The Influence of Chinese Rhetorical Patterns on EFL Writing: Learner Attitudes Towards This Influence

JI Kangli  
Tsinghua University

Abstract  
This paper explores the extent to which Chinese rhetorical patterns influence EFL writing, the reasons behind such an influence, and how Chinese EFL learners think about this influence. A multivariate method was used to achieve this purpose: discourse analysis, text-based interviews, a questionnaire, and an analysis of high school textbooks in China. The findings show that only one third of the 26 students who participated the study exhibited “circular” or “indirect” characteristics (Kaplan, 1966), and, more interestingly, these characteristics were not directly influenced by the “eight-legged essay” pattern (Matalene, 1985) but rather derived from the modern Chinese prose. The learners held that it is beneficial to know English rhetorical structures, but it is also important to preserve Chinese writing conventions.

Key words: L1 Rhetorical Pattern; EFL writing; learner attitude; contrastive rhetoric

1. Introduction

More than four decades have passed since Kaplan’s (1966: 15) inquiry into contrastive rhetoric in which he claimed that oriental learners display a circular, indirect pattern in English paragraph writing while English native speakers display a linear, direct pattern. Since then, no consensus has been reached regarding L1 influence on L2 writing. Some studies confirm Kaplan’s findings in Chinese learners of English (Fagan & Cheong, 1987: 26; Cai, 1993: 13; Liu, 2005: 13; Matalene, 1985: 797) while others found no L1 influence on Chinese learners’ English writing (Mohan & Lo, 1985: 528; Kirkpatrick, 1995: 50, 1997: 238). In addition, whether the claim made 45 years ago can stand the test of time remains a question.
The ethnographic study conducted by Matalene (1985) who taught in a Chinese university shows the great influence of the “eight-legged essay” or *ba gu wen* on her Chinese college learners of English. The typical pattern, she found, follows four steps: a description of an incident, a review of an unfortunate history, an explanation of the current improved situation, and a concluding remark. According to Matalene, this pattern of argumentative essay derives from the Chinese writers’ recourse to history, tradition, and authority, but not to logic.

Cai (1993) from University of Arizona obtains similar findings by analyzing a Chinese essay of the late Qing Dynasty, two English articles published in Chinese media, and one ESL student academic discourse. The study shows the influence of the conventions the Chinese writers follow the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he*, a simplified version of the *ba gu wen*, when they write in either Chinese or English.

In an analysis of 60 English expository prose written by the ninth graders in Singapore, Fagan and Cheong (1987) found 50.6% of them demonstrate the Chinese writing pattern of Introduction-Body-Related or Contrasting Subtheme-Conclusion, the four-part pattern that corresponds to the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* format. In addition, 71.4% of the essays revealed digression, repetition, and indirection, and 53.8% tended to use flowery or metaphorical language in their writing.

In comparing American and Chinese online argumentative instruction materials, Liu (2005) found that the macro-level descriptions are the same: they both use similar statements of purpose, three-part structure, and formal logic. In micro-level structure, however, Liu found that the process of argumentation is not the same. The American websites emphasize the anticipation of opposition while the Chinese websites rely more on the use of analogy as a tool, thus making their arguments look spiral or circular. According to Liu, English speakers are prepared to form counter arguments when writing argument. Yet Chinese learners of English are likely to make comparisons by using previous examples as supporting details for their own argument.

All the above studies shed light on our understanding of Chinese learners and the importance of the role played by the socio-cultural environment. The Matalene and Cai studies, however, uses very small samples and the study by Liu fails to take the learners’ literacy or education experience into account. The Fagan and Cheong study uses middle school students as its subjects. This study examines 26 EFL university students’ essays and take the learners’ secondary schooling into consideration.

