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Connecting Rather Than Colliding: When American and Chinese Rhetorical Styles Meet in the University Classroom

Many American teachers can see differences between the way their domestic and international students organize an argument; fewer would be able to explain these differences. Due to the recent wave of Chinese students enrolling in American universities, many professors are grappling with cultural differences ranging from the unfamiliar classroom behavior to the diverse rhetorical styles of these students. Misunderstandings may form a rift between the students, who write according to their own Eastern rhetorical upbringing, and the professors, who assign and assess the writing based on their Western rhetorical tradition. As a result, many professors are looking for ways to bridge the gap; having a mutual understanding of the rhetorical traditions behind the American and Chinese styles of writing is a step in the right direction. A closer look at the European and Chinese rhetorical traditions, as well as a comparison of current American and Chinese composition pedagogies, demonstrates that there are both differences and similarities between the two traditions. With ever increasing numbers of undergraduate and graduate Chinese students in the United States, it is in the best interest of both the students, who will be expected to understand American rhetorical styles, and their professors, who will be expected to assess them, to understand something about wherein those similarities and differences lie.

Since the 1980s, the number of non-native speakers pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees in the United States has increased dramatically. The largest single group represented is

from China. The transition from a Confucian-oriented learning environment which focuses on the "pragmatic acquisition of essential knowledge" into a Socratic-oriented environment which focuses on "self-generated knowledge" may explain the sometimes contradictory expectations of Chinese students and their American professors in composition classes (Jinyan 335).

In the European rhetorical tradition, Aristotle believes that the purpose of argumentation is to argue that which is just. Although the rhetorician should be capable of arguing both sides of a topic, doing so would mean to argue the just as well as the unjust. In *On Rhetoric,* Aristotle says, "One should be able to argue persuasively on either side of a question, just as in the use of syllogisms, not that we may actually do both (for one should not persuade what is debased) but in order that it may not escape our notice what the real state of the case is and that we ourselves may be able to refute if another person uses speech unjustly" (Aristotle 35). In other words, being aware of both sides of the argument is necessary, but arguing both sides of the issue is not rhetorically strategic.

Another characteristic of traditional Western rhetoric is that the first part of a speech should actually contain the speaker's final point. As George Kennedy points out, "Aristotle's point…is that it is usually more effective to state the conclusion first and then support it with examples" (Aristotle 164). This is not a style that is common in all discourses; in fact, to writers from some cultures, this may seem peculiar. Nevertheless, to Americans who have grown up in the Western rhetorical tradition, these ideas seem completely natural. According to Aristotle, "It is ineffective after stating something not to demonstrate it and to demonstrate it without a first statement; for one demonstrating, demonstrates something, and one making a preliminary statement says it first for the sake of demonstrating it…Of these parts, the first is the statement [prosthesis], the other the proof [pistis], just as if one made the distinction that one part is the

problem, the other the demonstration" (Aristotle 230). The focus here is on the word "first." Stating one's opinion first and stating it directly are not necessarily rhetorical strategies shared by all cultures, but it is perhaps the most important, and most widely accepted and taught, component of Western rhetoric.

It is also possible to trace the traditional western strategy for writing a conclusion to Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*. Traditionally, American students are taught to regard the conclusion as a chance to summarize the main argument of the essay as well as to make a final appeal to the audience, to reveal a suggested course of action for the readers, or to forewarn the audience of the negative consequences of siding with the opposition. The precursor to this style can be seen in Aristotle, who advised, "Thus, one should not ask any further question after drawing a conclusion nor couch the conclusion as a question unless the balance of truth is in one's favor." He goes on to say, "The epilogue is made up of four things: disposing the hearer favorably toward the speaker and unfavorably toward the opponent; amplifying and minimizing; moving the hearer into emotional reactions [pathe]; and [giving] a reminder [of the chief points in the argument] (Aristotle 248-9).

