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Teaching Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" from the Perspective of Postcolonial Ecocriticism in Twenty-First Century Taiwan

Pei-Wen Clio Kao
National Ilan University

The article explores some of the key challenges of teaching Joseph Conrad's fiction in present-day Taiwan. It focuses on how to teach "The Secret Sharer" (1910) through the lens of ecocriticism, aided by Peter Fudakowski's 2014 film adaptation. Targeted at a class called "Literature of the Sea," teaching Conrad's fiction is expected to guide students to re-evaluate the literary canon from a contemporary perspective.

The film adaptation is employed as a teaching supplement to the original short story. The entire process of teaching and reading this work is structured by the threefold role of "Intercultural Translator," "Intercultural Interpreter," and "Intercultural Mediator" played by the director Fudakowski, the teacher, and one of the film's characters, Li.

The article reflects on how Fudakowski's film adaption helps students understand the significance and relevance of Conrad's short story to the twenty-first century world in general and Taiwan in particular.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, "The Secret Sharer," *The Secret Sharer* (film), Peter Fukdakowski, ecofeminism, postcolonial eco-justice.

As a teacher of English literature and a Conradian situated in twenty-first century Taiwan, it becomes imperative for me to investigate Conrad's relevance to Taiwan in particular and to the modern world in general. In the age of the Anthropocene, the environmental issue rings urgent and is pressing in the classroom and everyday life. How to bring the ecological perspective into my pedagogy as well as my research and make literature pertinent to the contemporary world is my first and foremost concern. In the case of Joseph Conrad's short story "The Secret Sharer" that I taught in theclass "Literature of the Sea," I put myself in the role of a "cultural mediator" when teaching transcultural or intercultural literary studies (Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts 6). Iaim to bridge the gap between the canon (of the dominant culture) and the adaptation (of the "peripheral" culture). In other words, I attempt to break down the hierarchy between "innovative centres" and "imitative peripheries" in my teaching of Conrad in order to transmit literary knowledge (Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts 6). According to R. Taft, the role of "cultural mediator" can be performed by "a person who facilitates communication, understanding, and action between persons or groups who differ with respect to language and culture" (qtd. in Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts 8). While teaching Conrad's text from the perspective of postcolonial eco-justice, I found Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone" very useful in my efforts to dispense with the unequal power relations of "domination and subordination," which develop when "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (qtd. in Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts 11).[1] I will not only reflect on how the cinematic adaptation operates subversively to dismantle hierarchical positions in relation to the original text but will also ar-

[1] See Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (2008).

CORRESPONDENCE: Dr Pei-Wen Clio Kao, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, National Ilan University, No.1, Sec. 1, Shennong Rd., Yilan City, Yilan County 260, Taiwan. @ pwkao@niu.edu.tw

gue for the subversive potential of the "peripheral" people and characters to challenge Eurocentric power and perspectives in the film adaptation.

Diana Roig-Sanz and Reine Meylaerts suggest that we could include the "role of cultural mediators as custom officers or smugglers" in the "peripheral cultures" (3). The "custom officers" impose censorship on the intercultural or transcultural exchange to cater to the needs of the dominant cultures, while the "smugglers" create their own intercultural standards and values to circulate and disseminate diverse ideas. As a university professor and literary critic based in Taiwan, I adopt the role of a "smuggler" to engage in the "alternative reading" that attempts to tease out the diverse voices embedded in literary works, whether original texts or adaptations. I argue that there are three smugglers and threefold intercultural mediations in teaching Conrad's "The Secret Sharer": (1) Peter Fudakowski as the film director who produces the adaptation of "The Secret Sharer"; (2) myself as the Taiwanese scholar who introduces and transfers the texts and adaptations in their reciprocal relations to the Taiwanese students; (3) Li as the Chinese woman character in the film who transfers Chinese cultural knowledge to Polish/European Captain Konrad. The three of us all play the role of the "smuggler" in our own way, defying the authority of the dominant culture that suppresses the perspective of the subordinate recipient culture.

