

Writing
in the Devil's
Tongue

A HISTORY
OF ENGLISH
COMPOSITION
IN CHINA

XIAOYE YOU

中國
英語
作文
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語

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In memory of
Lynn Walters, 1966–1993

We will not strive to put before you a model of English writing; our style will often be uncouth and our sentences ungrammatical, but we will try to use the *great* English language to express the thoughts that come into our minds.

—“Greeting,” *St. John’s Echo*, 1890

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PREFACE

A sense of complacency, if not outright chauvinism, is tangible these days in certain parts of American composition studies. Sensational statements of one kind or another—"Composition Studies Saves the World!"; "Globalizing Composition"; "Transnationalizing/Globalizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies"; and so forth—reveal not only tremendous disciplinary pride but also compositionists' confidence in what the discipline can do: namely, rescue the troubled world at large.¹ And why shouldn't we be confident about what the discipline can achieve? After all, we have gained a better understanding of our students, students of diverse linguistic, cultural, racial, sexual, and class backgrounds who have made such a strong presence in American universities since the 1960s; and we have developed effective pedagogical approaches to address those students' needs. Projecting this national experience to the rest of the globe, we naturally become optimistic. Indeed, the rest of the world is also hopeful now, looking to American composition studies for standards of English writing practices and proven pedagogies.

As the teaching of composition is increasingly connected to global politico-economic dynamics, our disciplinary effort to lift composition out of narrow nation-state bounds is the right direction to go. However, American composition scholars do not seem fully cognizant of the geopolitical differences and stakes involved in the teaching of English writing. For one thing, while English has been taught as the native language, the official language, or a second language in the United States, it is typically taught as a foreign language in the majority of nations in the world. A different name for English entails a different history of the language in a particular country. A different name for English entails a whole different constellation of values and practices in teaching English writing.

I come from China, where English has been long ridiculed as a "foreign devil's tongue." The expression captures at once colonialism, Chinese nationalism, and Occidentalism, all of which characterize the history of English in the country. The language was forced upon the Chinese by Western colonial powers in the nineteenth century, so ever since, the Chinese have drawn a clear line between native Chinese and Western languages by calling the latter "foreign devils' tongues." They did this even though they used the

devils' tongues unapologetically to advance their own nationalist and personal agendas. In fact, this derogatory, racialized expression was a time-honored Chinese rhetorical strategy. Two thousand and five hundred years ago, Confucius famously admonished his disciples not to probe the other world where devils, or spirits of the deceased, dwelled. Demonizing Westerners as *yangguizi* (foreign devils), the Chinese not only mystified the "barbarians" coming from outside the Middle Kingdom but also warned their countrymen, in their increased interaction with the West, to guard against foreign products and influences that would endanger their Chinese essence.

A distinct history of English inevitably carries forth a distinct set of values and practices associated with English teaching. When I first arrived in the United States to work toward my doctoral degree, I was surprised that writing was studied in a discipline called composition studies. I had to take courses such as "classical [Western] rhetoric," "modern [Anglo-American] rhetoric," "postmodern [Western] rhetoric," "cultural studies," and "post critical qualitative methods." In China, I studied writing in literacy classes before and during college and in applied linguistics in graduate school. Shuttling between English-teaching communities in both countries, I further found that they shared so much, but at the same time so little, in teaching writing. For example, teachers in both countries emphasize topic sentences, logical arrangement and paragraph development, and correct grammar in student writing. But they differ about what English writing can do in students' lives, what good writing is, how to teach and assess writing, how to train writing teachers, and many other matters. How can American composition scholars make claims about saving the world or globalizing the discipline while other English-teaching communities do not share with them many fundamental values and practices in teaching writing?

This book intends to draw both American and Chinese communities' attention to values and practices that they share but also those that they do not share. By understanding our common and our different grounds, we may not be able to save the world, but we may achieve goals that matter to individual English-teaching communities instead of goals that only matter to American composition studies. I contend that this aim should be the global vision of composition studies, a discipline that, while residing in the United States, also has played (and continues to play) a crucial role in the world of English teaching and learning. The book has been written for both composition teachers in the United States and English teachers in the rest of the world. The purpose is to bring the parties together to generate productive conversations. I am privileged to have the opportunity of building such a transnational bridge.

