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Patrick Sullivan, Yufeng Zhang, and Fenglan Zheng

College Writing in China and America: A Modest and Humble Conversation, with Writing Samples

This article is a pragmatic, classroom-focused conversation about the teaching of writing among three teachers living in the United States and China, separated by many thousands of miles and many centuries of tradition and culture. Our focus here is on classroom concerns: actual student writing, assignment design, and assessment. We seek to understand more clearly through this conversation how culture and rhetorical tradition help shape the way we teach writing.

Patrick: This collaboration began with simple curiosity. Yufeng and I had been working together on a collection of essays about college writing, and I thought it would be fascinating to initiate a conversation between a college professor in China and a professor in the United States about our work as writing teachers. My idea was simply to talk about college-level writing together and to see what we might be able to learn from one another. I had in mind something straightforward and pragmatic—a dialog about practical issues related to the teaching of writing between teachers from different nations that might make a modest contribution to Bruce Horner and John Trimbur’s call for “an internationalist perspective” related to the teaching of writing—a perspective “capable of understanding the study and teaching of written English in relation

CCC 64:2 / DECEMBER 2012

306

to other languages and to the dynamics of globalization” (624; see also Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue). Moreover, I saw this collaboration as precisely the kind of “entry point” that Xiaoye You discusses in *Writing in the Devil’s Tongue*, one that would further the process of helping American composition “engage in conversation with the rest of the world” (176). If we embrace You’s claim that “increasingly connected relations among linguistic, economic, social, political, and cultural” communities “has turned the composition classroom into an international economic and cultural space” (177), then we have compelling reasons to promote this kind of collaboration and conversation. This project is designed to be one such collaboration.

We understood, of course, that we would have to proceed with care and humility. We would have to guard against making “reductionist, deterministic, or essentialist missteps” (You 9), and we also knew that we couldn’t presume to speak for the composition programs in our respective nations (each with long and complex histories). Nor could we offer readers anything like a national survey of writing practices in our two countries. What we *could* do was welcome readers into our classrooms—which are separated by thousands of miles and shaped by centuries of very different cultural, political, economic, and artistic traditions. In so doing, we could talk about college writing and see what we might be able to learn from one another. This kind of collaboration and dialogue is very rare in our scholarship, and we think it is time that our profession begins to make space for teachers from different nations to talk with each other about the teaching of writing and to share the results of these conversations. We believe there are many ways our profession can benefit from this kind of dialogue. Many of us who teach college composition in the US, for example, have never read a single piece of college writing produced outside the US. We would like to see that changed.

My question to Yufeng at the beginning of this project was very simple: “Are there any teachers that you know in China who might like to engage in a conversation with us about teaching college-level writing in our respective countries?” Fenglan was invited to work on this project with us and agreed to contribute. Yufeng worked with us as a collaborator on this project and as our intermediary and translator.

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Project Design

Each of us has selected an assignment and student writing sample that we believe is fairly typical of the kind of work being done by first-year college students in our countries. Obviously, different teachers may well have selected different kinds of assignments and student writing samples, and different teachers

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may well have focused on different kinds of pedagogy and theory. Furthermore, we want our readers to understand that we do not presume to speak for compositionists in our respective nations, nor do we wish to suggest that the writing samples we

discuss here should be regarded as representative of student writing in our two countries. We position ourselves here simply as three composition teachers talking about student writing.

The considerable body of scholarly and theoretical work related to cross-national literacy practices has guided us and made this conversation possible (Bhandari and Laughlin; Canagarajah; Foster and Russell; Horner and Trimbur; Kirkpatrick; Mao; Reichelt; Swearingen and Mao "Introduction"). Our conversation has also been informed and shaped by the body of scholarship related to second language writing and applied linguistics (Basham, Ray, and Whalley; Bell; Cimasco and Reichelt; Dong; Li; Matsuda; Purves et al.; Reichelt; Soter; Swearingen and Mao "Introduction"). We seek in this essay to build on and extend this important work.

We begin with a writing sample from one of Fenglan's students at Shan Dong University in China. This student's writing appears here in a translation by Yufeng. We then move on to discuss a writing sample from a student of Patrick Sullivan's studying writing at a college in the US. Our final section is a round-table discussion among the three of us.

A Writing Sample from a College Student in China

Context

Yufeng: Chinese writing, with a history of more than three thousand years, has enjoyed an almost unrivalled status in Chinese education. For thirteen hundred years (605–1905), it was the only medium employed for the selection of officials at the civil service exams, and for an even longer period of time, education in China was equivalent with the teaching of reading and writing. The significance of writing still holds true today in China; it is regarded by many

high school and university teachers as the most important measurement of a student's comprehensive capability.

For more than two thousand years, Chinese writing has been under the influence of Confucian rhetoric, the essence of which includes three elements: the Way (*dao*道), writing (*wen*文), and ritual (*li*礼). In this tradition, writing (*wen*) is a vehicle used to seek, understand, and sustain the Way (*dao*) and to promote peace, beauty, and harmony in human society. In other words, writing serves as an educational tool that shapes and nurtures people's thinking, and thus confirms and reinforces well-established moral codes (*li*) (You 10–11). Confucian rhetoric also emphasizes a balance between meaning and form, or *dao* and *wen*: thoughts are expressed through words, but words cannot go far without literary elegance.