The concept of postcolonial eco-justice is a good starting-point for the students in Taiwan, an island country, which, currently in its postcolonial stage, bears the scars of a Dutch occupation and Japanese colonization. The so-called "conquest of nature" could also be seen as a form of colonialism; the devastation of the natural environment is equal to the oppression of the colonized people (Clark 120-9). The intertwined issues of "conservation, colonialism, and the depredations of international capitalism" (Clark 121) serve as a springboard for me to frame an alternative reading/teaching strategy based on the combined postcolonial and ecocritical approaches.

In the tradition of Conrad scholarship, the works of Joseph Conrad have long been enshrined in the "Great Tradition" of English literature that carries a strong moral sensibility and aesthetic beauty.[2] Conrad's maritime prose, in particular, depicts the isolated sea community as a testing ground for human solidarity, fortitude, and endurance. The characters in his sea stories are "subject not only to physical stress but also to prejudice and incomprehension" (Watts xi). The external environmental world and nature thus function as an objective background in which individual growth, or a journey toward maturity and wisdom, takes place.

The publication of the edited volume *Conrad and Nature: Essays* (2019) signifies a turning point in the theoretical methodology that provides the means of reading Conrad's sea and jungle stories in the context of ecocriticism. It is a trailblazing attempt to bridge Conrad Studies and the environmental humanities, in order to investigate the pressing issues of environmental disasters, climate refugees, global warming, and the rise of sea levels through studies of literature. It is now evident, therefore, that Conrad Studies is no longer confined to the study of *human* nature only. The study of *material* nature is also brought to the forefront, as "Conrad's work illuminates the environmental issues of his own time, [and] even … anticipates contemporary environmental criticism and current global environmental crises" (Scheider-Robozo and MacCarthy 1). Seen from the perspective of ecocriticism, the wild natural world and the sophisticated human community are joined together into one single biosphere for scrutiny: "the 'wilderness' encompasses the social and economic as well as the environmental" (Scheider-Robozo and MacCarthy 2).

Borrowing these seminal ideas from *Conrad and Nature*, I chose to teach "The Secret Sharer" (1920) in my class "Literature of the Sea" to demonstrate Conrad's relevance to twenty-first century Taiwan and the global world. Along with that, I refer to Peter Fudakowski's film adaptation *The Secret Sharer* (2014) as supplementary material that makes Conrad's work more accessible and familiar to my students, thanks to Fudakowski's strategic relocation of key narrative elements into new, subversive possibilities. In the film, for instance, the English ship is replaced by a Chinese ship; the homoerotic tale of two white men is transformed into a romance between a Chinese woman and a Polish man. The Polish captain's ambition to lead the undisciplined and mutinous Chinese crew is complicated by the fact that

[2] On the "Great Tradition," see F. R. Leavis *The Great Tradition* (1948; 1972).

he has a beautiful and capable Chinese woman as a stowaway in his ship. The film adaptation adroitly blends together the issues of environment, race, class, and gender into one spectacular picture where humans and nature become indistinguishable. The film cast of Taiwanese and Chinese actors/actresses is another asset as it helps bridge the contextual gap between the original text and contemporary culture and bring Conrad's work closer to my students' life experiences. Through Conrad's novella and the film adaptation, they can learn about the potential of natural as well as transnational allegory as a major analytical tool.

The Film Adaptation: Peter Fudakowski as an Intercultural Translator

Accomplished in the tradition of intercultural mediation, Fudakowski's film is fraught with the possibilities of "intercultural breaches, misunderstanding, even conflicts" (Hogan, Rentel, and Schwerter 9). As a film director who attempts to translate Conrad's "prose to the language of cinema" (*The Culture PL* screen 4), Fudakowski must have borne in mind the pitfall of intercultural misconstructions in order to occupy a "median or mediating space within and between cultures" (Hogan, Rentel, and Schwerter 9). The film in question can illustrate how Fudakowski transforms the original English sea-tale into a bi-lingual tale of hybrid cultures, "promoting the respectful acceptance of cultural difference" (10). In other words, he inculcates the sense of "intercultural competence" in the audience and enables them to see and understand "different cultures without prejudice or linguistic interference" (Hogan, Rentel, and Schwerter 10).