Such a bridge, which is long overdue, could not have been built without help. The project was first conceived in the spring of 2001: I took a graduate seminar on second language writing with Tony Silva at Purdue University and under his guidance became discontented with its exclusive focus on the post-World War II U.S. context. Ensuing conversations with Braj Kachru, Margie Berns, and Yichun Liu convinced me that it was my responsibility to rewrite the modern history of second language writing. In particular, I wanted to tell a Chinese story about how the Chinese encountered and transformed English composition. Once the project took off, I benefited from Margie Berns, April Ginther, Paul Kei Matsuda, Thomas Rickert, Tony Silva, and Patricia Sullivan, all of whom offered constructive criticisms of my dissertation writing.

Since coming to Penn State, I have received additional generous collegial support, which enabled me to bring the project to fruition. I am grateful to Dean Susan Welch, to my former English Department head, Robert Caserio, and to my Penn State colleagues Keith Gilyard and Richard Doyle for early encouragement and for believing in the significance of my project. Many others, most notably Suresh Canagarajah, Arabella Lyon, LuMing Mao, Carolyn Matalene, Stephen Schneider, Jack Selzer, Jan Swearingen, and Hui Wu, offered extremely helpful criticisms on the book manuscript. A number of colleagues also read parts of the manuscript with care: Jonathan Benda, Kevin Eric Depew, Jenny Edbauer, Lin Gui, Julia Kasdorf, Xing (Lucy) Lu, Gretchen Nauman, and Stuart Selber. Students in my graduate seminar on the “Theory and the Teaching of Writing” in fall 2007 also commented on the manuscript: Kim Andrews, Gabriel Ford, David Green, Tyler Hollett, Paul Johnston, William Lee, Rebecca Wilson Lundin, Ersula Ore, and Mark Sturges. My dear colleagues Cheryl Glenn, Nicholas Joukovsky, Mark Morrison, and Robin Schulze provided me invaluable guidance in various aspects of manuscript preparation.

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I am also thankful to the Southern Illinois University Press staff. Editor-in-chief Karl Kageff offered me encouragement and guidance when I prepared the manuscript. Copy editor John Wilson was patient with me.

I also want to express my gratitude to family and friends. Bart and Kelly Alexander embraced me into their family as soon as I arrived at Purdue. Charles and Barbara Walters invited me to stay with them every time I visited Yale. Liu Ping and Liu Huiying showed me hospitality in Guangzhou. My family also extended material and spiritual support. My parents, Mingkeng and Meixiang, and my sister, Xiaoqiong, helped me collect source materials in China. I thank Scott Baxter, Huiling Ding, Christine Tardy, Gigi Taylor, and Hsiao-Hui Yang for their comradeship in my scholarly pursuit. My research interns Ali Ferguson and Candace Shultz edited the manuscript for me.

Finally, I want to dedicate the book to my former teacher Lynn Walters, a graduate of Smith College. Like numerous Anglo-American teachers who taught in China over the last two centuries, she devoted her young life to this foreign land. She always hoped to do research on Ginling College, a sister school of Smith College in China. She was never able to do so. I am pleased that I have done that for her.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is always contested for residents of what Mary Louise Pratt has called “contact zones,” or “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (34). There has been no exception to this rule for Chinese students who write in English, as my early encounters with English writing reveal. In the late spring of 1989, China Central Television (CCTV) devoted its primetime news coverage entirely to students’ political demonstrations in major Chinese cities. I was in my first year of high school and, as a country boy, hardly understood why college students were refusing to eat while demanding Western democracy in front of the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Beijing. Against this backdrop, our English teacher asked us to write a passage reporting a recent event in our lives. Living in a small town in the south, my family almost every evening watched CCTV Channel One, the only channel that our black-and-white TV received, so I wrote about the demonstrations following the government-censored news. The writing did not seem daunting to me. I simply drafted a Chinese passage in my mind, or *da fugao* 打腹稿, as our Chinese teachers always instructed us, and then translated it into English. When the teacher returned the paper, I was disappointed by the many red-inked corrections. However, I was thrilled that I could compose, however imperfectly, in the language of the “foreign devils,” as Westerners were popularly nicknamed in Chinese colonial history. In retrospect, my first English piece encapsulated a high-school student’s situated cultural experience: using an international medium, namely English, I tried to make

sense of a political struggle resulting from China's reengagement with global political and economic orders after the Cultural Revolution (1967–76).¹

