a lot of strange feelings here in Victoria and at UVic during that time because I think most of my students were from China and a lot of them have family there. And then, because I moved here from Shanghai also in 2018, I still have a lot of connections in China, and I just felt like it was a very, like, uncomfortable time here. And I guess that's when I first started thinking about, like anti Chinese kind of sentiment and racism here in BC and specifically, like, in Victoria and on our campus. And, I think I tried to, like, bring it up in a number of my classes, just like how uncomfortable it was here. And, after that since then, it's just something I'm more conscious about. So, for instance, working on that Wikipedia project in PAAS 215 then, we tried to really, like, have students, like, talk to them about this as a kind of work that's very intentional, and they can choose, you know, topics that are related to this in their research. So before, I think it was something that's more kind of in the back of my mind or, something that could happen just, like, coincidentally. But now I think after COVID, I started, like, thinking about racism more and, like, how to bring it up in the classroom more. So my students are yeah. I guess, I felt relieved that my students are very receptive to this, and it's a topic that they feel very passionate about. And, you know, if they feel like they can do research on this topic and kind of contribute to the online knowledge about it, I think that was, like, very positive.

Angela Lu (14:32)

Yeah. Because I'm really curious about, like, these non Chinese students. Like, yeah, for their assignment, will they like to include a tiny bit of their bias or did you ever notice them?

Angie Chau (14:45)

Mhmm. Yeah. I mean, ideally, like, because for that class PAAS 215, it was about translation. So, ideally, I wanted the groups to work in kind of like diverse groups, like, where they have diverse language skills. So the idea is that, like, some of the Chinese students will work with the Canadian students, but it actually, like, very rarely worked out that way. I thought about just forming the groups myself, but they said they want to work in their own groups. And, so that was kind of challenging because ideally, if you have more, like, communication, then the bias can be, you know, can be addressed. Right? But, yeah, I haven't figured out, like, the best way to do that. Actually, I think this class I'm teaching this semester, it's very small, but it is more like a kind of balanced classroom. And we have really good discussions. And I think it's like, in the past, I know that Chinese students are always very curious about what the Canadian students will think about, like, Chinese movies or Chinese novels. So they like to hear that. And then, it's also really valuable to have people who know more about Chinese culture and history to, like, share their opinions. So I think that's the ideal kind of situation. But yeah.

Angela Lu (16:08)

Yeah. For me also, I'm just curious about how they think about, like, Chinese film and culture and how the film is presented. Mhmm. Alright. The next one?

Angie Chau (16:20)

Yep. Okay.

Angela Lu (16:22)

Do you think UVic has been doing a meaningful job in advocating Asian cultures, like doing events, activities, and stuff?

Angie Chau (16:33)

Yeah. I think I mean, I think, you know, there's a lot of events and things like happening, but I don't know how the attendance of those events is. I guess, like, you have seen some things over at CAPI. Right? We tried to do the Asia forum. It seemed like there's a lot of people interested in learning about Asia and just beyond, like the students or faculty. I was impressed that actually a lot of staff people from UVic came. So they're not like studying Asia, but they would like to learn more about it. So I think that interest is there. I'm not sure about advocating Asian culture. I know there's like Asian heritage month every year. Have you heard of this?

Angela Lu (17:25)

No.

Angie Chau (17:26)

Okay. Yeah. I mean, UVic, I think they want to present themselves as, like, very diverse. Right? So they put an effort to do that. I'm not sure if that's really advocating Asian culture, though. It's kind of something different. So, like, for Asian heritage month, every year, they'll try to, like, reach out to people working on Asian related topics, like, research topics or something and put, like, the photos or something on their website. I don't yeah. So that's one thing they tried to do. Yeah. I would like to see more, but I think it's hard. And right now, with the, like, Canada China relations is kind of, like, in a touchy spot. So I don't know what's going to happen. I didn't see much of, like, promoting Chinese culture specifically. Right? They're like, oh, K-Pop night or, oh, like, manga or something. Right? But I didn't see a lot of promotion of Chinese culture specifically.

Angela Lu (18:30)

Yeah. Because you are, like, the professor of the Pacific Asian department. Yeah. So I thought you might know, like, different activities across campus.

Angie Chau (18:38)

Yeah. And I think that's why I like working at CAPI because they're more, they seem more, like, open to, kind of all of Asia as opposed to yeah. I think, like, here in our program there's a lot of emphasis on, like, language learning, so that's a big part of it. And then, I think we have to see what will happen in the future, but I I didn't see so much, like, advocating for Asian culture, actually. I don't get that sense.

Angela Lu (19:16)

Yeah. UVic really emphasized the diversity of culture. However, I didn't see any, like, events going on regarding different cultures or movements for PAAS. Well, minority groups, gender, yes, because I'm in gender studies, I know a lot of that. And activities for Indigenous groups also. But, regarding Asian culture, I'm not really sure about that.

Angie Chau (19:37)

Yeah. Yeah. I just actually, I saw one of my grad students, like, a few months ago, and she saw, like, when she came onto campus like, she's graduated now, but she came on campus this fall in September. She said she noticed, like, how there's not many Asian students. Like, it seems like kind of a drastic change from maybe not drastic, but the last few years is, like, every year a little bit fewer, and this year feels like a lot fewer.

Angela Lu (20:02)

Yeah. Because I went to UT last reading week, and there's, like, a lot of Chinese students. It's like a quarter or something.

Angie Chau (20:10)

Yeah. I was at UBC last weekend, and I also thought, wow. They have so many Asian students and Chinese students. But, yeah, not here at Uvic anymore. Full of Chinese. Mhmm.

Angela Lu (20:23)

And since we have time, I have an additional question. So what difficulties do you encounter when teaching the course Mhmm. Overall?

Angie Chau (20:36)

Mhmm. Difficulties. Yeah. I think my problem is, like, one of the problems I constantly think about is, you know, I'm, I want to promote Chinese literature and film, right? I want more people to know about it and to want to watch those movies and read the books. At the same time, like, some of the things that I put on my syllabus, it might be, like, critical of China. Right? It's also critical of, like, Canada or the US. And, then I just worry, like, if people read those things, does it make them, like, not want to go to China or something? You know? Because I'm also actually, like, one of the things I'm trying to do is, like, start field school to bring students to China because I used to do that when I was in the US. And I think it's, like, such a great learning experience. Yeah. But I think, like, because there's so much bad media here in Canada and the US about China, like, some Canadians or Americans, they're kind of nervous right now to go there. Yeah. So it's like I just worry about, like, the content I teach in my classes. Like, I don't wanna show, like, I wanna show a balanced, like, view of, like, reality, which is not perfect. Mhmm. But, like, not scare people from wanting to learn more or not, having people, like, have more racist ideas about, like, Chinese people or China in general. So that's something I worry about.

Angela Lu (22:00)

Yeah. Because, there's this one reading, called Huozhe. The reading's so sad. Yes. So I was thinking, like, why did you choose this?

Angie Chau (22:17)

Mhmm. Yeah. I choose that because well, for this film class, it's, like, about literature and adaptation. Right? So, I guess my point was, like, Yu Hua, like, he became so famous after the film adaptation by Zhang Yimou. So it's like trying to show the relationship between literature and film and also, yeah, because it's kind of a short novel. And I heard that it's also, like, some high schools will use it in their curriculum, like in China. So I just thought, oh, it's good, like, work that it's like very accessible. Also, Yuhua's writing is very simple to read and it's much

shorter than Shiongdi or something. So that's why I chose it, but it is very sad. And then, yeah, I do worry.

Angela Lu (23:11)

I'm like, oh, it doesn't make people, like, not want to go to China. Like, does it bring negative impressions?

Angie Chau (23:20)

Right. So that's what I'm kinda worrying about. Yeah. But if you think about literature, like, most literature is about something negative, actually. There's very little literature that's, like, just happy and talking about, like, how perfect life is because that will be very boring to read. I think nobody would like to read that.

Angela Lu (23:33)

Yeah. So that's, like, a really difficult part for, like, promoting Asian cultures. Like, you want them to notice the bright side, but then you have to address the dark side also.

Angie Chau (23:48)

Yeah. I think also, like, just at UBC, I was, there was this article that is about, like, the Chinese databases. Like, I don't know if you use, like, CNKI. It's, like, one of the databases that has all the Chinese journals online. And, in the recent years, like, in the last 5 years or something, a lot of the articles disappeared from the online database because of censorship. So, this historian did a study on, like, which words, like, related keywords relate to articles, which ones disappeared. So I assigned it in one of my classes, and then my students, like, accused me that they're just, like, you're so biased. Like, you show these articles, like wasn't it, like, accuse me of, like, It was, like Oh. You know, that sort of thing. I was like I mean, that article also talked about how this is happening and it's more about the dangers of online databases. Right? How censorship can happen anywhere. It's not just about China. Right? But I think, like, the way I present it, maybe, like, people are sensitive to that. So that's a challenge. Yeah.

Angela Lu (25:01)

Yeah. Understanding what you really want to mean. Alright then. Then do you have, like, anything else to add?

Angie Chau (25:10)

I don't think so. Yeah. I can't think of anything else. I mean, it's interesting. I'm glad I have those challenges because it makes me think hard about, like, what I'm doing. I think those are good things to think about. I don't wanna just, like, blindly, like, teach whatever and not think about the repercussions or the implications of what I do.

Angela Lu (25:30)

Yeah. And regarding the students' assignment, are there any non-Chinese assignments you get that, like, opens your perspective?

Angie Chau (25:40)

I think so. Yeah. Like, just people's interpretation of literature can be so different. And some of the students, they don't know much about, like, Chinese history or anything. So their interpretation of something could be very different, and that's always helpful just to see, like, a different perspective. Right? Because when we say, like, if we read Shakespeare or something, we don't have, like, all this knowledge about, you know, Elizabethan, England or something, but we can still make meaning out of that literature. So I think, you know, for people without the background of Chinese history, they can still have their own interpretation of Chinese literature too. So the answer doesn't have to be purely just based on history.

Angela Lu (26:28)

Alright, perfect answers, and I think we are done here. Thank you.

Angie Chau (26:33)

Alright. Thank you.