The influence of the Confucian thoughts on writing was institutionalized with the establishment of the civil service exam system in 605 of the Sui Dynasty, which further solidified the status of writing. This highly competitive exam, run by the central government, was held regularly to select civil officials at different ranks. Exam takers were expected to produce an impromptu piece of writing on

In the early twentieth century, the Chinese educational system that had traditionally been centered on reading and writing became more oriented toward science and technology.

an assigned topic, which typically was based on the classics (the Four Books and Five Classics) representing the Confucian canons. By demonstrating their knowledge of the classics, examinees also needed to showcase their ability to analyze and solve contemporary political problems in their writing. In the thirteen-hundred-year history of the civil service exam, the form of writing was mainly exam essays (as represented by the notorious *baguwen* or eight-legged essay, an extremely structured essay type), which were typically persuasive or expository, or a combination of the two. However, as an exception, poetry, which was considered the highest form of literature in ancient China, was included in the exam in the Tang Dynasty (618–907). Lyrical prose (*sanwen*), an ancient genre whose origin can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 B.C.), was not tested in the civil service exams, but it remained active among writers for the expression of personal feelings and experiences in these years. (Lyrical prose is the genre of writing Fenglan has assigned her student, and she discusses it in detail in the "Assignment" section below.)

In the early twentieth century, the Chinese educational system that had traditionally been centered on reading and writing became more oriented

toward science and technology. With the abolition of the civil service exam system in 1905, Chinese writing put less emphasis on familiarity with the classics or molding of character. Instead, in conjunction with the rise of scientific rhetoric, writing came to be viewed as “a means of creating psychological effects on the audience” (You 52), intending to entertain, inform, or persuade. In addition to the conventionally significant approaches such as persuasion and exposition, other approaches such as description, narration, and expression of feelings also appeared in influential textbooks at this time. Lyrical prose (*sanwen*) gradually became the most popular genre with the rise of the Vernacular Writing Movement in 1917, which called for, and eventually led to, the establishment of a vernacular writing style as the dominant writing style in China. (Before this movement, Chinese writing was dominated by the more formal “classical” style of writing.)

Pedagogy

Fenglan: Like many other colleagues in my department, I structure my writing instruction around two elements: writing theories and exemplary writing

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samples. Half of our class time is devoted to the introduction of writing theories such as basic principles of writing (including the interaction between the text, writer, and reader), features of different genres, and the cultivation of skills that are considered essential to writing: observa-

tion, interview, data collection and selection, analysis, synthesis, and aesthetic education. The remainder of our class time is devoted to the analysis and discussion of exemplary samples. For student assignments, I usually do not restrict students on their selection of topics or materials. Instead, I encourage them to focus on what impresses them most based on their own observations and experiences. Students have about two weeks to work on the assignments outside of class. After my grading, which usually comes after students’ peer review of one another’s work, excellent student works are usually shared with the class and then recommended for publication.

The Assignment

For this assignment, students were asked to write a free-topic lyrical prose text of approximately two thousand words. I set the genre of the essay, and students picked their own topics. Lyrical prose, or *sanwen* (which literally means scattered writing), is a traditional genre that stands between prose and

poetry. It is called “scattered writing” because it features “the writer’s personal feelings and thinking provoked by some seemingly insignificant, sometimes scattered facts” (Li 86–87). Usually, there is no restriction on topic or structure. This genre has a very high expectation for the linguistic ability of the writer: “The language of lyrical prose is very polished, literary, concise, and rich with historical references, poems, proverbs, and natural images” (87). The seemingly scattered thoughts or facts in the essay should be held together with a thread, or focused theme. For these reasons, this genre is easy to teach but hard to master. Since proficient language ability is considered essential to all writing and is a top priority in Chinese writing instruction, lyrical prose is a very common college writing assignment. At Shan Dong University, it is one of the key points in the writing curriculum for students in Chinese and journalism. Lyrical prose can be descriptive, narrative, expository, or expressive. The assignment here is expressive, which foregrounds the writer’s feelings and emotions. Included here is the first section of Zhao’s essay in its original Chinese, followed by a translation of her entire essay into English by Yufeng.

Student Writing Sample

一方水土，一方人

山东大学文学与新闻传播学院 赵尔靖

“日暮乡关何处是，烟波江上使人愁”。在外面世界漂泊的日子里，家乡一直在召唤着我的心灵，让我久久品尝着思念的滋味。那承载着我数不尽的童年乐趣和点点滴滴成长印迹的地方，是我一生的挚爱和眷恋。我爱那方水土上最美的山、水和人。

我的家乡是一个距县城较远的村落，遥远的几乎被遗忘。然而也正是由于这种不经意的遗忘，它在时代的前行中没有被急速的城市化所淹没，依旧保持着自己原来的面貌：三面环山的地形使它像坐在一把舒适的椅子上，显得宁静而安谧；而被大片绿色所覆盖的地貌又使它显得生机勃勃、富有活力；片片果园和精耕细作的土地弥漫着乡村特有的祥和温馨的气息。

A Special Land Raises a Special People

By Zhao Erjing

“The sun sets while my hometown is still far away; I sink into deep melancholy on the mist-covered river.” In the days when I drift around in the outside world,

home has always been the place my soul longs for. With numerous memories of my childhood happiness and reminders of my growing pains, my hometown is the love of my life. I love the mountains, rivers, and the people there, the most beautiful in the world.

My hometown is a village far away from cities, so far away that it is almost forgotten. For this reason, however, it has maintained its original outlook, immune from the rapid urbanization: surrounded by mountains on three sides, it looks like it is sitting in a comfortable chair, calm and peaceful. The vast verdant land adds to its vigor and energy, and a unique harmonious and warm atmosphere permeates the orchards and fields.

There are four distinct seasons in my hometown. Due to the alternation of the seasons, I developed a deep understanding of concepts such as color and beauty when I was still a child. In the spring, light rains turn willow trees to shades of green, and spring breezes wake up the river, which starts to flow cheerfully once again. After listening to fairytales in the winter, the earth stretches and yawns, and everything becomes active again. Driving cows out of their sheds, farmers start to work in their fields for the year. With an exciting roll of thunder, the trees and crops race to grow faster in the thunder-and-lightning "Symphony of Life"—summer, the symbol of passion and energy, has arrived.