Just as current American rhetorical pedagogy can find its roots in Aristotelian philosophy, various aspects of the Chinese style of argumentation can be traced back to Confucian philosophy. Unlike their American peers, many Chinese students submit equally strong and valid supporting details for both sides of an argument and refrain from stating their opinion (if they state their opinion at all) until they have reached the conclusion of the essay. Perhaps this is due to the ancient Confucian tradition of peace and harmony. In fact, "nearly all the scholars expounding the philosophy of Confucius assert that the core of his philosophy is 'benevolence'" (Xu 121). Confucius (551-479 B.C.) lived as a member of a failing aristocratic

family during a period of great unrest, when wars were being fought over expansion, leaving in their wakes "abysmal human misery." Growing up amongst such unrest and misery, "[Confucius] unswervingly upheld the concept of a world of love, harmony and order" (Huo 65).

Huling Ding of Purdue University explains that Confucius mainly believed in persuasion by deeds rather than words. As a PhD candidate, Ding examined the *Analects,* claiming it to be "a dominant philosophical and ideological influence on Chinese society until the early twentieth century" (143). According to Ding, while Aristotle defines rhetoric as "an ability to see the available means of persuasion," Confucius's theory centers on rhetoric because he advocates the use of virtuous action as the primary means of persuasion (147). Whereas Aristotle claims that "the audience will be favorably disposed to us if we follow lines of action from which they think they have benefited or are likely to benefit (Aristotle 275), Ding points out that Confucius stresses repeatedly that flattery, clever words (*qian yan*), and pretentious amiable appearances (*ling se*) are seldom associated with virtue (148). In fact, some Chinese students have commented on the "insincerity" of American rhetoric. A closer look at the history of composition pedagogy in China may clarify some of these differences.

Over time, composition pedagogy in China has been affected by socio-political changes and educational trends. During the 20th century, the limited availability of seats in Chinese universities propelled the national university entrance examination to become the focus of learning throughout junior and senior high schools across the country. In order to study for the exam, as well as in order to master the classical Chinese writing style, daily recitation continued to be the preferred classroom practice. Pedagogically speaking, recitation "was valued for mental discipline" and "considered indispensable" (You 154). While daily recitation certainly forced the students to exercise their mental capacities, it did little to stimulate creativity. In fact, students

were discouraged from original thoughts and opinions in favor of reciting points of view expressed by "professionals."

> The students became particularly familiar with expository (*yi*, *shuo*) and argumentative (*lun*, *shui*) styles through deliberating upon and exposing questions concerning moral philosophy, classical studies, and history, although in most cases they were not expected to express their own views when answering these questions. This *bagu-ce-lun* pedagogical system dominated the scene of Chinese writing instruction until the end of the Qing Dynasty (You 154).

In the late nineteenth century, composition pedagogy in China experienced some changes that more closely aligned it with European pedagogical and rhetorical trends. One movement focused on "xiushen," or self-cultivation, wherein writing exercises focused on self-reflection and traditional virtues such as benevolence (You 154). After losing two opium wars in 1842 and 1860 to the West, reformers in China looked to Western countries for ideas about how to get out of the country's national crisis. LiHongzhang and Zhang Zhidong, two of the leading reformers, founded foreign affair schools in which students were introduced to Western subjects and Western rhetoric.

> As many textbooks were imported from abroad, students in those schools had the first contact with Western rhetoric…Scientific rhetoric as manifested in the science textbooks was featured by the wide use of syllogistic and inductive logic, and a plain style with the Aristotelian ideals of clarity, brevity, and appropriateness applied to report objective observations and experiments (You 154-5).

During the 1910s and the 1920s, the focus in schools was to connect oral production with written production. At this time, the most common modes of Anglo-American discourse were

adopted in both public and private schools (You 157). Still, the rhetorical strategy that was most commonly implemented in the schools was the argumentative essay, although the fact that the topics were often beyond the cognitive capability of the students led some critics to complain that the students would be forced to simply repeat answers to common essay questions in order to attain high scores (You 160). Students were taught to present both sides of an argument and conclude with their main point or thesis statement. In fact, Chinese students who are currently studying argumentation in high school continue to learn "equal support for both sides in most cases" (Hsieh). Overall, "the formation of modern Chinese writing instruction…was conceived in the conflation of Chinese and Western rhetorical traditions" (You 161). Still, the idea of presenting the main idea in the conclusion is a difference between Western and Chinese rhetoric. Aristotle says, "Having a starting point, it is easier for one to find proof" (Aristotle 244); in contrast, Chinese students might say, "Having proof, it is easier to persuade the audience of one's main point."

