

## Review

MYA POE

Dan, Wu. *Introducing Writing Across the Curriculum into China: Feasibility and Adaptation*. New York: Springer, 2013. 150 pages.

*INTRODUCING WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM INTO CHINA: Feasibility and Adaptation* is an offering in the Springer Briefs in Education series, which are manuscripts published as part of Springer's eBook Collection and available for individual print purchase. Manuscripts in the Spring Briefs series combine elements of journals and books, presenting "concise summaries of cutting-edge research and practical applications in education" (Springer). I was eager to read *Introducing Writing Across the Curriculum into China* and can recommend the book because of the perspective it offers on the potential of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) in China.

*Introducing Writing Across the Curriculum into China*, which closely follows Wu Dan's 2010 dissertation from Clemson University, includes seven chapters with the first three chapters providing introductory material and historical framing. Chapter four is dedicated to methods—interviews of twenty-eight Chinese university faculty, administrators, and recruiters from "state-owned, foreign or joint, and private companies" (48) and interviews of eight leading US WAC scholars. Chapters five and six offer interview results, divided into findings from Chinese participants and findings from US participants. Based on those interview results, Wu Dan derives the opportunities and challenges for introducing WAC into mainland Chinese higher education. The book concludes with a summary of her feasibility analysis, suggesting, for example, that WAC initiatives in China might bring together internationally-trained writing researchers, Chinese literature teachers, English language teachers, and faculty in the disciplines to expand the reach of WAC beyond English-language instruction: "WAC programs in China quite possibly will be initiated by [US trained

Chinese writing researchers] with an initial focus on English writing but will be eventually expanded to Chinese writing” (113).

The introductory material and historical framing provide a review of the WAC movement in the US and description of changes to Chinese higher education. As readers of *The WAC Journal* will know, origin narratives of WAC in the US have been a staple of WAC scholarship since the 1980s. While most articles today no longer need to recount early programs at Carleton College and Beaver College or theoretical distinctions between WAC and Writing in the Disciplines (WID), the story of how WAC came to a specific institution remains an important element in much scholarship still found in the field. Likewise, more recent scholarship has tended to point to where WAC is going, especially in regards to technological advances as well as support for graduate students and multilingual writers. And, importantly, Chris Thaiss's WAC WID Mapping Project has made us cognizant of the international spread of WAC or WAC-like initiatives. Wu Dan's book adds much needed details about the possibilities for introducing WAC into China (hence, the title of the book). In doing so, she lays the groundwork for an origin narrative of WAC in China with provocative suggestions for the possibilities as well as challenges of introducing and sustaining WAC initiatives in mainland China. (Wu Dan notes that WAC interventions to date have been at sites such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, which have different political, colonial, and linguistic histories than mainland China.)

Such narratives are important in contemporary international WAC scholarship for several reasons. First, they give us a portrait of the history of higher education in other national contexts. As Wu Dan explains, the Chinese higher education system is “a combination of an indigenous tradition that can be traced to 135 BCE and an imported Western model” (p. 28). The modern Chinese higher education system has a relatively short history that has been punctuated with dramatic ideological and curricular shifts. For instance, after World War II, Chinese culture underwent a massive upheaval with the introduction of Soviet-style education: “in the Soviet model, higher education faculty and students were assigned to specialized institutions, each focusing on one area, creating a planned workforce to serve the planned economy” (37). On one hand, effects of the Soviet model included a focus on science and technology, limited pedagogical exchange across disciplines, separation of teaching and research, and isolation of Chinese scholars from scholars outside the Soviet sphere. On the other hand, the Soviet model also opened higher education to average Chinese students. Other changes would also dramatically affect Chinese higher education. Through the mid-1960s and 1970s, the Cultural Revolution destroyed many academic freedoms and severely curtailed research in the humanities and social sciences. By the 1990s, China's higher education was again undergoing a massive transformation, this time with expansion of college enrollments from 3.2 million to 18.8

million within a ten-year period (1997-2007). Economic transformation brought on double-digit gains in the gross domestic product (GDP) and a corresponding demand for a better-educated workforce.

Second, WAC origin narratives are important in documenting the cultural and political forces that shape higher education within national contexts, including contexts outside the US, because such narratives offer context for the forces that give rise to WAC initiatives. In doing so, they disrupt notions that WAC is being exported as a complete system from the US and being taken up “as is” in other national contexts. Today, Wu Dan explains, the introduction of WAC into China has the potential to take root because of national awareness that the quality of Chinese higher education must improve. In addition, efforts to expand access to college education as well as provide English language instruction from middle school through college provide a fertile context in which WAC may flourish. Such an opportunity is distinct, however, from other national contexts because it is found in a culture that values Confucianism, includes an appreciation for “good writing” (28), and has adopted an economic growth model that demands highly skilled workers with English language skills. Moreover, it is written against an educational infrastructure that continues to rebuild from the destruction of the Cultural Revolution, limits faculty expansion to match student enrollment increases, and rests on a funding and political model that is resistant to grassroots changes: “in China, grassroots movements could cause unnecessary resistance from the administration who may fear that the initiative or the subsequent research and collaboration may be subversive” (37). Such forces suggest that the uptake of WAC in China will be anything but “as is” from the US.