In the fall, branches bend under the weight of clusters of fruits, spreading the joy of good harvest; the magnificent colors of the sunset in the Western Mountain are simply breathtaking. A wave of chilling fall wind sweeps across the green grass, as if painting it with a dry, lifeless yellow—lonely, sorrowful, but sublime. In the winter, my favorite season, the land falls into deep thought, mysterious and impeccable, leading me to endless imagination. Feathery snowflakes falling from the sky, the mountains and fields are blanketed in white snow. Build a snowman, have a snow fight, or chase one another with snowballs—this is a dreamy moment in my memory!

Each time I come back home, liberated from the polluted air in the city, I feel refreshed and energized almost immediately. Stepping on my native soil in the field, I feel at home. At this moment, my horizon seems to be broadened and all my trivial worries are gone. I am so delighted, as if just set free from a heavy bondage. I deeply cherish the people who have been living on this land as I have.

Up till now, I still remember a picture I saw when I was a little girl, the most beautiful picture I have ever seen: on my way to work in the mountain with my parents, I saw a girl of my age sitting on the grass. She was in her teens, wore her hair in braids, and her whole body was bathed in the golden light of the sunshine. There were two goats in front of her, munching on grass, while she bowed her head, as if whispering to the goats or thinking about the teacher's lecture of that day. Father told me that the girl, coming from a very poor family, had to work after school every day to make things easier for her family. Living a carefree life with no idea of poverty in my mind at that time, I asked my father to buy a little goat for me to play with. My request was rejected, of course. Now, this picture often occurs in my mind, perhaps due to the powerful harmonious beauty displayed in it

between human beings and nature. This picture also reminds me of the composed attitude about life that people in my hometown have, which is a wisdom we all need in a restless time like this.

There is such a group of people in my hometown: plain but down-to-earth, they taught me a lot when I was growing up. They do not dress fashionably, but always neatly and appropriately; they are not genteel or graceful, but friendly, kind, and hospitable; they are not sophisticated, but will reach out to help those in need. Having lived their lives for generations in the mountains, they are as steady and reliable as mountains, and flexible and active as rivers. Their profession may not be the greatest of all, but the harvests they reap with their hard-working hands are the greatest. They smile at the fruits of their labor, sharing their happiness of harvest with one another.

My home is built on this land. In the front of my house is the road that connects my village to the outside world, in the back is the river that nurtures the whole village, and the mountain I am deeply in love with sits right across the river. I have always enjoyed the location of my home. Because of it, I do not envy Tao Yuanming's "picking asters neath the Eastern Fence" as my classmates in the city do, since "my gaze" already "rests upon the Southern Mountain." I am not amazed at the ease and comfort of "the fisherman" who "spent the night in the Western Mountain" as my classmates are, since I can also "paddle a boat in the greenness of mountain and river."

Besides me, there are four members in my family: my kind but serious father, my caring and beautiful mother, my style-conscious but willful younger sister, and my naughty but never-let-you-down younger brother. I love each of them, deeply and sincerely. In order to pay for our education, my father has built and managed the first chicken farm in my hometown. I am grateful for what he has done from the bottom of my heart. My mother's smile has motivated me to work hard to meet her expectations with my academic accomplishments. As the oldest sibling in my family, I take care of my younger brother and sister, as my responsibility and my pleasure. To me, love is not a burden; their laughter and growth is my happiness. In the days when I study in the city, sometimes at night, warm, happy pictures of my family getting together will come to my mind, and this warmth and happiness have spread out to the river running outside my house, to the little parasol tree waving in the wind, and to the drifting white clouds up in the blue sky.

A special land raises a special people. No matter how far away I go in the future and wherever I live, my hometown is my spiritual harbor and the land I love forever.

Discussion

Zhao Erjing is a country girl who studies at a university in the city. With a grateful heart, she expresses her appreciation of and attachment to her hometown. Her essay, which in my judgment is sincere, touching, and vivid, displays three admirable features.

First, *her language is vivid and poetic*. Writing is the art of language; therefore, the ability to use beautiful language to describe scenery and objects is an important criterion to measure a writer's skill. This is also why language training has always been an important part of our writing curriculum. In her essay, Erjing vividly depicts the picturesque natural beauty of her hometown with smooth, poetic language and multiple rhetorical methods. For instance, the comparison she draws between the landscape of the village, which is surrounded by mountains on three sides, and a chair is lively and original. Her description of the harmony between the shepherd girl and nature may remind readers of folk art paintings, which often depict this theme. When the writer depicts the alternation of the four seasons in her hometown, she thoroughly demonstrates the magical rhythm and beauty of nature by capitalizing on the color and sound effects of language. The spring with running rivers and green lands, the summer with trees and crops growing up in "the Symphony of Life," the fall with abundant fruits and the happiness of harvest, and the mysterious, romantic winter blanketed in white snow—all become so alive under this writer's articulate pen. Her detailed description reveals the beauty of language and appeals to a reader's senses and interest at the same time.

Second, *the emotions revealed in the essay are sincere and touching*. Writing is the product of thoughts and emotions; therefore, the sincerity and genuineness of writing is key to whether it can inspire and influence readers. In addition, positive, healthy emotions are also an important factor in reaching the beauty of the spiritual world. The hometown topic on which the writer focuses is not unique; however, what makes her essay special is that the affection, attachment, and aspiration expressed in it is not pretentious. Unlike many students her age, the writer does not strive to be sentimental. She might have shed homesick tears at the fallen leaves on the ground, but the emotions revealed in the essay are bright and clear, like sunshine. With her simple living philosophy and frank nature, when she looks back at her native land, she is full of gratitude, compliments, and affection. Thus, "love" is the primary color of the essay, and "love" is also the thread running through the essay. Because of this love, the mountains and rivers are gorgeous in the writer's eyes. The idyllic scenery of her hometown, the location of her home, which allows her to "rest [her] gaze upon the Southern Mountain," and the white clouds up in the sky touched by the happy laughs of her family—every word in the essay is permeated with her deep feelings toward her hometown.

