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## “Cultural Anchors” of Chinese Students’ University Writing: The Learning Culture and Academic Traditions

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BĚIJĪNG WÀIGUÓY DÀXUÉ, CHINA

This chapter takes an intercultural perspective on academic literacy focused on the didactics of French for Academic Purposes. It is linked as well to the long-standing field of sinology and Chinese research on Chinese Writing. This work lies within the scope of the latest research on academic literacy in intercultural perspective, on didactics of French for Academic Purposes, and it is linked as well to the field of long-standing sinology and Chinese national studies research on Chinese writing. This research analyzes a corpus of textual productions, in French and in Chinese, written by Chinese students who have learned French at the university in China, and a corpus of comprehensive interviews in Chinese with those students. The analysis of academic dissertations written by Chinese undergraduate and graduate students studying in several Chinese universities shows a few specificities of the writing of Chinese students completing academic writing tasks. These features are described and linked to the students’ discourse on their writing practices and on their training to writing and to academic writing. The writing of Chinese university students in China has its basis in five main cultural anchors: Chinese culture; learning culture developed in Chinese schools with specific exercises for the acquisition of Chinese characters; western academic rhetoric, which is a part of what China has borrowed from universities in Europe and America since the 19th century; literary writing in the Chinese academic tradition, which can especially be found in the forms and uses of the imperial examination system (*keju-zhidu*); and the writing of the contemporary scientific community. Through this analysis, it is possible to approach some of the specific features of academic

writing in China (*xue-shu xiezu*).

Cette contribution présente des résultats issus d'une recherche en didactique de l'écriture en Français langue étrangère, portant sur l'écriture des étudiants chinois dans l'Université chinoise. Les analyses portent sur un corpus de productions textuelles en français et en chinois écrites par des étudiants qui ont appris le français à l'université en Chine et un corpus d'entretiens en chinois avec ces étudiants. L'analyse des productions des étudiants de premier cycle et des étudiants avancés issus de différentes universités chinoises fait apparaître plusieurs spécificités de l'écriture académique d'étudiants chinois. Ces spécificités sont reliées au fait que l'écriture, pour ces étudiants, prend racine dans des traditions séculaires concernant les écrits de savoirs, l'intelligibilité et l'interprétation du monde existant. Nous distinguons ainsi cinq ancrages culturels de l'écriture des étudiants en contexte universitaire : la culture chinoise, la culture d'apprentissage de l'école chinoise, l'écriture lettrée de la tradition académique chinoise, la rhétorique universitaire occidentale et enfin l'écriture de la communauté scientifique internationale contemporaine. La notion d'écriture académique (*xueshu xiezu*) dans le contexte chinois peut être reliée dans une perspective plus large à la notion d'écriture (*wen*) dans la culture chinoise telle que l'ont analysée les sinologues.

The results which are presented in this chapter are based on research on the didactics of French as a foreign language and the practices of intertextuality in Chinese students' writing in an academic setting in China. Specifically, how do they use quotations when writing academic texts? The context for this research is the analysis of academic literacy from an intercultural perspective and on French for academic purposes; it is also linked with sinology.

The analysis focuses on a corpus of 36 textual productions, in French and in Chinese, written by Chinese students (graduate and postgraduate dissertations) who are learning French in China (as a major for some of them). The corpus contains also 26 comprehensive interviews in Chinese with post-graduate students from East China Normal University (Shanghai). They were studying for their master's degree in 13 different majors while learning French, in preparation for doctoral studies in France at one of the of *Écoles Normales Supérieures* (ENS).

Among the results, I would like to show the "cultural anchors" (Barré de Miniac, 1995) of Chinese students' academic writing, which Reuter (2004)

calls “*écriture de recherche en formation*.” These anchors provide contextual insight, in addition to what we know from the disciplinary environment (Delcambre and Lahanier-Reuter, 2010). There are five anchors: Chinese culture and its conception of writing, the learning culture in China, literary riting in the Chinese academic tradition, western academic rhetoric, and finally the international scientific community.

In this chapter I will analyze the first four cultural anchors, which I have identified in students’ discourse and practices.