Regarding conclusions, some Chinese students prefer to end an argumentative speech or essay with a new question or a proverb. This is contradictory to Aristotle's soft warning to avoid introducing a new question in the conclusion. In the past, due to the political strife between China and Taiwan, students were often required to end their essays with a standard political expression. Michael, who grew up in Taiwan but was taught to write in the traditional Chinese style, notes, "When I was a student, the last sentence for a writing was always 'Long Live President Chiang Kai-Shek' no matter what topic it was. For example, if the topic was 'a bear and his friend a pony,' then I had to think out what was its connection with Chiang Kai-Shek" (Chuang). If American teachers are aware of the writing experiences of their Chinese students,

they will better understand their students' confusion when they advise them not to use proverbs or "canned" expressions in their writing.

What happens, then, when these Chinese students come to study in American universities? With their Confucian-oriented perspective, and the Socratic perspective of their professors and classmates, they may feel uncomfortable (Jinyan 336). Some students may resist the rhetorical essay patterns that are being taught by their English teachers, complaining that the style is too direct, boring, or even childish. They may feel that it is more academic to present arguments in a more subtle, indirect way. "Taiwanese and Chinese students have been indirect since long, long ago. It's not easy to make a big change in short, though it is changing" (Chuang). Since their classroom culture is to be quiet, passive, and completely respectful of the teacher, they may suffer in silence as they continue to feel confused by the style of writing assigned by the teacher. "In Chinese classrooms, students are not supposed to challenge their teachers" (Jinyan 338). Nevertheless, although they may not challenge their professors verbally, they may challenge them by continuing to write in their own rhetorical styles, which can be even more frustrating for American professors.

Chinese students who enter American universities will soon be expected to write an argumentative essay. If they place into an academic preparatory ESL program, they will most likely be taught various Western rhetorical strategies, from narration to argumentation. Most students who place out of ESL and directly into an undergraduate program will be enrolled in a freshman English composition course in which the professor will probably review the qualities of an expository essay. Students who bypass ESL and place directly into a graduate program, on the other hand, my find themselves in a class in which they are expected to know how to research and write an argumentative paper, following guidelines such as those presented in the

Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University. They will learn, for example, that the most important component of the essay is "*A clear, concise, and defined thesis statement that occurs in the first paragraph of the essay…*If the student does not master this portion of the essay, it will be quite difficult to compose an effective or persuasive essay" (*"The Argumentative Essay"*). Mastering the argumentative essay is critical for American students, since persuasive prompts are common on the national Standardized Achievement Test (SAT). Therefore, much practice in junior and senior high school is dedicated to this rhetorical strategy.

The national university entrance exam plays an even more significant role in the amount and type of writing practice that Chinese students get in high school. The Chinese educational system is an "examination-oriented system" in which the dream of many parents and their (often only) children is to enter a prestigious university (Qi 54). The GaoKao is the annual national exam which students take in their final year of high school in order to compete for the limited number of seats in university. In fact, only slightly more than half of the millions of students who take the exam will be able to enter university, so the GaoKao is "regarded as one of the most important life events for test participants" (Jing 28). In fact, one parent, whose son has gone through the Chinese system, goes so far as to say that "[the] examination leads teaching" (Chuang). Schools start training students at an early age for the culminating experience of the GaoKao, and most of the focus is on memorization and repetition (O'Mahony 40). Some of the students who come to the United States to pursue a university degree are those who fail to enter university in China.

It seems obvious to say that a clear understanding of students' previous writing instruction and future writing needs is important when planning the pedagogical approach to teaching writing (Guangwei 69). The question American teachers must ask, then, is what do

these Chinese students need? What areas of writing do they feel comfortable with, and what areas are completely, well, "foreign" to them? One study involving Chinese students' past experiences with writing found that they "have had little experience with, and no systematic instruction in, academic writing in English before they attend our program….most of the students have difficulty with expository writing….These background factors make it necessary … to begin with the very basics of academic writing" (Guangwei 69).