Fudakowski was born into a Polish immigrant family and attended financial school before he embarked on the career of a filmmaker (*The Culture PL* screen 2). His immigrant background should be considered when we analyse his intercultural projects and his ability to employ intercultural exchange, conflict, and final reconciliation as cinematic tools. Fudakowski maintains that the film *The Secret Sharer* is "not a direct adaptation," but it took "inspiration" from Conrad (screen 4). The most conspicuous element brought into the film is the romantic relationship between the young Polish sea captain and the beautiful Chinese fugitive hidden in his ship. Besides, in the film, the novella's English crew is replaced by a gang of rebellious Chinese. The atmosphere of intercultural exchange is obvious in the film, particularly in terms of racial, gender, cultural, and class differences. The film reaches its culmination in the final resolution of the intercultural conflict the outcome of which is the achievement of mutual respect by the captain and the crew and the end of intercultural misunderstanding.

According to Gene Moore, Fudakowski's film version turns Conrad's tale of "narcissism or homosocial bonding" on its head ("A Postscript: *Secret Sharer*, the Movie"). In Conrad's original tale, the geographical setting does not matter much; but in the film, the setting of the "South Chinese Sea" tells a lot about race, language, and cultural difference. The film, in fact, undertakes *an intercultural translation*, for it deals with the "captain's initiation into what it means to be Chinese" ("A Postscript: *Secret Sharer*, the Movie"). Fudakowski creates a cinematic version of the Conradian encounter between east and west, and this time the east is not the silent and obscure Other, but definitely returns the gaze of the west. The story does not end with the simplified subversion of the racial and cultural hierarchy. Rather, we are presented with "a contemporary story of rapprochement and growing [mutual] respect" with the "capacity for solidarity" of people across racial and cultural boundaries ("A Postscript: *Secret Sharer*, the Movie").

The "Literature of the Sea" Class: The Teacher as an Intercultural Interpreter

I included Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" in my curriculum for the "Literature of the Sea" undergraduate class, among other seminal authors of maritime prose, such as Melville and Hemingway. Within such a context, Conrad's work is, indeed, a significant achievement. In teaching this novella, I play the part of an intercultural interpreter striving "to reconcile alternative ways of interpreting the world" (Hogan, Rentel, and Schwerter 10). In other words, I bear the ethical and (inter)cultural responsibility of guiding my students to an understanding and appreciation of other cultures and alternative worldviews, so that they can cultivate intercultural empathy.

In this classroom of Taiwanese students with medium-level English competence, I thought it best to teach them classic literary works and in this endeavour, I was much assisted by film adaptations. Gene M. Moore suggests that film has already replaced text as a medium that can effectively transmit literature to the wide public, and the cinematic adaptations of Conrad's works are no exception ("In Praise of Infidelity: An Introduction" 1). Without the need to be "faithful" to the original work, film directors even aim at "infidelity" in order to reach "topical or political referents" for the contemporary times (2,7,13). This "topical and political" element is exactly what Fudakowski has added to his film adaptation of "The Secret Sharer," and this helps fuel concerns about contemporary issues related to race, culture, gender, and ecology. Rather than producing a simplified reduction of the text to the level of exotic entertainment, as has happened with some of Conrad's other texts, Fudakowski successfully and adroitly "smuggles" the inter- and multi- cultural elements of Conrad's English narrative, which prompts the audience to rethink the potential meaning of this literary work.

I chose Fudakowski's 2014 film version as teaching material, as it is closely linked to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of my Taiwanese students. As already remarked, the English crew of the novella is replaced by the Chinese/Taiwanese crew of a Chinese-registered ship named *The Pacific*. Only the young captain is an English-speaking Polish man who communicates with his crew members in a bilingual manner. The familiar language and cultural backgrounds of the characters in the movie have successfully aroused my students' interest and helped them become more involved with the narration.