The writer loves the natural scenery of her hometown, but she loves the people living on this land even more. They are the treasure of her life. Plain as the yellow soil, these folks are not eloquent or heroic, but they are kind, generous, and ingenuous; they live peacefully and calmly and embrace the hard work that can bring fruitful results. For people in the city who live in a restless, hypocritical, and material world, isn't there something they can learn from these country folks?

In the writer's loving eyes, everything in her hometown is beautiful; this is a restful garden for her soul, the roots for her life, and a habitat for poetry. Like a song from the bottom of her heart, the essay has a touching emotive beauty. At the same time, this love transforms into a sense of responsibility, which adds spiritual beauty to this essay. One of the major tasks for college writing teachers in China is to help cultivate positive, healthy emotions among students.

Overall, this is a vivid, sincere, and beautiful essay.

Third, *the essay employs appropriate techniques and skills*. Each genre has its own features and structures, so an essay has to follow certain forms to express its intended meaning. This essay is a lyrical prose work. With an accurate grasp of the features of this genre, the writer makes successful use of typical techniques such as vivid depiction of scenes and objects, proper narration of characters and events, particular attention to details, and conveyance of feelings via scenes and objects. Moreover, quotations from classic poems lend fun and flavor to the essay.

Overall, this is a vivid, sincere, and beautiful essay. Of course, as a work by a first-year college student, it has some flaws, too. For instance, the focus of the essay fails to go beyond a surface description of her hometown. Out of the writer's deep love, her hometown is depicted as something from a perfect folk art painting. In reality, life in the countryside is like a coin with two sides: it has both joy and sorrow, both sunshine and shadows. Although the feelings expressed in the essay are genuine, they are general and lacking uniqueness. In addition, at the beginning of the essay, the writer quotes from "The Yellow Crane," a poem by Cui Hao in the Tang Dynasty. The theme of this poem is not only endless homesickness, but also the hardship of the world, whereas Erjing's essay is limited to her feelings about her hometown. Also, regarding the organization of the essay, the message delivered in the opening quote is not fully developed in the essay either. Therefore, these three weaknesses have constrained the height and depth of the essay.

A Writing Sample from a College Student in the United States

Context

I have selected a writing sample for this project from a student in my English 93 class.... This course is designed to help students transition from basic writing to college-level work, so it seems like an ideal site from which to draw a typical college-level writing sample.

Patrick: I have selected a writing sample for this project from a student in my English 93 class, a basic writing course I have been teaching for many years. This course is designed to help students transition from basic writing to college-level work, so it seems like an ideal site from which to draw a typical college-level writing sample. In basic writing classes like this one, we see college reading, writing, and thinking skills usually only as they are emerging. Nonetheless, viewing these emerging skills allows us to see and examine more easily the many discrete elements that contribute to college-level proficiency.

Pedagogy

This writing sample is the final draft of an essay that was developed in a process-oriented classroom. Our class spent approximately four weeks on this project, discussing the readings individually in whole class discussions and in small groups and then working together on drafts of this essay with peer editing teams. I met with each student in the class at least twice during this time to offer feedback and guidance as students were developing their essays.

Furthermore, this artifact was produced in a classroom that defined the nature of good writing in very specific ways. I invite students in this class to theorize writing expertise in terms of Anne Beaufort's "five knowledge domains": (1) Discourse Community Knowledge, (2) Writing Process Knowledge, (3) Subject Matter Knowledge, (4) Genre Knowledge, (5) Rhetorical Knowledge (5-27).

The Assignment

Most of my major writing assignments for this class cross traditional disciplinary boundaries because I want students to engage the kind of material they will be required to read elsewhere in the curriculum (Russell; see also Wineburg). Furthermore, it seems crucial to me that college writing proficiency be judged, at least in part, in terms of how well students can understand and engage college-level reading material (Sullivan, "What"). I have put such texts at the center of the following assignment.

Meeting Thomas Jefferson: Readings from Three Biographies

Reading Sequence:

1. Dumas Malone, *Thomas Jefferson: A Brief Biography* (1933)
2. Andrew Burstein, from *Jefferson's Secrets: Death and Desire at Monticello* (2005) [Chapter 5: The Continuing Debate: Jefferson and Slavery, pp. 113–150]
3. Annette Gordon-Reed, from *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997) [Chapter 4: Thomas Jefferson, pp. 105–157; Chapter 5: Sally Hemings, pp. 158–189; Chapter 6: Summary of the Evidence, pp. 210–223; Chapter 7: Conclusion, pp. 224–235; Appendix B: The Memoirs of Madison Hemings, pp. 245–248; Appendix C: The Memoirs of Israel Jefferson, pp. 249–253]

This assignment is designed to provide you with the opportunity to encounter three different biographical treatments of Thomas Jefferson, one of the most famous and revered of America's "founding fathers."

Here are the questions I'd like you to reflect on as you read these selections and work on this essay:

- What do these readings taken together suggest to you about "history"?
- What counts as knowledge and truth in this discipline?
- What might we be able to conclude about the *writing of history* from these three readings?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each historian's approach featured here?
- Is it possible to "know" and understand historical figures like Jefferson, who are far removed from us historically, and who lived in a world so different from our own in so many ways?
- Does it make sense to look back and judge historical figures like Jefferson using today's values? If not, then how should we judge their work, legacy, and achievement—especially someone like Jefferson who is among the most revered and important of all American heroes and perhaps our most eloquent defender of liberty and freedom?