## 1. Prestige of Writing in Chinese Culture

The first cultural anchor of Chinese students’ practices of writing and the discourses about it is Chinese culture and the “cult of writing” (Ji, 2011) in China’s history. This social representation is essential in what students say because they link Chinese writing with Chinese culture. It is also essential for research in the didactics of French as a foreign language because it helps to understand these learners.

To understand this representation, we must remember that the 1898 discovery of oracle bone inscriptions (on tortoise shells or animal bones: *jiaguwen*) which date back to the 13th Century BC, has been a scientific event (*hanzixue*) (Wang, 2006; Guo, 2004) as well as a popular event because this discovery locates China in a very early position in the chronology of the birth of writing in world history and thus in cultural history.

The notion of writing is as polysemic in Chinese as it is in French. However, it is expressed in Chinese with several Chinese characters. The first one is the character 文 (*wen*). According to the Ricci Dictionary, this character has four meanings: written form, prose text, literary work, and culture. This character can be put together with others to form words such as 论文 *lunwen* which means scientific writing (it can be translated as: dissertation, paper, or thesis). The character 书 (*shu*: book) can form 书面 *shumian* which means written language. The character 写 (*xie*: to write) can form 写作 *xiezuò* which refers to school writing. *Xiezuò* put together with 学术 *xueshu* (which means: to learn / art, technique) can form 学术写作 (*xueshu xiezuò*) which designates academic writing.

Chinese and western historians have shown the important role of writing in the social and political life in the history of the Empire. The social group of officers is a group of scholars, the only ones proficient in written language. Historians’ research, especially western sinology research, has produced a certain representation of writing in China. According to this representation, Chinese culture has its own specific qualities because of its graphic system

(which fascinated Leibnitz). Some research makes the assumption that a determining relationship exists between Chinese writing and Chinese thought. J. Gernet (2003) shows that Chinese syntax expresses a logic of combination and association (different from the linear discursive logic of Latin and Greek languages). F. Jullien speaks of “the civilization of *wen* (writing)” (Jullien, 2004, p. VII). Chinese students also convey the same representation of a different China because of its completely different way of thinking and writing.

W. von Humboldt noted that Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* deals a lot with written language and very little with oral language. In 1835 he wrote: “(sinology scholars) have replaced language with writing.” This example is quoted by Viviane Alleton (1994, p. 261) whose research on writing has tried to give back some importance to oral language. She has refuted the theory of two cerebral hemispheres, one used for alphabetic writing, the other used for character-based writing. She has disproved the explanation of a determining relationship between writing and thought. She has restored to favor oral language as a carrier of Chinese culture.

We can find the same debate in the didactics of foreign languages. Presenting Chinese students as “students with writing culture” was a commonplace in academic papers until the late 2000s. Thus, Chinese students are seen as learners with developed reading comprehension and writing skills but not good oral skills. But now, the situation has changed and some research (*Synergies Chine* 8, 2013) has shown students’ oral skills. This recent development is due to international mobility, early learning of French, multimedia accessibility, and the evolution of practices in classrooms.

## 2. Learning Culture and Chinese Students’ Writing Practices at the University

The notion of “learning culture” is much used in didactics in China (Cortier, 2005). It is the second cultural anchor of students’ writing. I discuss learning culture here based on student interviews.

For the students, the first experience of writing is the copying of Chinese characters in childhood. They have learned to write by imitating patterns (patterns written by teachers or *zitie* 字帖 copybooks for calligraphy). Several students have practiced calligraphy since the age of five. They recall the graphic gesture as the pursuit of an ideal: the control of breath regulates the flow of *qi* (vital energy) which is, physiologically and ethically, an inner strength. Copying is depicted as the pursuit of a kind of spirit.

Next, when students explain how they learned to write, they all describe it the same way: “(At school) we wrote characters to build sentences. After-

wards, we wrote little texts, and then composition.” Copying patterns also includes replacing parts of the text by similar elements. This instructional method is essential because children aren’t able to write a lot of characters. This is a kind of structural and distributional approach to texts: some elements are fixed and some can vary depending on what the student chooses.