It would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that the origins of WAC in China and the pressures that Chinese WAC scholars face are entirely unlike the pressures faced by American scholars. One of the things that struck me in reading *Introducing Writing Across the Curriculum into China: Feasibility and Adaptation* was the similarity of challenges that Chinese and American WAC scholars face. Like the US, for example, Chinese higher education values science and technology over degrees in the humanities and social sciences, is driven by an assessment system that—although different than the US accreditation process—drives many of the decisions made by university administrators, and is based on a reward system for faculty that privileges research over teaching.

These differences and similarities become more evident through Wu Dan’s twenty-eight interviews with Chinese faculty, administrators, and recruiters in Beijing and Xi’an as well as eight interviews with US-based WAC scholars. Despite the carefulness by which Wu Dan describes her narrative protocol, I found myself wanting more in the methods from this project. In fact, one of my criticisms of this project is that it seems to rely solely on interviews for its explanatory powers.

Qualitative researchers will find this lack of triangulation difficult. Where is the analysis of artifacts, samples of student writing, interviews with students, or survey results? Such methodological triangulation would have allowed Wu Dan to make stronger claims about the importance of her findings and directions for future research.

Notwithstanding my quibbles about the methodological approach in this project, I found myself intrigued by Wu Dan's findings, which are divided into primary and secondary themes depending on the frequency of the topic in the interview data. Not surprisingly, Chinese interview participants universally agreed that strong communication skills were important in the workplace. Moreover, almost all agreed that communication skills should be taught in higher education because communication skills are a "basic competence" (64), allow for the demonstration of technical competence, and are lifelong skills. What's interesting here is that in these interviews there is a view of writing in which writing is not distinct from acquisition of technical content—a point captured by one human resources (HR) manager. Wu Dan summarizes: "Chinese engineers can do as well as their Europeans counterparts, but the European engineers present their work more effectively. The reason, [the HR manager explained], was not the quality of the knowledge or skills of the Chinese engineers, but their lack of communication practice in the universities" (64). There was also a strong belief among participants that student writing both in Chinese and English was not very good (although professional recruiters were less critical of student writing in Chinese). It seems that Chinese and US faculty and business-sector professionals share many of the same attitudes toward student writing, even if they don't share the same cultural context.

What was also intriguing in interviewee responses was that there was no discourse of falling standards or cataclysmic cultural downfall as are standard themes in US popular literacy discourse. Writing did not need to be added to the curriculum. Instead, in interview responses there was a discourse of writing that was intermeshed with education and work. In fact, as Wu Dan concludes, WID is already present in Chinese higher education but "without proper guidance or support" (107). Writing is generally perceived as a by-product of courses, not evidence of student learning. While Wu Dan sees this as a fault, it's useful to note that writing is present in Chinese higher education and that it is perceived as a transparent process of acquiring technical knowledge. Finally, participants' views of writing were deeply tied to the global economy and the desire of interviewees to integrate intercultural communication into the curriculum. One wonders what US WAC would look like today if intercultural communication had been one of its initial theoretical pillars.

Despite this integrated view of writing and the consensus among interviewees that campus-wide communication initiatives might work best, interviews revealed

strong disincentives to introducing WAC-based programs, including issues such as heavy faculty workloads, assessment systems that are misaligned with writing outcomes, insufficient technological support, and mercurial administrative support.

Wu Dan's findings from her interviews with the eight American WAC scholars were less enlightening to me, in part, because such perspectives are well known in US scholarship. One exception, however, was her findings related to international dissemination of WAC. Interestingly, interviewees suggested that US WAC scholars have gained quite a bit of expertise in learning about international contexts for WAC. This marks an important change in the field and one worth continuing to follow in the scholarship; WAC of the future might be equally informed by the work outside of the US as well as the work within the US. It was particularly heartening that the US interviewees all agreed that the future of WAC is enriched through internationalization of the field.

In conclusion, Wu Dan argues that the results of her research "strongly support" the feasibility of WAC in mainland China (118). She offers the following advice for implementing successful WAC programs in mainland China: 1) administrative independence of writing/study centers from any department or college; 2) secure funding; 3) faculty development and connections with the evaluation program; and 4) faculty rewards such as reduced workload. She also concludes that obstacles in the way of implementing WAC in China include the local higher education structure, academic dishonesty, and insufficient educational technology resources.

Wu Dan writes, "With China now being the home of the most English-language speakers in the world and its rapidly increased access to higher education, the timing has never been more optimal for bridging the Chinese needs [for quality writing instruction] and the US-based WAC initiative" (119). Indeed, the introduction of WAC into China offers the possibility of a powerful new vision for writing instruction across the curriculum. *Introducing Writing Across the Curriculum into China: Feasibility and Adaptation* gives us a portrait of that potential.