Once we have completed reading and discussing these readings, I would like you to write a reflective essay about these questions.

Essays should be approximately 1250 words in length.

Although the subject matter may seem nontraditional for an English class, I have designed this assignment to align closely with the "WPA Outcomes State-

ment for First-Year Composition,” especially those outcomes related to “critical thinking, reading, and writing.” These include using writing and reading “for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating”; understanding a writing assignment “as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources”; integrating a student’s own ideas with those of others; and understanding “the relationships among language, knowledge, and power” (Council). This assignment requires students to engage these important outcomes. This approach also aligns well with outcomes articulated in the recent report of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) *College Learning for the New Global Century*, especially the focus on developing skills in “inquiry and analysis” (3). By design, this assignment invites students to engage the kinds of “challenging problems” (12) advocated by the AACU in this report.

Student Writing Sample

What follows here is a student response to this assignment completed in the spring 2009 semester. The student, Brian Urgo, wrote this essay in his first semester in college after five years in the workforce after high school.

Biographies of Thomas Jefferson

By Brian Urgo

The formal definition of history is “A record of past events and developments.” However, if history were based on sole facts and records like we are made to think, then each historian’s “record” of Thomas Jefferson wouldn’t differ as much as they do. Each historian puts in his or her interpretation and opinion by choosing to include or exclude specific details to portray Jefferson in his or her own way. This leads me to believe that one cannot rely on a single source when it comes to finding all the true facts about Jefferson.

Dumas Malone, Andrew Burstein, and Annette Gordon-Reed all have different accounts of Jefferson’s life. All of these historians’ views differ greatly. For example, Burstein and Gordon-Reed mainly focus their accounts of Jefferson’s life on his alleged affair with Sally Hemings. Malone, however, makes no mention of Sally Hemings, and portrays Jefferson as an honorable man who does no wrong. From these writings, the conclusion we can draw is that Jefferson had an affair with Sally Hemings and children were born as a direct result. This went on for almost four decades. While some historians choose to disregard or debate the scandal with Sally Hemings, the fact that Jefferson favored her children, and freed them once they reached adulthood proves that there was more than just a master to slave relationship between them.

There are many strengths and weaknesses that each historian had with his or her writings. Malone is well educated on Thomas Jefferson’s positive attributes

such as his accomplishments and contributions to early American government. For example, he not only wrote the Declaration of Independence, but also was a member of the House of Delegates, served as the first United States Secretary of State, served as President and also Vice President and contributed to the Louisiana Purchase. Malone's weakness is that he disregards the fact that Jefferson owned slaves. Malone sidestepped, in his writings, that Jefferson was against slavery yet owned slaves himself. Even though it was alleged that Jefferson had relations with Sally Hemings, Malone didn't include any details about that part of Jefferson's life whether it be true or not.

Burstein and Gordon-Reed have similar takes on Jefferson and the way he lived. They tell a different story than Malone. Burstein and Gordon-Reed tell the story of Jefferson and his liaison with Sally Hemings. Gordon-Reed gave detailed accounts of what transpired at the mock trial to decide the issue whether examples of hypocrisy in Jefferson's life significantly diminished his contributions to American society. This is a strength in their writings because they include a detailed account of Jefferson's personal life. However, they both exclude important well-publicized contributions to early America, which shows a weakness in their writings.

Historians portray so many different views of historical figures. To know a historical figure like Jefferson, one would have to have first hand knowledge, which is impossible because the era in which he lived was so long ago. Historians have the tendency to paint a picture of the past that best suits his or her opinion. They don't pay justice to all the events that happened. As the reader, we only see parts of Jefferson, not who he truly was.

It does not make sense to judge Jefferson's morals and values based on today's. Society and what is and isn't acceptable has significantly changed between Jefferson's time and today. For instance, it was unacceptable for Jefferson to be involved in miscegenation. That, in Jefferson's time, would have discredited him, and ruined his reputation. In today's society, it is nothing out of the ordinary. A lot of values practiced in Jefferson's time are not acceptable today. Jefferson owned slaves and sold their children. Today, at the very least, that is illegal let alone immoral, and would be the last thing you expect from a president.

In Malone's Jefferson there is no talk about slavery and miscegenation, in regards to Sally Hemings. Malone's Jefferson is nothing more than a well-accomplished patriot. Malone's views are one-sided with no room for the reader to see other dimensions of Jefferson. It is Jefferson from a young boy to an older man, never really talking about Jefferson's personal life. Personally, I didn't learn anything more about Jefferson than I did from high school history books.

The kind of world that Burstein and Gordon-Reed portray is dramatically different from Malone's. It is a depiction of Jefferson that not many people are aware of. These two authors are in sequence with their history or what they thought to be true. Their devotion to detail and accounts from Sally and Jefferson's family members draws a very vivid picture that is hard to dispute. By the end of Burstein and Gordon-Reed's writings, the reader could conclude that Thomas Jefferson had a 38-year liaison with Sally Hemings, which resulted in them having three children,

and was far different from what people were doing at the time. Not only were Sally Heming's children mistaken for white, and thought to look like Jefferson, but DNA proves that they were born from, if not Jefferson, a member of his family.

In conclusion, history cannot be based on one author's book. History is not based on sole facts, but an opinion is mixed in two. Jefferson had a very different life according to Malone versus Bernstein and Gordon-Reed's account of what really went on. The reader cannot know the true Jefferson without one on one experience due to the lack of information in historian's writings. Jefferson was a very renowned and accomplished man, but lived a very secretive life that would not have been acceptable in his society.

Discussion

This essay exhibits three strengths typical of much first-year college writing that I've seen. First, *this writer demonstrates a basic understanding of the conventions of the academic essay*. Although Brian's competence and sophistication here are still emerging and maturing, he is nonetheless following standard US essay format as he responds to this assignment: his essay has an introduction, body, and conclusion; he also maintains a strong and consistent point of view while discussing a complex or controversial subject. So I think his "genre knowledge" and his "discourse community knowledge" here are solid. Brian also maintains a solid sense of self as he interacts with others in this conversation, and this is something that has been an important part of writing instruction in the US for many years now—the development of a student's distinct voice, perspective, and position on a given issue or idea.

Second, *this writer appears to be working in good faith to engage the challenging questions provided by the assignment*, and he appears to understand, following Kenneth Bruffee, that "entering an existing knowledge community involves a process of negotiation" (647). Brian seems reasonably comfortable with ambiguity and subtlety, and he seems to have embraced the opportunity to think about history, the writing of history, and the challenges we face when we try to assess the life and work of historical figures like Jefferson. Brian also appears to be working hard not to simplify or misrepresent material for the sake of his argument, as we often see, it seems to me, in much pre-college work. This practice manifests itself in student writers who obviously enjoy having an opinion and stating it clearly and unequivocally. There is often also a sense of entitlement about this opinion as well—or any kind of opinion, for that matter, no matter how well substantiated, researched, or thought out. In this way as well, I think we can regard this essay as typical of college-level work, as this writer seems to be working actively (although, admittedly, imperfectly) to resist such simplistic ways of thinking.

We see this writer using “rhetorical knowledge” solidly here as well. I think he responds fairly effectively to audience and purpose. We may also be seeing this writer at work attempting to connect new ideas to previous knowledge, as when he notes that “This leads me to believe that one cannot rely on a single source when it comes to finding all the true facts about Jefferson.” Although there is room for development, this student has constructed a basic argument and developed a strong point of view on the questions this assignment invited him to address.

Third and finally, *this student worked through a number of drafts, reread key sections of assigned texts multiple times, sought out feedback from peers and his teacher, and planned to work on this essay over the course of a few weeks.* His “writing process knowledge” is strong, and it helped him produce a solid final essay. I saw him fully engaged in this process.

One weakness of this essay, in my judgment, is Brian’s level of engagement with the readings—the lack of direct quotations from the readings and the lack of close analysis of key passages from the assigned texts. Unfortunately, in terms of US college students’ reading skills, this may be typical of first-year college students as well (Jolliffe; United States). There are three places in particular where I would have liked to see more development of ideas and a deeper engagement with the readings:

1. “Dumas Malone, Andrew Burstein, and Annette Gordon-Reed all have different accounts of Jefferson’s life. All of these historians’ views differ greatly. For example, Burstein and Gordon-Reed mainly focus their accounts of Jefferson’s life on his alleged affair with Sally Hemings. Malone, however, makes no mention of Sally Hemings, and portrays Jefferson as an honorable man who does no wrong.”

—There is a great deal to say about this, and Brian might have paused here and defined these differences a little more carefully, using quotations from each text to do this.

2. “From these writings, the conclusion we can draw is that Jefferson had an affair with Sally Hemings and children were born as a direct result. This went on for almost four decades. While some historians choose to disregard or debate the scandal with Sally Hemings, the fact that Jefferson favored her children, and freed them once they reached adulthood proves that there was more than just a master to slave relationship between them.”

—Brian might have paused here to treat this issue, and the issue of the DNA evidence in particular, a bit more carefully. It's a complicated story, and the circumstantial evidence as well as the DNA evidence requires patient, detailed discussion.

3. "There are many strengths and weaknesses that each historian had with his or her writings. Malone is well educated on Thomas Jefferson's positive attributes such as his accomplishments and contributions to early American government. For example, he not only wrote the Declaration of Independence, but also was a member of the House of Delegates, served as the first United States Secretary of State, served as President and also Vice President and contributed to the Louisiana Purchase. Malone's weakness is that he disregards the fact that Jefferson owned slaves. Malone sidestepped, in his writings, that Jefferson was against slavery yet owned slaves himself."

—This is a very important and morally complex point that could benefit from fuller, clearer, and more nuanced discussion.

So this writer's "subject matter knowledge" regarding Jefferson and the historical record could be stronger. But I am encouraged by the way he is attempting to engage the big questions at play here ("Is it possible to 'know' and understand historical figures like Jefferson?" "What counts as knowledge and truth in this discipline?"). There is much more to say about these questions, of course, but this writer appears to be at least considering how a discourse community shapes larger questions related to knowledge and truth. Despite some weaknesses, I believe that this essay meets the minimum threshold for college-level proficiency.

A Round-Table Discussion among Contributors

Fenglan: This project, proposed and designed by Patrick, is not only a conversation between college writing professionals in the United States and China, but it also is a dialogue across two cultures. I am very glad to be part of this project.

I find that, despite cultural differences, there exist similarities in writing instruction between the two countries. For instance, in addition to familiarizing students with relevant writing theories, we both emphasize the development of students' writing ability through writing practice, we both stress the close connection between reading and writing, and we both expect students to observe life carefully, ask questions, and express thoughts accordingly in their writing.

However, based on the student samples we have selected, writing instruction in the two countries seems to emphasize different elements of writing. The assignment Patrick designed skillfully integrates students' reading, analyzing, and writing abilities, and to me, it puts more emphasis on the cultivation of a student's logical and critical thinking capacities. The sample essay I chose is lyrical prose, a genre that requires students to observe and reflect consciously, describe scenes vividly, articulate thoughts and emotions accurately, and organize an essay strategically. These requirements represent certain basic writing skills stressed in Chinese writing, especially for students in liberal arts majors. These differences in writing instruction, at least to some degree, reflect the influences of different rhetorical traditions on writing instruction in our two countries.

Finally, this project allowed me to see what has been neglected in college writing instruction in China, or at least in my context. I believe that a student's logical, critical thinking abilities deserve more attention in our Chinese writing instruction.

Patrick: I loved Zhao's essay. I found it, as you did, Fenglan, touching and vivid. I was particularly struck by the aesthetic quality of the writing, the carefully chosen details, the skillful and poetic observation, as well as the deep connection to community that the writer acknowledges and celebrates. I think American high school and college students could benefit in many important ways from assignments designed to nurture these kinds of observational and descriptive skills and this kind of engagement with community.

I was also moved by the personal quality of the narrative as well as its affective elements. Emotion is communicated powerfully and movingly here, it seems to me. As Brand, Lindquist, and Robillard all suggest, emotion is often considered to be either unconnected to or less important than "critical thinking" or cognitive ability in most academic settings in the US. This may be because emotion is often theorized as independent of traditional cognitive skills. Following Antonio Damasio and Martha Nussbaum, however, we can theorize emotion and cognition not as distinct and independent human domains, but rather as linked and interdependent faculties that function together in a variety of complex, interlocking, and important ways. I think Zhao's essay begins to show us what we have to gain by thinking of emotion in this way.

These differences in writing instruction, at least to some degree, reflect the influences of different rhetorical traditions on writing instruction in our two countries.

Finally, one of the features I enjoyed most about Zhao's writing was her artistry and style as a writer. I would love to encounter more writers in US classrooms who have developed a sense of style and who engage writing as an art form. To my mind, the more students we can inspire to create "writing to be read," to use Ken Macrorie's famous phrase, the better. I believe that Zhao's essay shows us what is at stake here as well.

Yufeng: One of the conclusions readers may draw after reading these two student samples is that American writing values logic, reasoning, and self-discovery, while Chinese writing values beauty of language and the moral message delivered in writing. This observation does not apply to all situations, of course; nevertheless, it does catch at least some critical characteristics of the two rhetorical traditions, in my opinion. Since Patrick has discussed the values he sees as typical of US writing, I would like to add here a few more comments about the practices and values of Chinese writing.

It is noteworthy that there are no general writing courses at Chinese universities. College Chinese, a general education course required for most college students, mainly focuses on the appreciation of literary works from different time periods, rather than the production of writing by students themselves. Unlike teachers in middle school and high school, college instructors do not have any national guidelines that clarify the goals or outcomes of Chinese education at this level. As to writing, the amount and type of composition vary substantially across disciplines. Another difference I have noted is the role of writing in student learning. In China, writing is less likely than it is in the US to be viewed as an epistemic tool that expresses meaning or that sorts out and leads to new meaning. That may be one of the reasons that more emphasis is placed on the balance between form and meaning in Chinese writing, less on the process that pursues meaning.

The Chinese writing sample by Zhao reflects the significance of literary elegance (*wencai*) and moral message in Chinese writing. As Fenglan suggests, the poetic language and vivid depiction of natural scenes are strengths of Zhao's work. The writer's familiarity with and reference to classical poetry also adds to the aesthetics of her written words. As a work of expressive lyrical prose, this essay features the writer's feelings and emotions, which, for the most part, are expressed through her literary description of the natural surroundings in her hometown. Here, it is important to note that this integration of emotions (*qing* 情 in Chinese) and natural scenery (*jing* 境) is a traditional rhetorical strategy in Chinese literature; that is, *qing* is couched in *jing*: "all descriptions

of natural objects or scenery are for the sake of expressing emotions” (Li 87). As Li points out, this intertwined relationship between *qing* and *jing* also reflects an ancient Chinese philosophy about man and nature: “man is part of *jing*, and *jing* is an extension of man” (87). Therefore, artists, including writers, not only are inspired by nature but also find in it a means of expression for their creativity. This rhetorical strategy is an honored tradition in classic Chinese literature, and it is still cherished today.

Another highly valued component in Chinese writing is the positive moral message, or soundness of character, expressed in writing. For instance, Fenglan has commended the positive emotions expressed in Zhao’s essay, and she also acknowledges that it is a writing teacher’s responsibility to help cultivate positive, healthy emotions among students. This view is also shared by other Chinese writing teachers (for example, teachers in Xiaoming Li’s ethnographic study), even though they may disagree on the definition of *soundness*, or what *healthy, positive* thoughts and emotions exactly mean.

I noted in my previous brief review of the history of Chinese rhetoric this moral or ideological significance in Chinese writing. The goal of Confucian rhetoric, whose strong influence is felt even today, was to find the Way (*dao*) and to bring forth people’s moral nobility. During the decades from the 1950s to the 1980s when Chinese rhetoric was impacted by communism and Marxism—and characterized by strong political teaching—the Way turned into “correct opinions” and “a clear-cut theme” in writing. Correct opinions often meant pledging allegiance to the party’s four cardinal principles (the socialist road, people’s dictatorship, party leadership, and Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought). A clear-cut theme therefore meant that a clear (and correct) ideological position guided a piece of writing (You 139). This “politically correct” requirement was dropped after China entered the market economy era, and creativity and individuality have gained more weight as a measure of good writing. However, as a gatekeeper of social morality and ethics, writing is still expected to exert a positive influence on readers. That is, a writer is expected to “observe everyday life closely, to think actively, and to develop his or her own sense of the ‘main melody’ of society,” and by doing so, this “brings the reader in closer contact with others’ life experiences, a process that eventually leads to the readers’ refined understanding of his or her own life and of society in general,” which is the Confucian sense of ritualization (*li*) (You 143).