Two years later, I entered a local teachers' college and took my first and only college writing course. Gary, a teacher from Canada, often copied sentences and short passages on the blackboard to illustrate rhetorical strategies, ones that I can hardly recall now. What I do remember is the prevailing anxiety that my fellow classmates suffered when they ran out of ideas for their journal entries. Some students later boasted in the dormitory about their coping strategy. They simply translated Chinese folktales into English, such as "The Legend of Miss White Snake" and "Lady Mulan Joins the Army." Stories that we grew up reading in picture books or hearing from our parents turned out to be a treasure trove for our English compositions. Gary seemed to be enchanted by these Oriental myths, so he gladly passed my fellow classmates. In retrospect, I would argue, translating Chinese folktales for English journals was more than a student gimmick; it was, rather, an unconscious cultural strategy designed to assert these students' Chinese heritage when it was being besieged by the influx of transnational ideas and products.

A postcolonial perspective continues to lead me into global contact zones. Reflecting on these personal anecdotes, I have come to realize that my experience in learning English writing in fact reflected an important slice of the history of English composition in China. As these anecdotes show, English composition was always deeply rooted in local and global politics, Chinese literary tradition, and the everyday lives of students. Resembling the "underlife" that operates in the American composition class (Brooke), Chinese students negotiate the requirements with their teachers when they appropriate local folklore to demonstrate unexpected agency in the English classroom. Considering that English was first taught in government schools in the 1860s, when China was being encroached on by Western powers, the history of English composition in China has definitely been a complicated one. How has English writing been taught over the last one and a half centuries? Did students fifty or one hundred years ago write in English the same way my generation did in high school and college? How did English writing affect the lives of Chinese students and, more broadly, the lives of their compatriots in the process of Chinese modernization? Because English was widely taught in many former colonial countries, similar questions can be raised about these nations in their struggle for national independence and modernization. A postcolonial perspective allows us to reconsider issues of ethnicity, modernization, and English composition in a global context.

Indeed, in the history of colonialism, indigenous people were often forced to learn the language of the colonial power—the "foreign devil's tongue"—to

inscribe their lived experiences. In their encounters with Westerners, the indigenous often invented names to signify those that were “not one of us,” names such as “foreign devils” (*yangguizi* 洋鬼子) in China,² “red-haired people” (*komojin* 紅毛人) in Japan, “white people” (*barang, falang, or farangi*) in South Asia, and “outsiders” (*gringos*) in Central and South America. Among the indigenous, these “terministic screens” (Burke) immediately conjured up exotic images of the “other,” including their physical appearances, clothing, language, mannerisms, and customs. Besides inventing local nomenclature to describe imagined “devilish” cultures, the indigenous often had to learn Westerners’ languages to limn their own feelings, experiences, and dreams. English was one of the devil’s tongues historically forced upon indigenous people. When British, and later Anglo-American, colonial powers stretched to different parts of the world, the English language accompanied the colonizers and became a tool of cultural dominance. Either for its pragmatic function in trade or as a symbol of prestige, English was widely taught in regions with British and American colonial interests. Students who had to learn English in those regions invariably bore the burden of trying to reason, speak, and write from the foreigner’s mind-set while entangled in local political and cultural dynamics. They had to juggle multiple languages, multiple identities, multiple cultures, and multiple worldviews. Learning English was thus a struggle for those students as well as for their teachers. Even in an age of global economy, as my own experience shows, learning to speak and write in the devil’s tongue remains highly contested in many regions.

Over the years, I have been troubled by the indifference in American composition studies shown toward worldwide teaching of English writing. There has been little awareness among composition scholars and teachers of the transnational nature of their undertaking. Bruce Horner and John Trimbur attribute this deep-seated parochialism to a tacit policy of English monolingualism underlying first-year composition. Due to the monolingual policy, they observe, “U.S. college composition, from its formation to the present day, operates for the most part within national borders, at worst justifying writing instruction for reasons of economic productivity, cultural integration, and now perhaps homeland security, while at best imagining a more inclusive, pluricultural, and participatory civil life in the U.S.” (623). Thus, it is not surprising that historical narratives of English composition have largely focused on the United States, reinforcing an egocentric national imagery. When composition historians do venture outside the United States, they are predominantly interested in transatlantic intellectual exchanges, ignoring those that have happened or are happening across the Pacific Rim.