In contrast to the studies discussed, other investigations revealed different results (Mohan & Lo, 1985, Kirkpatrick, 1995, 1997). By comparing the English education experience between English L1 students and ESL students in Hong Kong, Mohan and Lo (1985) found that Chinese classroom instruction focuses on sentence-level strategies while English classroom instruction focuses on discourse-level strategies such as organization and argumentation. Mohan and Lo conclude that the developmental factor rather than the cultural factor makes the difference. Hong Kong learners exhibit more deficiencies in macro structures because they are not taught those strategies.
In his analysis of English writing textbooks published in China before the 1990s, Kirkpatrick (1997) found little evidence of the “eight-legged essay” or the *qi-cheng-zhuang-he* pattern. The researcher argued that Chinese writing style has been strongly influenced by the Western format since the May 4th Movement in 1919.

Similarly, in an earlier study conducted by Kirkpatrick (1995), the researcher analyzed a *gaokao* (College Entrance Examination) essay in 1990 and used the essay-writing requirement as an example to argue that Chinese essay writing in high school is no longer influenced by the ancient Chinese rhetorical pattern.

However, Mohan and Lo’s study only examined the Chinese learners’ English learning experience, but failed to investigate their Chinese education experience because cultural influence mainly comes from learners’ L1 literacy experience. The Chinese writing textbooks examined by Kirkpatrick were published almost three decades ago. It would be better if we look at what is going on now. The case study of Kirkpatrick (1995) is insufficient to prove that the general tendency of Chinese composition writing adopts a Western rhetorical style.

The above review presents a framework for analyzing the influence of Chinese rhetorical patterns on EFL writing. This framework includes such components as organization of ideas represented by “linear” or “circular”, cohesion and coherence shown by the use or absence of linking words, and marshalling of evidence in terms of anticipation of opposition or the use of analogy and counter-arguments. Specifically, in contrast to the linear, three-part pattern of an English essay, Chinese EFL writers are likely to display features characterized by a delayed thesis (Kaplan, 1966), digressive discussions (Cai, 1993; Fagan & Cheong, 1987), a lack of cohesive ties (Guo, 2005), and a preference for using analogy and counter-arguments in argumentation process (Liu, 2005).

Having discussed the major limitations of the above reviewed literature, this study examines the extent to which the Chinese EFL writers under study are influenced by their L1 rhetorical patterns. If such an influence exists, what are the possible causes, and how the learners view this influence? This study contributes to the existing body of literature on this topic and offers insights into contrastive rhetoric.

2. The study

2.1 Participants
Twenty six Tsinghua University undergraduates participated in this study. They were enrolled in the one-semester Advanced English Writing course taught by the present researcher. The course was named “advanced” because it concentrated on academic writing, i.e., argumentative essays and term papers. Any student who had reached English proficiency CET3 or passed the Tsinghua English Proficiency Test One was eligible to sign up for this course. The researcher had been teaching this course for nine years. Most of the students who selected this course intended to pursue a graduate degree in an English speaking country but had received no systematic training in advanced writing previously.
2.2 Method

2.2.1 Data collection
In order to gain a fuller picture, the study used discourse analysis, text-based interviews, a questionnaire survey, and an analysis of two Chinese high-school textbooks. The students were assigned to compose a 500 word argumentative essay on a topic of their own choosing. After analyzing the 26 essays, the researcher found that 9 of them showed evidence of such Chinese rhetorical features as a delayed thesis, digressive discussions, and a lack of cohesive ties. Of the remaining 17 essays, 13 showed developmental weaknesses in awareness of ownership and use of evidence. Only 4 essays conformed to the English linear, three-part structure. This assignment was chosen for study because few students in the class had had any previous training in academic writing. Among the nine students, two are from School of Economics and Management, two are students of Electronic Engineering, two of Biomedical Engineering, one of the Humanities and one of Industrial Engineering Dept.

Then the students were interviewed individually and asked to explain how they had composed the essay, what factors they thought had influenced their English writing, and how they thought about that influence. To ensure objectivity, the researcher transcribed the recording word for word and carefully checked for its accuracy.

Towards the end of the semester, 23 of the 26 students completed and submitted a four item questionnaire addressing similar questions. Three were missing because the students were not available. The purpose of postponing the questionnaire to the end of the semester is to leave some time for students to get familiar with the distinction between Chinese and English rhetoric.