Another film adaptation of "The Secret Sharer," was released by RKO Radio Pictures in 1952. Considering the distant time and place of the early version's background, I opted for Fudakowski's 2014 version as the better teaching material for my class. In the older film version, the screenwriter Aeneas Mackenzie stresses the "British class (or caste) system" based on "the nation's famous merchant marine at the turn of the twentieth century" (French 94). Reproducing Conrad's plot, the anonymous captain and Leggatt share the experience as the "Conway" boys in John Brahm's film. We can assume the movie's focus is still on the glory of the British Empire bolstered by the British Merchant Marine. In contrast to the attempt to "reinforce the solidarity of the British class system" made by the 1952 film version and by Conrad himself, Fudakowski's 2014 film version suits the cause of intercultural mediation and advocates a solidarity of people across the boundaries of race, culture, language, and gender in a very complex manner (French 94). Assuming the role of an *intercultural interpreter*, I will elaborate on Fudakowski's innovative approach that bridges the class, racial, and cultural divides and deals with gender issues in the section about Li.

The movie begins with images of the busy ship traffic in the Gulf of Thailand before focusing on the Chinese ship *The Pacific*. Symbolically, it stands for an industrialized, commercialized, and globalized "New China." Captain Konrad's concern about commanding a Chinese ship is refuted by the Boss's boast of a "*New* China," in which "everything is impossible, but all things are possible." This "New China" represents a society based on capitalism and industrialization, which is ironically opposed to its claim of being a nation ruled by the "Communist Party." In this capitalist market system, the crew (the workers) stands in struggle against the Boss (the capitalist) and Captain Konrad looks like a suspicious "comprador" to the crew members. The Boss's plot to sink the old ship in order to get insurance compensation reveals the darkest side of capitalism. While Captain Konrad pretends to execute this "order" by receiving the money from the Boss, later he discards class division to work with the crew, getting the old ship back to Shanghai safely and refurbishing it with the Boss's money. This demonstrates the reconciliation between the different classes on board *The Pacific*; the captain and the crew working together to challenge capitalism and counteract its strategies of manoeuvring people to maintain dominance.

The biracial and bicultural community of the ship points to deeper considerations than simply the inevitability of racial and cultural conflicts. Although Captain Konrad has many confrontations with the Chinese/Taiwanese crew, they can eventually come to mutual understanding and establish a strong sense of comradeship and solidarity. The old cargo ship *The Pacific* is decorated like a "garden" by the eastern crew, "full of potted plants and shrubs." The milieu of this ship is very "domestic," reminiscent of an intimate family setting as the crew recurrently claims that "our ship is like our home." Neverthe-

less, Captain Konrad cannot understand and appreciate this in the beginning, and insists on throwing the flowers and plants overboard to maintain an orderly and professional milieu. After the recalcitrant and rebellious second mate Yang Shu starts a fight with Captain Konrad, the Engineer Si Chao asks Konrad to "apologize" to Yang Shu. It seems a totally insensible and ridiculous request to Konrad. But Si Chao tells him its purpose is "harmony," which is the Chinese way of addressing things and handling disputes. In this Chinese ship the European philosophy of a good work ethic seems unworkable. What the Chinese community cherishes is "harmony" and "peace" among co-workers rather than fair play and efficiency. All these are cultural differences and gaps that the young captain needs to overcome and adapt to. He gradually manages to do so in the course of the journey, evolving from an assertive and confident leader to an understanding and forgiving one. At the end of the movie, *The Pacific* sails back to the dry dock in Shanghai and is renovated with the money that Konrad has been given by the Boss to "sink" the ship. Now siding with the Chinese/Taiwanese crew, Captain Konrad sees the ship as their "home" and the crew as his "comrades" against the exploitation of the Boss. Their camaraderie represents the universal brotherhood grounded on mutual understanding and respect after reconciliation. The seeming racial/cultural conflicts are resolved with a happy ending of intercultural bonding and solidarity. In the movie, this "happy ending" says more than the original work by Conrad, which is confined within an English ship with a uniformly English crew on board. The leadership that the anonymous captain-narrator finally achieves is based on the identification with compatriots at its best. By contrast, the film adaptation goes beyond this national(list) confine to reach a true sense of universal brotherhood and solidarity, which can be deemed as a *tour de force* that caters to contemporary concerns with intercultural communication.