Although students may have had little or no experience writing essays in English, it seems that many have at least had some experience writing argumentative essays in their own languages. Although most cite differences between the location of the main idea as well as the level of directness of American and Chinese argumentative papers, at least teachers can begin talking about argument as one of the most common and significant rhetorical strategies. With this enthymeme between teachers and students, at least there is a starting point for discussing how to proceed with the analysis of the given topic. Strengths and weaknesses of each method can be discussed, thereby exposing both the teacher and students to multicultural discourses and establishing an atmosphere of mutual respect for each other's traditional rhetorical styles.

In order to facilitate this atmosphere in my own classes, I have asked several of my Chinese students whether they would consider their writing style to be similar to the American linear style of organization, to the Japanese circular style of organization, in which ideas are hinted at rather than stated and supported, or to the Arabic style, in which ideas are repeated over and over again. My students unanimously claimed a rhetorical style that was most similar to the American style. Nevertheless, they also noted one major difference between the two rhetorical styles; the American style is more direct than the Chinese style. In one study focusing on this difference, several essays of Chinese and American students were analyzed. Although the results

showed that Chinese students preferred directness in their writing, they also showed that "U.S. students tend to be significantly more direct than Chinese students" (Yang 113). The conclusions drawn in this study were that composition teachers of Chinese students do not need to regard the rhetoric from other cultures as "fundamentally different from and alien to English rhetoric" (Yang 128-9).

We come to the following question, then: Is the onus of multicultural understanding on the American teacher or the Chinese student? It is, I would argue, on both. The best way for teachers to work well with Chinese students is to take the time to learn something about the Chinese rhetorical tradition, specifically where the differences and similarities lie between the Chinese and American traditions. By appreciating the students' rhetorical tradition, composition teachers will more likely be able to teach Chinese students without frustration. This can be further enhanced by an effort to understand the American rhetorical tradition and the fact that it dates back over two thousand years to ancient Greece. The way Americans form an argument is not random; on the contrary, it has a long history, almost as long as that of the Chinese rhetorical tradition. Teachers and students should ask themselves, "How have our respective rhetorical traditions shaped our teaching and our learning?" In fact, culture awareness should be one of the major concerns of both native English speaking teachers and active Chinese learners" (Peng 49).

In "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing," Maxine Hairston argues that it is the English teacher's ethical responsibility to teach non-native speakers how to master the dialect of the dominant class: "It seems to me that one could argue…that the instructor who fails to help students master the standard dialect conspires against the working class" (184). Could we argue the same about Chinese students who are studying in the United States? Would we be doing them a disservice by allowing them to continue to write an argumentative paper according to

their familiar rhetorical style, in which both sides of the issue were given equal assessment, and which does not argue the point as directly as an American audience would expect it to be argued? I think we would be. In fact, I think Hairston would argue that helping our Chinese students master the American style of argumentation is helping them rather than denigrating their rhetorical tradition. Just as she believes students who do not speak the dialect of the dominant class want to master that dialect, I believe our Chinese students want to master the American style of argumentation, despite their occasional attempts to discredit it as "old-fashioned," "simplistic," or "too direct." The majority of our Chinese students are here to succeed in an American university, and one way for them to do that is to learn how to present an argument in a way that will be most easily recognized by their American professors. Along the way, if the professors acknowledge and validate other types of discourses, then our domestic students will also be able to appreciate the richness of diversity that the Chinese students bring to the classroom.

A. Suresh Canagarajah speaks about "pluralizing composition from the specific angle of emergent World Englishes" (1618). He advocates "code meshing" (as opposed to Peter Elbow's "code switching") "in a move toward gradually pluralizing academic writing and developing multilingual competence for transnational relationships" (1617). Nevertheless, he follows this suggestion with the disclaimer that he is unsure of how exactly to go about doing this. He himself has been trained for so long in "censoring even the slightest traces of Sri Lankan English in [his] own academic writing" that he is not sure how to go about teaching multicultural discourse communities, or even the dominant discourse community, the value of "code meshing". In fact, he claims that his article "is only a statement of intent, not a celebration of accomplishment" (1637).