Finally, two Chinese high school textbooks called Yuwen (Chinese) were examined to determine the proportions of attention which they devoted to various genres including narration, stories, exposition, and argumentative essays.

2.2.2 Data analysis
In this section, the data analysis method is introduced. For each instrument, a concrete example is attached to illustrate the procedure.

Kaplan’s categories (1968, cited in Cai, 1993: 10) were used to identify the Chinese learners’ writing characteristics. The terms “circular” and “indirect” were replaced by a “delayed thesis” and “digressive discussions”. “A lack of cohesion” was kept in its original form. Each one of the nine essays was carefully read before a corresponding label was attached to it. For instance, “a lack of cohesion” is illustrated in the following paragraph:

An important lesson we learn from history is that nomocracy plays a deciding role in valuating the modernization of a society. From The Code of Hammurabi in the ancient Babylon to the Constitution of the United States of America, Law has been by our side for thousands of years; but it is only in the past 200 years or so did Law really come onto the stage and rule the country, taking the place of former emperors. Someone used to define Law as “a
series of regulations that people agree to obey in daily affairs”. Different from moral, which has great uncertainty and isn’t compulsive in solving social problems, Law is the bottom line one should stay above and never get across.

This student (Student 1 or S1) writer intended to discuss different functions played by law, as suggested by the title “What should Law bring to our world?” Yet the underlined sentence seems to indicate she wanted to argue the necessity of Law, which has little connection to the body of the argument. A possible replacement would read: “Our discussion centers around the different roles Law can play in our society”, thus linking the sentence. The following is the second paragraph:

What is apparent to all is that Law helps to build a well-regulated society, which benefits everyone in nearly all aspects, from safety guarantee to education fairness. As “a series of regulations”, Law clearly states what we should or should not do, what we may or may not do—in other words, our obligations and rights—and what punishment will be meted out to us if we intendedly or unmeantly break the law. By ordaining fitting punishment and strictly carrying it out, a complete legal system can efficiently reduce crime rate and extent, and keep the society running orderly.

Then, the recordings of the text-based interviews were transcribed verbatim and recurrent themes identified. The frequencies in the completed questionnaires were calculated, and the Chinese textbooks for Grade Nine were counted for different proportions of text types. The reason to use the grade nine textbooks is they are easily obtained while the textbooks used by senior high school students are reserved for Gaokao and most textbooks used by secondary schoolers are not available in bookstore.

3. The results

The study explored three research questions: 1) To what extent are the Chinese EFL writers influenced by L1 thought pattern? 2) What are the possible causes of such an influence? 3) How do Chinese EFL learners view this influence? The findings are reported in accordance with the order in which these questions are posed.

3.1 To what extent are Chinese EFL writers influenced by their L1 thought pattern?

Of the 26 student essays, 9 displayed the typical Chinese rhetorical features identified by Kaplan (1966). Four of the 9 essays had a delayed thesis, three made digressions while making a case, and two did not use cohesive ties to link independent clauses.

A “delayed thesis” indicates that it took the writer a long time to get to the point, and this was described by Kaplan as “circular” or “indirect” reasoning. The writing starts from something peripheral, moves from surface to core, and only gradually gets to the point.
For example, one student intended to argue that the Chinese do not pay enough attention to their own history because many valuable antiques are not well preserved. Yet she began her essay with an introduction to the recent auction of a bronze hare and rat heads in France. Then, she moved to the different reactions of Chinese and French people followed by a description of possible measures for reclaiming those lost treasures. It was not until the fourth paragraph did the author begin to state her point. But since there was not much space left, the author had to make an abrupt end.

“Digressive discussions” refer to a part or parts of an essay which moves away from the main idea. For instance, one student writer argued that the click-through rate on the Internet is crucial and a high click rate brings benefits. The writer (S2) then switched to a discussion of movie stars’ privacy and the vulnerability of young people to this bad phenomenon. S2 seemed to be discussing more than two issues at the same time, moving away from the main issue and making it difficult for the reader to follow the thread of his argument.