An Ecological Allegory: Li as an Intercultural Mediator

There is plenty to say about Li's role in the film adaptation. She is intended to replace Leggatt as one of the protagonists in the tale. In this film version, we can see Li in the role of an intercultural mediator and an ecofeminist who brings together issues about gender, race, culture, and ecology. In the film, Fudakowski reworks the homoerotic relationship between Leggatt and the anonymous captain into a heterosexual relationship between Li and Captain Konrad. The *Doppelgänger* theme is here romanticized and heterosexualized, with Li playing the role of the female alter-ego of Captain Konrad. The intimate "double-ego" is no more an English compatriot, but an exotic Chinese woman with a different cultural and racial background. From the "mirror" scene in Konrad's cabin bathroom, to the intimate exchange of gazes between Li and Konrad, we can see the formation of subjectivity and the growth of the "I/eye" relationship in the heterosexual relationship. On the one hand, Li teaches Konrad many things including nautical knowledge, Chinese customs, and even how to love and be loved. On the other hand, Konrad saves Li and endows her with a new life, a new identity, and a new-born self after the "sea-change."

The intimacy and complementarity of the two sexes is symbolized by Li's "Ying-Yang pendant," which she leaves with Konrad as a love token. Fudakowski's design of this pendant image reminds us of the love story about split human beings elaborated by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. Li and Konrad's love story in a way aptly responds to both ancient western and Chinese cultures about human love.

Li serves as a competent mentor to Captain Konrad in the film. She teaches him lessons about Chinese customs and helps him win the comradeship and respect of the Chinese crew. Through this film character, Fudakowski also manages to successfully transform the stereotypical image of ethnic women as a vulnerable, weak, ignorant, or even dangerous racial Other, such as is Aissa in *An Outcast of the Islands*. In Li's character, we can observe the resilient power of the coloured woman. In her introduction to "ecological feminism" or "ecofeminism," Karen J. Warren maintains that the oppressed and the marginalized status of "women, people of colour, and the underclass" is connected to that of "the non-human natural environment" (xi). Li plays the important role of Captain Konrad's ecofeminist mentor with her bold and resolute personality, her nautical knowledge, and her familiarity with the maritime environment. Li serves as the bearer of ecological knowledge and the advocate of eco-development as well. Dean Curtin argues that "real ecodevelopment cannot be sustained … unless distinctively women's practices and ways of knowing are granted the conceptually central places they deserve" (82). In the world of

science, technology, and modernity, the discourse of development "[patronizes] mind over body, reason over feeling, and theory over practice" based on "masculine bias" (Curtin 87). The patriarchal ideology of "dualism" "favours the 'modern', scientific, rational, global, and high-tech over the traditional, small-scale, and low-tech" (Curtin 87). Female knowledge is rather dismissed as "'wives' tales'," worthy of no recognition (Curtin 87).

Li's former husband, Captain Wang, is a character whose patriarchal bias and desire to dominate betoken male arrogance and even sadism. His self-assertion takes the form of profit-seeking for a selfish purpose. Despite the "hurricane forecasts" that might threaten the lives of the whole crew on board the ship, he refuses to jettison the cargo and timber logs to save the ship. On the contrary, Li is concerned about the safety and well-being of people on board the ship, so she unhesitatingly throws out all cargo overboard and on account of this has a fight with the first mate. Captain Wang decides to hand Li over to the authorities for "murder," and this is the reason that drives Li to jump overboard and swim to her own unforeseen destiny.

In contrast to Captain Wang's authority and knowledge which seem to be "independent, autonomous, and temporal," Li's work and action can be deemed as "women's caring labour" that aims at "the everyday work of translation between the needs of the environment and the needs of the human community" (Curtin 92;87). From Li's nautical knowledge as a capable navigator to her instruction to Captain Konrad showing him how to overcome his cultural/racial misconceptions about the Chinese crew, we can see and admire her "caring labour" as an ecofeminist who nurtures life in a sustainable and symbiotic manner, for the common good of the maritime community. Her familiarity with the seascape and meteorology and general knowledge of navigation are signs of her power as a progressive and forward-looking individual. She administers her caring labour to maintain the integrity not only of the maritime system, but also of the human community. Her alluring Chinese dance, her healing Chinese tea, and her Chinese love-token all contribute to Konrad's better understanding of the racial Other. Her encouragement to Konrad to participate in the Chinese crew's celebration of the Moon Festival is particularly moving and life-giving. Li's practices can be seen as a form of "eastern spirituality," which exerts its influence on Captain Konrad's physical nature as a European man. Their relationship exemplifies how "eastern spirituality" endows him with "bodily health, fitness, and general well-being" when an eastern woman translates these physical and spiritual assets to make them understandable to her masculine western lover (King).