Students talk about texts they copied from textbooks or from annals of examinations and contests and above all from compositions written by other students, since the best compositions of the class are held up as examples. Students explain that after entering the university the first method for learning how to write an essay involves reading other students’ essays or papers written by their supervisor. They refer to academic writing as something with a frame (or a structure) and content. Furthermore, they recognize that there is a phenomenon of re-using the same topics with some variation (in some language departments, students are not allowed to choose some research topics because they are chosen too often).<sup>1</sup>

The teaching method using imitation of patterns is a key issue in Chinese culture. Some Chinese didactic specialists (for example, Meng, 2005) contrast *fanwenjiaoxue* 范文教学 “Didactics based on composition models” (it means: to let students imitate texts models) with *guochengjiaoxue* 过程教学 “Didactics based on procedure” (it means: to describe theoretically and a priori the writing task). The notion of “model” has been analyzed by Anne Cheng (1997b): she refers to “model extension,” which means that a model is never exactly reproduced. This is related to an aesthetics of series, which is essential in Chinese art. The word *xue* means “to learn” and “to imitate.”

The notion of model is linked to that of exemplary nature (Cheng, 1997b). A large majority of the students surveyed remember how proud they were the day their successful composition was read in front of the class. The result of this educational practice is that students get used to writing and adapting their essays to speech, i.e., a composition addressed to peers. The text becomes a speech, a writing addressed to peers. When I found out about this enunciative posture (Rabatel, 1998), I could understand why students’ academic texts, as shown clearly by the corpus, frequently address the reader and have conclusions that very often express determination to act collectively with this hackneyed expression: “we will strive to improve . . .”

Students’ academic writing uses the rhetoric of oral discourse, with exclamatory sentences, slogans, and so on. Texts manifest the qualities of storytelling (using fictional dialogues, the dramatization of historical events, the use of anecdotes, symbolism, etc.). Academic dissertations try to convince by using polyphony (*prosopopoeia*, effects via introductory or conclusive quotes, searching for good turns of phrase and emphasis while choosing quotes, etc.).

In addition, autobiographical writing is an important part of the learning process. Almost all students remember the task of regularly keeping a diary, which was a compulsory task starting with the first year of primary school; several of them have continued to keep one until the university. Students explain that they are used to writing 流水账 *liushuizhang* (day-to-day accounts) or 随感 *suigan* (spontaneous impressions). Some of them talk at length about writing about feelings or writing about moods. Some remember precisely their school compositions they call *sanwen* or *suibi*, a typical kind of essay in China in which writing about sentiments prevails. That kind of writing about sentiments and personal feelings can also be found in academic writing. Some might say this is not academic, but it's very hard to eliminate it.

When speaking of writing, students also constantly refer to examinations, which is an ever-present part of their school life. Examinations influence the genres of writing that are taught very early in the school curriculum. Examinations introduce the practice of cramming as well as the firmly established habit of quantifying writing tasks by calculating word counts and writing speed. When they refer to examinations or to the numerous writing contests, students link writing with excellence, pressure, intensive training, and suffering, which are frequent topics in Chinese literature and Chinese proverbs.<sup>2</sup> Some students explain that resorting to plagiarism is due to this constant pressure.

### 3. Scholars Writing in Ancient China

The mention of the issue of the examinations is related to what students call “ancient China” with its imperial examination system. This system, abolished in 1905, was a way of recruiting literati-officers with written tests (Liu, 2004). The Mandarin, who was an officer as well as a scholar, relayed the power of the Emperor throughout the Empire. He acquired his learning from books (he was able to quote the Confucian canon he had memorized) and mastered writing skills (he knew calligraphic styles, official genres, and the style characteristic of written language). The imperial examination system connected the social sphere and the knowledge sphere.

In several academic dissertations from the corpus, academic research and social responsibility are linked together, and scientific activity is presented as serving ongoing reforms in China. This is especially the case for academic writing in foreign language classes. For example, in some texts we read this expression 借鉴外国经验 “to learn from the experiences of foreign countries.” These are the same words which were used by the reformists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to promote foreign languages as tools to learn western scientific and technical knowledge.

Considering the link between knowledge and social responsibility, we can explain why ethical considerations have such an important place in writing. We can find them in the use of proverbs, in the expression of moral judgment when giving a commentary on a text (it’s obvious in literary commentary), and in writing phrases of praise (for example, phrases which express respect for the authors cited). From the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year of primary school on, students have to write compositions, and the topics for these compositions are often about moral lessons learned from experience.

The important place of ethics can be explained by Confucianism. Referring to Confucian thinking is essential in writing. Yet explicit allusions to Confucian classics are only necessary when the text is about Chinese issues. Confucian thinking appears in writing much more through proverbial expressions and through argumentative postures. During the interviews, some students explain it by referring explicitly to the Confucian notion of *zhongyong* 中庸 (middle way) from the doctrine of the mean. Using this word, students mean that points of view shouldn’t be expressed in a definite way and that a text has to seek balance by maintaining the balance of power between two contrary positions. For some of the students, this approach seems incompatible with trying to defend a thesis.

When they speak about the imperial examination system, several students mention the traditional eight-part dissertation 八股 (*bagu*) which is a kind of essay (Zhao, 2009; Liu 2009), created during the Ming Dynasty. It has a strict structure made up of a limited number of characters and a specific form in 8 parts, each one having a fixed number of sentences. It is characterized by a peculiar tone called *shengxian* 圣贤 (literally: wise). The topic of the essay is a quotation from “Four Books” and “Five Classics” and must be treated in accordance with the received interpretation of the Classics.<sup>3</sup>

Students have a positive representation of *bagu*; this is consonant with its current resurgence in China. Previously it was a disparaged genre, especially because of the rote learning that it requires (Lee, 2000: 159-161). And, yet, in the interviews, students lacked clarity of the genre’s features. and they hesitated while describing it. That hesitation brings to light that they have a global representation of writing and of the experience of scholars’ writing, which conflates writing as written down knowledge and writing as literature.

Indeed, for them, and in Chinese culture, literary writing is the center of all forms of writing. Therefore, style, rather than reasoning, can convince, because the flowing style of writing expresses *qi*, the vital energy which arouses a reader’s support beyond logical demonstration (Cheng, 1997a). From this perspective, certain features of academic writing are seen as a disturbance to the the text and to the fluidness of inspiration. Features such as quoting,

summing up, announcing the text plan, and making logical connections, as well as process elements such as planning a text or writing a rough draft, (which students seldom write, as I noticed during exams).

Furthermore, for Chinese students, literary writing is a rearrangement and a revival of old material in a new way. This leads us to think of philosophical, literary, and scientific compilations in ancient China, such as Classics compilations, encyclopedias, anthologies, etc. This has led a large number of sinologists to say that compilation and the overuse of quotes in writing are Chinese specificities (Granet, 1999, p. 54; Lévi, dans Chemla, 1995, p. 43; Jullien, 1989, p. 15). However, I think it is possible to draw a parallel between Chinese culture and western medieval culture, e.g., Antoine Compagnon says about the Middle Ages that “it is tempting to define [it] as the golden age of quotation” (“il serait tentant de [le] définir comme la grande époque de la citation”) (Compagnon, 1979, p. 157). Some students say that writing at university is basically a never-ending reuse of the same material which is combined again differently. For them, academic writing is made of remembering. Consequently, it is bound to be plagiarized. On this issue of plagiarism, some Chinese colleagues teaching English as a Foreign Language resort to the notion of “patchwriting.” Indeed, in the writing practices of students, it can be noted that they used cited sentences as mere language material, that is, that quotations are discourse pieces they directly juxtapose next to their own sentences without adding words of integration. They merely take sentences written by others for their own use. This has to do with the lack of a critical engagement with sources and with the weak presence of cited authors in students’ texts.

Literary writing also includes writing by allusion. Some students speak about the ideal, “to express deep meaning with few words” 微言大义, that is, writing concisely. When discussing the issue of quotations without reference, students mention *diangu* 典故, a kind of literary quotation. *Diangu* are cited without references because they are supposed to be known by the educated reader. The notion of “participation” (Maingueneau: 2004) can help to understand this kind of scholarly writing. For Maingueneau, when a community of scholars is based on an age-old relationship, their members share a tacit understanding of implicit references that form a “thesaurus of utterances.”

#### 4. Western Academic Rhetoric

The fourth cultural anchor of Chinese students’ writing is academic writing, which they describe as “western” (a vague and standardizing concept). For them, academic rhetoric is a part of what China has borrowed from European and North American countries since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century including: the con-



cepts of *university* and *science*; particular academic disciplines and the system of distribution of the disciplines in university faculties; research procedures, tools, language; and theories and methods.