“A lack of cohesive ties” means two or more clauses are arranged in such a way that there seems to be little logical relation between them. The following paragraph is an example:

All these days, my attention has been paid to one event: the old Summer Palace’s bronze artifact. The 2008 Olympic Game has not gone by too long ago, and we are still lost in the prosperity in spite of the worldwide abrupt economic downturn, by this very time, we should wake up and see, our nation isn’t strong enough, we don’t care about our own culture, there’s still a long way to go.

Obviously the writer (S3) was heavily influenced by Chinese writing format because he used commas all the way through in the third sentence and it was hard to see the logical relations between the last three clauses. Following the English writing style, the last three clauses should be three independent sentences and some transition word needs to be used between the first two so that the reader can understand the relationship between them. To this writer, “it is the responsibility of the listener (or reader) to understand what it is that the speaker or author had intended to say” (Hinds, 1987: 44). Hinds describes this perception as one of “reader responsibility”. It indicates that Chinese writers tend to expect the reader to infer the implied meaning and relationship rather than to try to make it explicit and crystal clear.

3.2 Possible causes for this influence: Results of text-based interviews and textbook analysis

After the analysis of the essays, text-based interviews were conducted with 8 of the 9 student writers whose papers showed Chinese rhetorical characteristics (one student was unavailable). Six of the 8 interviewees admitted their English essays were influenced by Chinese prose or cultural essays (wenhuia sanwen), a poetic style which is used to express feelings rather than argue an issue. As a result, the main idea of their essays was
usually held back and placed at the end. Two of the students (S4 & S5) clearly pointed out that it was a rhetorical strategy that they had been taught and practiced for the College Entrance Exam (*Gaokao Zuowen*). In these essays, the emphasis was not on the force of the argument but rather on the flowery language and decorative or ornamental style. Four students (S2, S4, S6 & S7) felt that their English writing was influenced by modern Chinese prose, especially Lu Xun’s essays, which, written against a special social background, normally follow an indirect approach which can best be understood by inferencing. Other students mentioned the influence of classical poetry and essays written in ancient times. As one of the students (S3) put it:

I don’t think my writing is very logical because I’ve never touched upon English academic writing before. My writing is very much prose-like, which is in a casual style; in Chinese, it’s *Suibi*. During my junior high school, I started to read literary works. I like to scrutinize essays written by Lu Xun. His writing is sharp, but some are quite indirect such as prose *Xia San Chong*... I also enjoy reading *Chibi Fu*, by Su Dongpo, who was a poet in the Song Dynasty...

A profound author, Lu Xun is not easy to understand because he often conveys his meaning in a roundabout way. This implicit style lends itself to delaying the statement of the thesis; that is, Lu Xun’s real meaning is held back and stated towards the end of the essay. Since the writings of Lu Xun, including essays and stories, take up a large proportion of Chinese middle school textbooks, many Chinese students have been influenced by his style. *Chibi Fu* is a long and well-known poem written by Su Dongpo, a poet in the Song Dynasty. This student also mentioned several other Chinese ancient and modern writers that he liked, including Guo Moruo and Ouyang Xiu. The students had clearly been influenced by the ancient and modern Chinese literary works to which they had been introduced in their junior and middle school years. Another student (S8) enjoyed ancient poetry only and made the following remarks:

Actually the worlds constructed by Chinese and English are quite different. Take myself as an example. I find it easier to write in Chinese. In other words, I wouldn’t get affected by English thought patterns. I take a roundabout approach and imply the meaning between the lines. Because I like the style used by Qin Guan or Liu Yong. Both poets used an indirect way in writing...

The two figures, Qin Guan and Liu Yong, were two poets in the Song Dynasty. Unlike Tang poetry, which has a similar number of words in each line, Song poetry changes the length every other line. This result roughly corresponded to the results of the questionnaire survey (see Table 1), in which an overwhelming majority of the participants (81%) held that Chinese learners are influenced by modern Chinese prose while less than one third of them held that the rhetorical influence is more due to classical Chinese poetry and prose.
As to the question how he had composed the essay entitled Click-through Rate Talks, S2 admitted that he had switched the topic from high profits brought about by the click rate to pop stars’ privacy. He said:

Originally I wanted to make an analogy between the past phenomenon and the current click rate. Then I would explain the reasons behind. That is, because there is such a phenomenon (privacy of stars is infringed upon) and it is driven by high profits, the click rate becomes the goal to pursue…

The key word is “analogy”. Unlike the English writing format of anticipating opposition, Chinese writers tend to make comparisons as a means of argumentation. The student writer expected readers to infer the meaning themselves. S5 made digressions from the thesis that “happiness is to give, but not to gain”, as stated in the beginning paragraph, because she described, in the second paragraph, a situation in which people prefer gains to giving. Her explanation follows:

Starting from second paragraph, I want to argue happiness does not derive from money. Perhaps it is not easy to see. It means I used a counterexample [to show that] happiness does not come from here because I said in Paragraph One it is to give, not to gain.

The use of counterexamples is another way of argumentation in Chinese writing. The student was obviously trained in this way in her Chinese literacy education. This finding coincides with what Liu (2005) found, in which one of the differences reflected in English writing online teaching materials between America and China is the use of analogy and counterexamples. In summary, the text-based interviews provide explanations for the way the students write. Six out of eight (74%) think their writing was influenced by Chinese modern prose. The emphasis on style instead of content has much to do with Gaokao guidance. The textbooks analysis provides further explanations in the following section.

In addition, the analysis of Grade Nine Chinese textbooks shows that 13 of the 49 texts (26%) belong to classics while 36 (74%) are written in modern Chinese. In terms of genre, six out the 13 classical texts (34%) are persuasive while the rest include poetry, narration, fables and travelogues. Eleven of the 36 modern Chinese texts (30%) are argumentative while the rest include narration, description, drama and short stories. In total, argumentative texts both in classical and modern Chinese occupy 34% of the 49 texts. Apart from a small proportion, most of the classical argumentative essays do not follow the three-part structure as the modern texts do. Therefore, insufficient exposure to the argumentative genre may have led to the learners’ tendency to use a prose writing style. To summarize, the possible reasons for L1 influence on L2 writing might be middle school education experience: L1 writing instruction and L1 reading materials, including contemporary Chinese and classical Chinese. This in part explains why after the May Fourth New Cultural Movement (1919), Chinese rhetoric still follows an indirect approach
in making a case, as labeled the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* pattern, which is derived from the “eight-legged essay” (Cai, 1993; Matalene, 1985). But modern Chinese prose does not exactly fit into the “eight-legged essay” because the latter, according to Zhou (2006: 339), has six structural parts (*po ti*, *cheng ti*, *qi jiang*, *ru ti*, *fen gu* and *shou shu*) among which *fen gu* contains another four parallel components like *qi gu*, *zhong gu*, *hou gu* and *mo gu*, adding up to the so-called “eight legs”. In writing an “eight-legged essay”, the writer needs to strictly follow the format: focusing on the “four books” and using classical Chinese. The writer does not begin to make his point until the fifth part i.e. *fen gu*. But a modern prose writer is free to write his own topic and use his own language. The only similarity between the two types of writing lies in the delayed thesis.

#### 3.3 The view of learners

In order to address the third research question, the student opinion of the rhetorical influence, the questionnaire and the text-based interviews were used to obtain results. The questionnaire was completed by 23 participants including the 9 students. While the text-based interviews were conducted at the beginning of the semester, the questionnaire was completed toward the end of the semester. After a semester’s training, the nine students made great improvement in their writing.

As Table 1 indicates, a majority (78%) of the 23 students held that there were no “good” or “bad” thought patterns; 17% of them thought English thought patterns were more logical, and 8% thought the Chinese thought patterns were less effective. As to the effects of training, more than half of the participants (56%) did not think English writing instruction would have a negative effect on the Chinese culture while 39% thought it would. Only 4% of the participants found it hard to say one way or another. As to the attitude towards the Chinese thought patterns, a majority (73%) believed that they would stick to their (Chinese) thought patterns. Only 4% thought it was a good idea to learn to write with English thought patterns, while 21% found it difficult to answer the question one way or another.

Table 1. EFL learner attitudes to English instruction (n = 23)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Choices</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sources of L1 influence</td>
<td>classical poetry</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>classical prose</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>novels of Ming &amp; Qing Dynasties</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Baihuawen</em> prose</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards the two sets of thought patterns</td>
<td>No “good” or “bad”</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English more logical</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese less effective</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Influence of Chinese Rhetorical Patterns on EFL Writing: Learner Attitudes Towards This Influence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Choices</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effects of English writing instruction</td>
<td>negative effects</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on Chinese culture</td>
<td>no effect</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hard to say</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards Chinese patterns</td>
<td>stick to them</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>move to English</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>patterns</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The students were allowed to choose more than one answer to each question while completing the questionnaire.

The data collected from the interviews provided the reasons for the questionnaire results. Four of the eight students interviewed said that the directness of English thought patterns was caused by the quick pace of living and it had much to do with the market economy. Influenced by the fast rhythm of life, people were no longer in mood of taking time for writing and reading. The students interviewed also said that the straightforwardness is more effective than the indirect approach as it has some merit in some specific genres of writing such as research reports and business reports. As one participant (S4) put it:

As an Engineering student, I need to write paper, do research, such kind (linear way) of the thinking pattern is better because it gets to the point immediately.

Other participants held that we sometimes need to be implicit or indirect, especially when dealing with people. If you want others to do a favor for you, you can’t make the demand directly. You need to use a gradual strategy to approach the point. In addition, like English writing, Chinese writing has its own logic even though it may not get directly to the point. The following is what S6 said:

Chinese also have clear logic. On many occasions, they like to use something minor in order to imply something significant. (The student meant some lofty theme.) Furthermore, Chinese prose writers usually elevate the idea to a higher point, the level of human ideals. They have the world in their mind when writing. They often have political ambitions. Take Ai Lian Shuo for example. What I mean is I like the articles of this kind, pursuing something spiritual.

The prose mentioned by this interviewee is Zhou Dunyi’s “On Love of Lotus”, a philosophical essay written in the Song Dynasty. In this essay, Zhou wanted to express his admiration for such noble human qualities as purity and uprightness. Yet instead of approaching the thesis directly, he compared these admirable human qualities with the qualities of the lotus. It is typical of classic Chinese writing to use many figures of speech like similes or metaphors.

Generally speaking, the student participants found it beneficial to learn another way of thinking while knowing the merits and limitations inherent in their own Chinese...
thought patterns. But they were not worried about the danger of English thought patterns replacing the Chinese patterns, because their Chinese patterns have been ingrained in them and will not be easily replaced.

4. Discussion

In summary, more than one third of the EFL learners investigated followed the Chinese rhetorical patterns when writing in English. The reasons are many-folds: the composition guide for the college entrance examination, reading practice in secondary school, and Chinese socio-cultural modes. Four out of the 23 participants, however, found it beneficial to know the English thought patterns reflected in English essays and held that such knowledge could give them a new perspective and help them with their academic writing. Most participants were not judgmental about the two sets of thought patterns because they assumed that they were ingrained with the Chinese patterns. They also believed that the Chinese way of thinking should be preserved because diversity enables a culture to stand out although 2 out of 23 students held the English writing patterns to be more efficient.

It should be pointed out that although some students used indirect or circular rhetorical structures, these structures do not fit exactly into the “eight-legged essay” or qi-cheng-zhuan-he pattern as indicated by Kaplan (1968, cited in Cai, 1993: 10), Scollon (1991, cited in Connor, 1996: 38), Matalene (1985), Fagan and Cheong (1987) and Cai (1993). The reasons mainly had to do with the textbooks the students had used in secondary school and the requirement of their college entrance examination.

The syllabus for Chinese instruction of the six-year secondary education emphasizes narrative writing, which occupies a large number of the texts, although argumentation is also taught during the senior high. As Guo (2008: 73) states, the focus of junior high school writing is on narration while in senior high school, the foci shift to both narration and argumentation because competence in both kinds of writing is tested for academic achievements in the exams. Argumentative writing is not given much importance in traditional textbooks, about one fourth of a whole book. Chinese students are heavily influenced by the traditional and special genre of lyrical prose. In lyrical prose, the writer usually narrates a story before making his or her point at the end. This type of writing is liked by most students because the style is delicate and the language is refined, but it is more narrative or descriptive than argumentative. The students cited modern writers like Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Shi Tiesheng, and Su Tong as their models. They are all well known practitioners of the lyrical prose style. On the other hand, the students often disregarded the plainly written argumentative essays included in the textbooks. They don’t contain enough imagery for the students’ tastes.

The guidance the students receive in preparing for the College Entrance Exam is another reason for their writing style. The exam tends to reward a writing style close to that of lyrical prose rather than the style of the traditional argumentative essay.
Admittedly, students have received training in writing argumentative essays, yet they put more emphasis on the fluency, elegance, and expressiveness of the language they use. They do not emphasize the power of persuasion and the use of evidence as much as Western students might. Zhou Haiyang (Guangming Daily, July 7, 2009) is an extreme case in point. He was a Gaokao champion from Hubei Province, China, in 2009. He wrote his argumentative essay as required on the exam in poetic form, expressing his feelings about the heroes who gave their lives during the Anti-Japanese War. The guided topic for the writing was: “When I stood in front of…” The writing pattern which Chinese learners use has been heavily conditioned by their preparation for Gaokao and its requirements because the greater proportion of the long poem was devoted to historical narratives rather than argument presentation.

What might also be one of the causes is Chinese students are habitually required to memorize classical Chinese poetry and prose, and this also influences their prose writing style. Taking a small proportion of the entire textbook, about one fourth only, Chinese ancient poetry follows a qi-cheng-zhuang-he pattern (Kirkpatrick, 1997: 229) and most Chinese ancient prose indicate the author’s point at the end. Take “What the Snake Catcher Says” for example. The main idea of the essay is to condemn the cruel taxation system, but the author first tells a long story about a farmer who prefers to engage in the dangerous snake catching business to working in the fields because farming is taxed at a far higher level than snake catching. The author Liu Zongyuan, a Tang Dynasty essayist and poet, used the farmer’s story as an analogy to argue against the cruelty of the taxation system and its unbearable burden on common people. Not until the end of the essay does the author make the statement: “Cruel politics are fiercer than a tiger, the man-eating animal.” The students may not be taught to write this way, yet the memory or repeated recitation of authoritative models like this affects their writing. This way of writing, furthermore, accords well with modern Chinese prose style and practice. That explains in part why two of the students in this study used analogy and counterexample in their essays.

With regard to reader responsibility, it has much to do with the norm of social interaction in China. Chinese tend not to speak their purpose directly when dealing with people. They meander around some relevant issue and then wait for their interlocutor to perceive and capture the meaning behind the argument. This occurs because Chinese are likely to assume that people have shared knowledge in social interaction. By the Chinese system, it is better to wait for others to make preparations, especially when confronted by a thorny problem. The shared knowledge between speaker and listener sets up a situation where it becomes polite to wait for the other to understand and then initiate the question. This cultural phenomenon is reflected in Chinese writing, resulting in the so-called “reader responsibility”. When this writing habit is transferred to English writing, it is very confusing to a native speaker. There is no problem with a Chinese speaker, however, because such tacit knowledge is shared between them.