Conclusion: The Inspiration of Ecofeminism

As a Conrad scholar teaching in twenty-first century Taiwan, I have found ecofeminism a feasible and pertinent approach to interpret Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" and Fudakowski's film adaptation in my literary course. Fudakowski's film problematizes oppression of all kinds and in particular, domination over women and nature. As Ynestra King puts it, ecofeminism is concerned about "social domination of all kinds, because the domination of sex, race, and class and the domination of nature are mutually reinforcing" (20). In the film adaptation, we see how the webs of racial, gender, and class oppression are interwoven into a sea story in which human beings attempt to conquer the natural world of sea, and to dominate the maritime community. Instead of speaking for the oppressed community as western feminists do, Andy Smith argues for the ability of the oppressed and marginalized "to speak for themselves" (33). Accordingly, I encourage the students to identify with the voice of the Chinese crew, of the female stowaway Li, and the perspective of the entire maritime community. In the film's setting of a Chinese ship commanded by a European captain who forms a romantic relationship with a Chinese woman hidden in his ship, the issues of race and gender stand out to capture our attention. Instead of appropriating postcolonial theory wielded by "first-world" male scholars and intellectuals, I chose ecofeminism both as a reading strategy and a pedagogical tool, for "ecofeminist theory more seriously grapples with the issues of colonization, particularly the colonization of native lands, in its analysis of oppression" (Smith 22).

Fudakowski's movie has equally incited feminist thoughts and conceptions in my class. The film adaptation highlights the power of women to subvert the action and thought of domination. Li's rebel-

lion against Captain Wang's patriarchal authority points to feminism "disobeying all systems of male domination" (Kelly 113). After Li's subversive action that undermines the patriarchal system ruling the maritime community, she brings a sense of balance and harmony to the community of Captain Konrad's ship (114). She teaches Konrad to embrace the culture of the Other by crossing racial boundaries and achieving mutual understanding and respect with his Chinese crew. Instead of overturning patriarchy in an overt manner, this form of feminist action derives its potential from sharing "power *with* other[s]," and this "shared power …has to replace patriarchal power" (Kelly 114). We can see that Captain Wang and, in a sense, Captain Konrad both represent the male power of a patriarchal system that aims to conquer and control the maritime community, women, and the racial Other. By contrast, Li immerses herself in the natural seascape, like a fish, or some other kind of marine creature that lives in harmony with the ecosystem. In an extended sense, Li loves and nurtures the eco-community where different species, gender identities, and races coexist in a sustainable way. Petra Kelly contends that "the ultimate result of unchecked terminal patriarchy will be ecological catastrophe or nuclear holocaust" (113). Third World women and ecofeminists propose an alternative path as they stress the importance of "harmony" to replace "hierarchy" for "their knowledge is inclusive, not exclusive" (Kelly 117).[3]

As an ecological allegory for the twenty-first century globalized world Fudakowski's film adaptation extends Conrad's compelling solidarity and brotherhood of humanity into an eco-community, where all beings and all species live in sustainability and symbiosis. As Vandana Shiva observes, "the ecological categories with which they [ecofeminists and Third World women] think and act can become the categories of liberation for all, for men as well as for women, for the West as well as for the non-West, and for the human as well as the non-human elements of the earth" (qtd. in Kelly 117).[4]

From Conrad's mystery tale that commends maritime brotherhood, we have come to an age of cinematic appreciation of the literary canons. In the film, the ethnic woman character acts as a potent elemental force that takes over the male community in a stealthy manner but has storm-like effects. With her feminine discernment and eastern knowledge, she can transform the egoistical western captain and teach him how to embrace the world of the racial and the non-human Other.

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[3] See also Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Developmen*t, p. 244.

[4] See also Vadana Shiva. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development,* p. 244.

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