Despite the fact that cross-national information and human flows have made composition classrooms virtually global, composition studies have not yet broadened their scope to an international level. Although the number of international and generation 1.5 students significantly increased in American universities over the last several decades, composition studies have, until recent years, paid little attention to them, treating them as no different from U.S.-born students or as needing to be assimilated into the mainstream. Due to the isolationist mentality and an assimilationist stand, a majority of teachers are little informed of the diverse cultural, literary, and rhetorical traditions that their students have to wrestle with when writing in English.³ Composition scholars keep going back to Western rhetorical canons for theoretical and pedagogical inspirations. Influenced by a colonialist mentality, they assume that English is *the* language of the WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) and thus the national language of the United States; therefore, English writing must be and only can be taught in light of Western tradition.⁴ The interpellative force of monolingualism “hails” both composition teachers and scholars, making them susceptible to colonialist and nationalist assumptions and practices.

Only in recent years have scholars critically examined American composition practices against the backdrop of worldwide teaching of English writing. In 1995, Mary Muchiri, Nshindi Mulamba, Greg Myers, and Deoscroun Ndoloi raised complex issues related to the exportation of American composition practices into several African countries. A series of studies by Suresh Canagarajah revealed the discriminating and marginalizing tendencies of Anglo-American writing conventions that have exacerbated writing practices in postcolonial countries (“‘Nondiscursive’ Requirements”; *Geopolitics*). He argued that rhetorical assumptions and pedagogical practices need to accommodate writers who are shuttling between linguistic communities in an age of globalization (“Toward”; “Place”). Min-Zhan Lu suggested that composition studies develop more responsible and responsive approaches to the relation between English and its various users in the world. LuMing Mao underscored the possibility of a creative understanding of cultural and rhetorical traditions when people live and work in “rhetorical borderlands,” a term that succinctly describes contemporary composition classrooms (“Rhetorical Borderlands”). These scholars not only have critiqued the parochial, monolingual mentality in composition studies but, more important, also have suggested ways American composition can both benefit from and contribute to the worldwide teaching of English writing. Their egalitarian and inclusionary political stances have opened up a space for new rhetorical assumptions, pedagogical approaches, and writing practices in composition instruction.

In second language (L2) writing studies, a field that traditionally has focused on ESL (English as a second language) writing in North America, scholars have also articulated their international visions and responsibilities.⁵ At a colloquium addressing the future of L2 writing in 1999, Terry Santos argued that as ESL students tend to be mainstreamed at American universities, the increasing number of students with English as a foreign language (EFL) in the United States promises an optimistic future for L2 writing studies. Furthermore, she said, "Perhaps we should look beyond the United States when considering the future of the field, and appreciate the opportunities the larger world offers our profession" (10). Ilona Leki further alerted the field of L2 writing that as English writing is taught in many non-English-dominant countries for various reasons, EFL writing teachers, particularly expatriate teachers of North American background, will be looking toward North America for innovation. And when an L2 specialist researches or teaches in an EFL context, Leki suggested, at minimum he or she should conduct "a careful analysis of the local needs, goals and possibilities" (205). Although remaining U.S.-centric, Santos and Leki have advocated a transnational response to the worldwide expansion of English composition. Their proposals to learn from and work with composition specialists in other parts of the world break new ground in L2 writing and American composition studies.

What should be the future role of composition studies in worldwide English writing, research, and teaching? What kind of knowledge in composition studies might cross geopolitical boundaries and become more universally useful in teaching English writing? When considering the values of American composition theorists and theories, what kind of relationships do composition studies hope to foster with English teaching professionals in other parts of the world? As American composition has, like it or not, funneled many theories to other parts of the world, can it continue to stand as a purely American enterprise? Current practices can easily evoke fears of cultural imperialism among English teachers in other countries if compositionists do not develop an international perspective "capable of understanding the study and teaching of written English in relation to other languages and to the dynamics of globalization" (Horner and Trimbur 624). Historically, English composition in many other countries has sprung from the colonial influences of Britain and the United States and their academic institutions. However, Muchiri et al. argue, "What we need is not a colonial metaphor, as conventionally applied, but some way to go from the global circulation of writing research to the local contexts of writing" (194). The "global circulation of writing research" has only perpetuated more of the same monolingual, monocultural assumptions developed in North America. If we agree with

Muchiri et al.'s postcolonial stand, what strategies will allow us to enter into "the local contexts of writing" and to make our work more ethically global? One way to start engaging these questions may be by taking a close look at the history of composition in other countries. Through examining alternative composition histories, we may move beyond anachronistic assumptions and practices.