In the interviews, students said pointedly that academic writing and many characteristic elements of academic genres are “western.” For example, introductions and conclusions, abstract(s), keywords, table(s) of contents, as well as standards for bibliographies, quotations, reviews of literature, forms of reasoning, structuring words or forms of expression, and more.

For example, some Chinese students think that banning the use of the pronoun “I” is an American standard (see also Donahue, 2008). The influence of these American representations provides one explanation for why, when Chinese students write in French, they use the French pronoun “on” (one) or “l’auteur” (the author) a lot, which in French is quite inelegant, or “nous” (we, representing not “I” but “I and the group I belong to”).

However, Chinese standards for writing academic texts (*lunwen*) and writing practices conform to international standards (ISO 690 and ISO 690.2), even if the Chinese academic dissertation has some particularities features that differ from French dissertations. For example, the role of the abstract, (which is a long presentation), the function of introductions and conclusions (which are sometimes missing or mingled with the rest of the text), and the importance of acknowledgments.

Nevertheless, the analysis of the interviews shows that logical notions are used only occasionally by Chinese students when they refer to their academic writing. In teaching French, a problem arises, for example, with the notion of “problématique” (research problem) for which there is no equivalent, neither in students’ discourse nor in the normative or methodological discourse of textbooks. In Chinese, students use 问题意识 (problem awareness) or 研究问题 (research questions) or 问题的提出 (issues raised). But those expressions don’t involve for them the idea of hypothesis testing or reasoning.

In the classroom, I try to use expressions found in dictionaries to translate “problématique” (提问法, 问题群, 一组问题) but students say they neither use nor understand them. When I ask students who went to study abroad in France, most of them tell me they have discovered this notion there. In practice, argumentative writing rarely entails a debate between views. Instead, students usually choose to attach themselves to the views of one author, whom they quote at length.

## Conclusion

The analysis of those four essential cultural anchors of Chinese students’ ac-

ademic writing highlights the necessity of documenting the history of academic places and practices and the history of contacts between different academic cultures. I have not said anything here about the fifth cultural anchor, the contemporary scientific community, because it is under development due to the recent increase of academic mobility in China and in the world. This anchor appears in what students say but, significantly, it is often mixed up with the anchor of western traditions of academic writing, as if the latter was inevitably becoming the global prevailing standard.

In China, research concerning the imperial examination system has contributed to a new research area on the history of literati's throughout the imperial dynasties (Liu, 2004;2009). A similar history remains to be written for western academic rhetoric. This writing tradition is not considered very often as a research topic. Even though many academic writing practices are taken for granted in western universities, the emerging reflection on the writing practices of the scientific community should be rooted in multiple cultural contexts. This means deepening the analysis of these contexts as well as analyzing them from different geo-cultural points of view. In China, some young researchers are engaging in this path, and their research will be welcomed.

## Notes

1. For example, see pages 3 through 25 of the methodology textbook: Mu Yang and Chen Chunlian 牟杨, 陈春莲. (2007). 英语专业毕业论文写作指南 (I). Wuhan: Wuhan University Press.
2. Some students evoke the physical pain in writing: "we had to write continually, every day we wrote so that we had a sore hand!" In Chinese proverbs, we find the figure of suffering student: 刺股悬梁 "jab one's thigh with an awl and tie one's hair on the house beam" (hurt oneself to keep oneself awake and not to fall asleep on one's book); 囊萤映雪 "read by the light of bagged fireflies or the reflected light of snow" and 凿壁偷光 "bore a hole on the wall in order to get some light from the neighbor's house" (study hard far into the night); 吃得苦中苦方为人上人 "after bitter suffering, you can be the best."
3. The Confucian canon contains "Four Books" (*Analects of Confucius, Mencius, Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean*) and "Five Classics" (*Classic of Poetry, Classic of Documents, Classic of Rites, Book of Changes, Spring and Autumn Annals*).
4. Chinese official standard GB7713-87 Presentation of scientific and technical reports, dissertations and scientific papers, 1987; National standard GB/T7714-2005 Rules for Contents, Form and Structure of Bibliographic References, 2005.

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