The student sample Patrick selected, together with his analysis, confirms my perception of college writing in the US: it emphasizes the integration of reading, writing, and thinking skills, the ability to critique sources (instead of

accepting them as truth without question), and the construction of knowledge from both personal and scholarly perspectives. Due to different emphases, the Chinese essay by Zhao might seem too emotional, or not convincing enough to American readers, but I was very happy to see that Patrick appreciated the "aesthetic" and "affective" features of Zhao's essay.

Patrick: I think there are some fascinating and important questions related to the role that culture, power, and ideology play in the act of writing that this project invites us to consider. For example, my student writing about Thomas Jefferson is, in some ways, enacting an empowering and liberating literacy practice whereby issues in a democracy are candidly and openly discussed in the free marketplace of ideas. In ways that are related to but also independent of this process, we also see this student participating in a process of socialization and acculturation into what Lisle and Mano call "the language of power" (21)—academic English (see also De and Gregory).

In still other ways, we can see my student participating in a larger, less egalitarian social process whereby power, wealth, and sponsoring agents like the US government and business interests shape the way we think about literacy and help determine who receives literacy training and who doesn't. Literacy training has become a high-stakes enterprise now in the new US knowledge economy, of course, and as Deborah Brandt has argued,

although apprehended as differences in literacy rates, we really have different histories of literacy sponsorship operating in the United States—differential systems by which literacy has been subsidized, developed, and compensated. (203)

We see this stratification process at work here with my student as well. Unlike some of his more advantaged peers at the other end of the economic spectrum who attend very selective institutions—places Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin call "bastions of privilege" and not "engines of opportunity" (135)—my student is a first-generation college student who works full-time while attending an open admissions institution. With work and family commitments, he is able to attend school only part-time. Students at selective institutions typically do not work full-time or attend school part-time, a combination of factors that attenuates one's time in school and can often compromise one's progress toward degree completion (Sullivan, "Measuring"). I think our dialogue here brings us around again to a very fundamental question for our discipline: In what ways are our pedagogical practices shaped by culture, power, and ideology?

Fenglan: Inevitably, our pedagogical practices are influenced, and even framed, by our ideology. The valued features of “good writing” in China reflect, as well as result from, the expectations of the Chinese cultural and rhetorical traditions. For instance, both the “General Guideline for Middle School Chinese Language Education” and the “General Guideline for High School Chinese Language Education,” which are published by the national Ministry of Education, signify the importance of “genuine, healthy thoughts” in students’ written work. They also note that the goals of Chinese education include “helping students develop sound personality and noble character” and “cultivating in them socialist ideology, moral values and patriotism.” These guidelines set the tone for Chinese writing in college, which is usually considered an extension of what has been done in high school. This is shown by my comments on the Chinese writing sample as well.

Patrick: We conclude this discussion with a brief look at a related question—how rhetorical traditions help shape our orientation toward the world and the production of knowledge and meaning. As Lisle and Mano suggest, different rhetorical traditions provide different ways of constructing identity, understanding self, and knowing the world. For teachers in the US, a true multicultural classroom would also provide students with the opportunity to explore and challenge the “supposedly superior Western ways of knowing the world and speaking about and constructing it” (De and Gregory 118). I think the “personal” or “expressivist” nature of Zhao’s essay helps us see what’s at stake here. The subject of personal writing is one, of course, that has generated significant debate within our discipline. The case against it has been made perhaps most memorably by Lester Faigley, who characterizes such writing as “turning away from the relation of the individual to the social world” and embodying a view of composing that “ignores how writing works in the world, hides the social nature of language, and offers a false notion of a ‘private’ self” (656). There are many kinds of personal writing, however (see Hindman, “Making”; Hindman, “Special”; Paley; Symposium Collective) and Zhao’s essay here, it seems to me, obviously turns toward the relation of the individual to the social world, and posits a very historically and locally contingent sense of self. Many comments within her essay make that very clear. Whereas US students typically focus on individual opinion and perspective by way of argumentative essays (which, I would argue, often offer their own false version of a private self), Zhao’s essay

Inevitably, our pedagogical practices are influenced, and even framed, by our ideology.

and this lyrical prose assignment (which, by design, produces writing “rich with historical references, poems, proverbs, and natural images”) provides us with an example of a very different kind of writing—and a very different way of understanding the self, connecting to community and history, and knowing the world.

This is a complex subject, of course, and it is important to note here that there is scholarship in our discipline that, among other things, challenges the very idea of “self,” and that argues, furthermore, that “selves” are not stable but fluid and socially and situationally constructed (Barthes; Foucault, “Ethic”; Foucault, “What”; Steven Heine’s essay “Constructing Good Selves in Japan and North America” adds a fascinating international perspective to this debate). At the very least, Zhao’s essay shows us quite dramatically that we have much to gain from opening ourselves up to writing practices from other cultures and rhetorical traditions.

Conclusion

Patrick, Yufeng, and Fenglan: We embarked on this project, following the important work of Bruce Horner, John Trimbur, Andy Kirkpatrick, Xiaoming Li, LuMing Mao, Xiaoye You, and others, fueled by the hope that our conversation would support and extend, in at least in some small way, Horner and Trimbur’s call for “an alternative way of thinking about composition programs, the language of our students, and our own language practices”—one that “holds monolingualism itself to be a problem and a limitation of U.S. culture and that argues for the benefits of an actively multilingual language policy” (597). We believe our dialogue here adds an important dimension to this discussion, connecting in important ways to the broader dialogue our discipline has been conducting around this issue for a number of years now. We believe our conversation enriches in some significant and very pragmatic ways our understanding of what it means to write in two very different cultural contexts and allows us to see more clearly the role that culture and ideology play in the act of writing and in the teaching of writing, and also the powerful ways that different rhetorical traditions provide different ways of knowing the world. We believe there is still, obviously, a great deal to learn as we continue the important work of historicizing and contextualizing the act of composing.

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