Victor Villanueva Jr. also seems to struggle with the dilemma of how to mesh multicultural discourse communities. "So here's what I want to lay out – a problem for which I don't have a solution. When we demand a certain language, a certain dialect, and a certain rhetorical manner in using that dialect and language, we seem to be working counter to the cultural multiplicity we seek" (992). Although he is referring to the propensity to force minority groups in the U.S. to speak and write in the dominant dialect and style, his argument is also applicable regarding international university students from China. Villanueva concludes, "So here is where the essay runs out, limping to a halt. I don't have a conclusion. All I have, I hope, is the beginning of a conversation" (997). This is a conversation in which teachers at universities with increasing numbers of Chinese students will continue to be involved in the foreseeable future, as evidenced by the increasing popularity of in-services related to "understanding our Chinese students."

Barbara Schneider, professor of writing theory and composition at the University of Toledo, also discusses cross-cultural empathy when reading multicultural texts. She examines Krista Ratcliffe's concept of "rhetorical listening" and summarizes the idea, which all teachers of Chinese students (or of any international students) would benefit from considering in their teaching.

> As I understand it, rhetorical listening begins with an attitude of receptiveness and humility, a listening while our own wants, needs, and egos are held at bay so that we may receive both the gifts and challenges others' texts offer us … Rhetorical listening does not lead to an easy empathy that collapses these differences while retaining the commonalities, but it does allow the reader to hear the other both as the other and as a

companion. It encourages an empathy that identifies and differentiates affiliates with others and respects their separateness" (928).

Additionally, Schneider claims that modeling empathy teaches students to be less self-centered and more "other-centered," which will benefit not only international students but also domestic students who will graduate and enter into a multicultural world in which such empathy and deeper understanding of other cultures will be invaluable. While both Chinese students and their American professors should realize that the Chinese students will need to learn the patterns of Western rhetoric, both teachers and students should also recognize the experience as an exercise in collaborative learning. As Kenneth A. Bruffee claims, "Knowledge is the product of human beings in a state of continual negotiation or conversation. Education is not a process of assimilating 'the truth' but, as Rorty has put it, a process of learning to 'take a hand in what is going on' by joining 'the conversation of mankind.' Collaborative learning is an arena in which students can negotiate their way into that conversation" (555).

Patricia Bizzell reconfirms this idea in her article "'Contact Zones' and English Studies." In discussing English Studies and multicultural literature, Bizzell says that we need to look at how diverse world literatures may "come into productive dialogue with one another" rather than being assimilated to one another (165). She discusses Mary Louise Pratt's idea of a "contact zone," where cultures come together and must coexist, and she notes, "If we understand that we are teaching in, and about, contact zones, Pratt suggests that we must stop imagining our job to be transmitting a unitary literature and literacy" (166). We need a model, she says, that "treats difference as an asset, not a liability" (166).

Finally, Scott R. Stroud's analysis of John Dewey's form of pragmatism is the idea that American teachers of Chinese students need to remember when they begin to feel frustrated with

the unfamiliar writing styles of their students. Stroud highlights the importance of mutual cross-cultural respect when two cultures come into contact with each other through rhetoric.

> A typical response is to denigrate the practices of a certain culture and to then try to disabuse it of "uncivilized" elements. Pragmatist appropriation would seek neither missionary amelioration nor the greedy strip-mining of cultural resources, but a serious and educative engagement of one culture with the traditions of another…such processes will only be encouraged by the habit of seriously taking other cultures as equals to one's culture, as well as taking the thinkers and traditions in those cultures as partners in your ongoing quest to succeed at various projects" (364).

As international students continue to pour into American universities, professors and students are going to have to shift their teaching and learning styles in order to successfully communicate. Some professors and students will embrace the change, while others will get exasperated and resist it. Such frustration and resistance, I propose, is a waste of energies that could be spent learning about each other's rich rhetorical traditions. The sooner both teachers and students better understand the Western and Eastern rhetorical traditions, dating back to Aristotle and Confucius, the easier it will be for them to diffuse the misunderstandings and frustrations that often result when multicultural discourses come into contact with each other in the university classroom.

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