“A lack of cohesion” might have something to do with a characteristic of the
Chinese language. Chinese has its own inner logic without using transition words. However, the Mandarin Movement at the beginning of the 20th century brought about great changes to the Chinese language. Scholars like Hu Shi, Qian Xuantong and Fu Sinian advocated drastic changes to the Chinese language. Many literati such as Liang Shiqiu, Zhu Shenghao, Xu Xiacong, Wu Guangjian and Chen Liangchu translated English dramas and novels into Chinese using a vernacular Chinese called Bai-hua-wen, i.e., Mandarin Chinese (Wang, 2003: 96-99). In the meantime, Lu Xun, Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, Shen Yimo, Liu Bannong, and Yu Pingbo started to publish literary works in Mandarin and created a new genre called the New Literature (Cao, 2006: 145). All these developments have changed the traditional Chinese writing style. Under the influence of the translated European works, some cohesive ties or conjunctions were introduced into modern Chinese writing. Examples are conjunctions like he (和 “and”), erqie (而且 “and”), huozhe (或者 “or”), yinwei (因为 “because”), ruguo (如果 “if”), and suiran (虽然 “though”) (Guo, 2005: 202). Gradually, the use of these conjunctions became a compulsory element in composing sentences. Yet the influence of the mother tongue is still there. That explains why some students still write without using conjunctions. Therefore, Chinese is said to be context dependent while English is context independent.

Having discussed the influence of L1 on L2 writing, we now turn our attention to the learners’ attitudes. Most participants were aware of the difference between Chinese and English writing, and they could see and appreciate the relative strengths of each type of thought pattern. According to some students, English rhetorical structures of argumentative writing are more suitable for research articles, business reports and laboratory reports because it is more direct and saves time while making things clear. They suggest that the English way of writing is influenced by standards of efficiency inherent in capitalism.

On the other hand, the indirectness of Chinese writing has a long tradition and is influenced by Chinese custom and social norm. Though it often takes time for the other party to understand the meaning, it functions as a source of social cohesion among people. In addition, when Chinese interact with each other, it poses no barrier to understanding. The traditional Chinese thought pattern has unique characteristics possessed only by Chinese and other Asian people. This difference makes Chinese people distinctive from other peoples. So we should cherish it and preserve the diversity of the world.

When dealing with Westerners, however, it is a better strategy for Chinese to know their thought patterns and adapt to them so as to facilitate the communication. It is globalization that has made it necessary for non-Westerners to adopt a Western style of communication as economic power plays the key role in language choice. Knowing this, English educators should remind EFL learners of the neutrality of cultures and thought patterns so that they can show respect for their culture.
5. Conclusion

Chinese EFL learners might not be explicitly influenced by the “eight-legged essay”, but most likely they have been influenced by modern Chinese prose which exhibits the *qi-cheng-zhuang-ge* pattern and the guidance they get from teachers and textbooks in preparing for the writing part of the College Entrance Examination.

The differences between Chinese and English writing conventions reflect different cultures and traditions and should be respected and treated equally. Though English is prevailing and dominant in international interaction, English educators should make it clear to their EFL students that their own culture and writing conventions are crystallizations of their collective wisdom and intelligence and should be given due respect. Perhaps a “middle way” could be found between the “polarized viewpoint” of the Western culture and “the caring, more holistic and empathetic emphasis of East Asian cultures” (Belcher, 1997; Durkin, 2007: 51; Kubota & Lehner, 2004).

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my colleague Roger Olesen for editing my paper and making valuable suggestions.

References


**Appendix  写作问卷（09春）**

说明：本调查问卷的目的是了解同学们对英汉思维的态度，请同学们认真回答以下问题，并做简要说明。你的答案不分对错，请如实回答。对你的支持表示衷心感谢！

1. 中国学生用英语写作表现的汉语思维模式，可能受到以下影响（可选择多项，并做解释）______
   A. 古汉语诗歌
   B. 古汉语散文
   C. 明清小说
   D. 白话散文
   E. 其他
   因为：
2. 我对英汉不同思维模式的态度是 ______
   A. 各有所长
   B. 英语思维模式更具逻辑性
   C. 汉语思维模式效率不高
   D. 没看法
   E. 其他
   因为:

3. 接受英语线性思维模式的训练，对汉语思维模式 ______
   A. 可能造成不利影响
   B. 不会有影响
   因为:

4. 有人说“只有民族的才是世界的”，我对汉语思维模式的态度是 ______
   A. 应该发扬光大
   B. 应该向英语思维靠拢
   C. 不清楚
   因为:

(Copy editing: May Fan)