This book investigates English writing instruction in China since the Second Opium War (1856–60) as a Chinese response to the realization that traditional native literacy education was inadequate in the pursuit of national modernization. A key theme is the Chinese pursuit of versions of modernity since the Opium Wars through their relentless fight against feudalism, colonialism, imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism, and, nowadays, transnational capitalism. Embedded in the Chinese endeavor for modernization, English composition has always been a contested educational practice ridden with conflicts of multiple dimensions—rhetorical, pedagogical, and professional. In their rhetorical practices, some scholars sought to develop new rhetorical assumptions responsive to the new societal demands, such as scientific rhetoric, current-traditional rhetoric, and proletarian rhetoric, while others clung to old assumptions, such as Confucian rhetoric, in both Chinese and English writing practices. In the pedagogical arena, writing teachers struggled to balance between indoctrinating students into Chinese mainstream ideology and providing them with a practical tool for making a living. They wanted to adopt innovative writing pedagogies or simply to spend more time on teaching writing, but sometimes their material conditions did not allow them to do so. In their writings, students strove to inscribe their lived experiences, feelings, and desires by meshing traditional Chinese and Anglo-American rhetorical strategies; they also wrestled with their relatively low English proficiency, political turmoil, and fierce competition in the job market. In the professional arena, Chinese scholars actively sought new pedagogical theories from overseas and tried to tailor them to local pedagogical traditions and material conditions. Continuous conflicts created tensions as well as propelling forces. The interweaving of these conflicts, tensions, and forces shaped English composition instruction in China.

The Chinese pursuit of modernity, an overarching theme of this history, ideologically sustained and shaped writing instruction. Louis Althusser defines ideology as "the expression of the relation between men and their 'world,' that is, the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence" (89). The school system helps the state exercise its ideological control in a silent way.⁶ Through an apprenticeship in various kinds of knowledge coated by the

ruling class's ideology, students reproduce and perpetuate the relations of production in a class society. As a required part of schooling, English composition in China reproduced the mainstream discourse of modernization and, hence, the relations of production and subjectivity. For example, at the beginning of the People's Republic, English teaching was motivated primarily by political needs, such as training military interpreters and producing candidates for the field of diplomacy. Not only the fear of war but also the hope for world peace among the Chinese prompted English teaching at that time. In their English writing, students were excited by, and thus identified with, the fantastic idea of building a "new China," and they pledged to study hard to become competent socialist workers. Nowadays, English is hailed in Chinese mainstream discourse as an indispensable tool for participating in the global economy. Students conscientiously study the language to enter fields of industry, business, trade, education, and culture. Historically, English writing practices engaged Chinese students first in the nationalist imagination of modernity and later in the discourse of globalization.

Mainstream Chinese ideology seeped into composition partly through pedagogical discourse. Examining the relationship between ideology and pedagogical discourse, Basil Bernstein suggests that every discourse in the educational field is "ideologically repositioned" (200) in relation to its original field of production.

[P]edagogical discourse is a principle for appropriating other discourses and bringing them into a special relation with each other for the purposes of their selective transmission and acquisition. Pedagogic discourse, then, is a principle which removes (delocates) a discourse from its substantive practice and context, and relocates that discourse according to its own principle of selective reordering and focusing. In this process of the delocation and the relocation of the original discourse the social basis of its practices, including its power relations, is removed. (183)

In the present study, I explore how the discourses of mainstream Chinese society were ideologically repositioned in the schools through the rhetorical traditions represented, the pedagogical approaches chosen, and the essays written by students. Thus, the architecture of the study consists of two key trajectories with students' writing cutting across them. First, underneath the overarching trajectory of the Chinese pursuit of national modernization, