

‘Chinese essay writing: a special challenge for universities in the West.’

A discussion of Chinese students’ essay writing traditions and Western praxis

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This article discusses how the traditions and experience Chinese students bring with them to the West influence their performance in essay writing classes in a Western university. The writer is Senior Lecturer of English Literature at the University of Kristianstad, southern Sweden. The University of Kristianstad has a partnership agreement with the University of Ningbo in south east China. Essay writing classes at Kristianstad are offered at three levels: ‘A’ (15 ECTS), ‘B’ (30 ECTS) and ‘C’ (45 ECTS). The article is based on a conviction that the culture a learner brings with him/her to the classroom has a profound impact on student performance and academic achievement. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the field of essay writing, which incorporates a wide range of skills including clarity of thought, the ability to structure and uphold a logical argument, analytical skills, sensitivity to different registers, a wide vocabulary and a good knowledge of grammar.

As Lixian Jin and Martin Cortazzi argue, ‘culture is a pattern of normal ways of doing things, what people expect and how people interpret situations in which their expectations are not met.’ⁱ In an academic context, this means that there is a taken-for-granted system governing the performance of tasks and the behaviour considered appropriate. The culture the learner brings to the classroom is more than a background influence, it determines how the learner perceives learning and how s/he evaluates his/her own performance and that of other students.ⁱⁱ The academic culture which Chinese students bring with them differs significantly from that of the West. Chinese students are acutely aware of this.ⁱⁱⁱ This article focuses on cultural differences related to so-called ‘high context’ as opposed to ‘low context’ cultures, discourse patterns and management, achievement orientation, rote learning, power relations, and creative/critical thinking.

Our goal must be to produce cultural synergy: the Chinese and Western cultures have much to learn from each other. Before they can do this our awareness of differences must be raised. Chinese students must know before they arrive in the West how Western academic culture differs from the Chinese; similarly, Western professors need a greater understanding of the

Chinese academic culture in order to anticipate and meet the challenges with which Chinese students are faced when writing essays in the West. The writer suggests that one of the most effective methods of teaching Chinese students how to write essays which conform to Western standards is process writing within small groups combined with individual tutorials as required. In this way, students are able to ask questions without losing face, a widely recognised problem for Chinese students,^{iv} and their critical skills are fostered. As Chinese students expect their professors to anticipate questions and have ready-prepared answers,^v the process writing system enables Western professors to deal more efficiently with potential difficulties before they become problems.

Studies^{vi} indicate that Western professors see Chinese students as energetic, methodical, goal-oriented and persistent. They are regarded as shy and passive in the classroom, and their reliance on rote learning is considered to be an obstacle to learning as it is defined in the West, i.e. thinking and writing critically. The Chinese students, on the other hand, see themselves as diligent, sociable, friendly, respectful of the teacher and independent learners who think for themselves. In terms of essay writing, studies show that Chinese students are confused, they feel teachers do not understand their essays and too little attention is paid to improving vocabulary and grammatical correctness.^{vii} To understand why there is a gap in understanding one must look at differences in cultural and discursive practices.

China is a so-called ‘high context’ culture, i.e. inference and implicitness are the source of meaning; it is the reader’s responsibility to interpret meaning. In a ‘high context’ culture, meaning may be unspoken. Chinese writing may be seen by Westerners to be ambiguous, the message is *behind* rather than *in* the language itself. This contrasts clearly with the low context culture of the West, where meaning is explicit, cause is discussed before effect, and argument is linear.^{viii}

Chinese students adopt a holistic view when analysing and tend to perceive on the basis of an overall pattern uniting objects or ideas. Opposites may be part of a larger truth. Chinese students tend to think in terms of ‘both-and’ rather than the ‘either-or’ alternative which characterises Western-style binary thinking. In the West, a more analytical, separatist view is adopted in which objects or ideas are decomposed into parts and common attributes identified.^{ix} For Chinese students, the main aim of communication is to create harmonious relationships rather than share information. Inductive patterns of communication are used in

which the background comes first, the main point later and reasons before results. Proof can come from analogy, examples or indications. In the West, there is a general consensus that the main point is stated first, results come before reasons and proof is provided by explicit sequential links. In China, communication defers to tradition and authority; originality and spontaneity, important qualities in the West, are of less significance.

The preferred method of thinking in China is deductive and not inductive as in the West. This is an important difference which has profound implications for teaching essay writing to Chinese students. Deduction involves beginning with first principles which are taken for granted. It uses a logic which reasons ‘downwards’ in order to derive propositions; because these contain no inferences or new information, they must by definition be ‘true.’ Induction, on the other hand, has as its starting point empirically verifiable facts and/or statistics. It uses these to reason ‘upwards’ in order to produce conclusions or theories which are regarded as tentative since more facts may become available.^x

What then are the implications of the above differences in thinking for essay writing? When the Chinese student places background first and the main point later in the belief that the latter cannot be understood without the necessary background, a Western tutor is likely to be confused or frustrated. By emphasising the importance of the introductory paragraph as an identifier of the main point of the essay as is the praxis in Western rhetoric, subsequent misunderstandings will be avoided. Students can be taught to use basic introductory statements like ‘This essay discusses . . .’ or ‘This essay focuses on . . .’ In a discussion of a famous novel, for example, the introductory statement might read ‘This essay discusses the relationship between love and marriage in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*.’ Students may work in pairs or small process-writing groups to discuss the implications of the introductory statement and develop/identify a specific thesis. The latter may be expressed as ‘This essay argues that Darcy learns that love is more important than social position or financial security when choosing a partner for life.’ Once the introductory and thesis statements have been formulated, students should be encouraged to identify the scope of their essay, i.e. the main topics to be covered. The basic structure of the essay is thus established in the first paragraph and the reader is clearly informed of the order of points to be discussed. The progression is linear and attention is paid to the links between paragraphs to ensure smooth transitions from point to point.

The above system assumes inductive thinking in which it is the responsibility of the writer to establish unambiguous meaning expressed in clear, non-metaphorical language. The essay outlined above also rests on original thinking and posits a view of *Pride and Prejudice* which is based on close analysis of textual evidence. It requires students to think creatively and build a linear argument with a minimum input of background information and maximum emphasis on textual analysis. Process writing enables one to steer students' efforts from the very beginning and ensure that they have a clear structure and argument with which to work. It is the writer's experience that Chinese students do not find it difficult to adopt this strategy. It is important for Western tutors, however, to know that the approach may be unfamiliar to Chinese students. Tutors must be able to anticipate problems. Chinese tutors in the home country can also prepare their students for the Western system and discuss differences and their implications.

What are the barriers for Chinese students to adapting to the Western system? One important obstacle is the emphasis on rote learning which has traditionally characterised the Chinese educational system. According to the Chinese view, memorisation is a concession to the collected experience of the past and to the authority of others. For Western tutors the method is old-fashioned and detrimental to cultivating understanding and analysis. While memorisation does not preclude understanding – indeed it is seen by Chinese tutors as a means of gaining knowledge which can be further developed at a later stage and used for creation – it takes the focus off penetrating below the surface to discover deeper meanings, broader themes, underlying assumptions and different argumentative directions;^{xi} in other words, it does not further the very skills which are fostered within the Western system of essay writing.

Above all, memorisation inhibits creativity and critical thinking as these are defined in the West. Students of all nationalities must be taught to close read. This is particularly problematical for Chinese students who need extra help with concept formation and information processing. Close reading also requires a high level of language sophistication in order to discuss in detail particular words and expressions or stylistic devices. Chinese students are clearly at a disadvantage where the culture in which they live has relatively little exposure to the English language. It is thus particularly important for Chinese students to work in small groups where they have maximum opportunity to discuss texts with fellow

students, test their hypotheses and benefit from the advantages of more individual guidance from the tutor.

One final problem for Chinese students is the overuse of metaphors. Studies^{xii} indicate that Chinese students believe that the more metaphors there are in a text, the more effective is the writing. In Western tradition, metaphors are used sparingly and effectively. From the Chinese perspective, metaphors allow the reader to draw more than one meaning from a statement, thereby rendering the latter more convincing. In the Western tradition, ambiguity is thought to confuse or blur meaning.

The presence of Chinese students in Western universities represents a clear challenge but also a welcome one. The goal of co-operation must be to provide mutual satisfaction. This can only be achieved by understanding the differences between Chinese and Western culture and by recognising that such differences give rise to different expectations and perceptions. These can result in misunderstanding and disappointment on both sides. The more Chinese students know about Western educational practices and, from the point of view of this article, about essay writing practices in the West, the easier it is for them to fulfil requirements in the West. Similarly, the more Western tutors understand the principles of Chinese education and thinking, the better they will be able to solve problems and anticipate these before they arise. Process writing has many advantages: it allows the tutor to steer the development of an essay section by section, it ensures that students conform to requirements from the very beginning, and it promotes clear thinking and effective argumentation. Process writing is best carried out with the support of a small peer group in which students can test their hypotheses, gain support in interpreting specific passages and benefit from constructive criticism. This method has proved highly effective at all levels of teaching at the University of Kristianstad and has had particularly pleasing results with the group that has benefited from it most, namely our Chinese students.

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ⁱ ‘“This Way is Very Different From Chinese Ways:” EAP Needs and Academic Culture’ in Martin Hewings and Tony Dudley-Evans (Eds.), *Evaluation and Course Design in EAP* (Hemel Hempstead: Phoenix ELT, 1996), pp. 205-216 (206).

ⁱⁱ Lixian Jin and Martin Cortazzi, ‘The culture the learner brings: a bridge or a barrier?’ in Michael Byram and Michael Fleming (Eds.), *Language Learning in Intercultural Perspective. Approaches through Drama and Ethnography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 98-118 (98).

ⁱⁱⁱ In a study of Chinese postgraduate students in the UK conducted in 1993 by Lixian Jin and Martin Cortazzi students were asked to rate their ‘lack of knowledge’ in the following areas: writing, speaking, intensive reading, skimming, scanning, listening, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. The highest percentage, i.e. 54% was given for writing (‘This Way is Very Different From Chinese Ways,’ p. 208).

^{iv} See, for example, Lixian Jin and Martin Cortazzi, ‘The culture the learner brings: a bridge or a barrier?’ (pp. 106-7).

^v See, for example, ‘This Way is Very Different From Chinese Ways’ (p. 214); Kathy Durkin, ‘Challenges Chinese Students Face in Adapting to Academic Expectations and Teaching/Learning Styles of U.K. Masters’ Courses, and How Cross Cultural Understanding and Adequate Support Might Aid them to Adapt’ <http://www2.britishcouncil.org/china-education-scholarships-china-studies-grant-awardlist-kathydurkin.pdf> (p.13). Accessed on 20 May 2005.

^{vi} ‘The culture the learner brings: a bridge or a barrier?’

^{vii} ‘The culture the learner brings: a bridge or a barrier?’ pp. 104-5.

^{viii} See, for example, M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1973). R. Kaplan has shown that Chinese writers are indirect in that they do not develop arguments in a linear fashion, i.e. they do not use topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph, neither do they provide supporting sentences or conclusions as is the norm in linear Aristotelian rhetoric (‘Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education’, *Language Learning* 16:1-20, 1966). Similar observations have been made by T. Cole, *Contrastive Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

^{ix} Experiments have been conducted to test these hypotheses and to demonstrate that such practices are inculcated from an early age. See Michael Harris Bond, *Beyond the Chinese Face. Insights From Psychology* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991), chapter 2 ‘Socializing the Chinese Child,’ pp. 6-19.

^x For an explication of these two kinds of thinking and their wider implications for teaching Chinese students see Hu Wenzhong and Cornelius L. Grove, *Encountering the Chinese. A Guide for Americans* (Yarmouth, U.S.A.: Intercultural Press, 1991), chapter 8, ‘Teaching and Learning among the Chinese,’ pp. 73-89.

^{xi} For a wider discussion of the implications of memorisation as a learning tool in Chinese society see Jimmy Chan, ‘Chinese Intelligence,’ chapter 7 in Michael Harris Bond (Ed.), *The Handbook of Chinese Psychology*, (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 93-108.

^{xii} See James L. Myers, ‘Rhetorical style: Chinese encounter Aristotle’ in A. Brown (Ed.), *English in Southeast Asia 99* National Institute of Education, Singapore (2000).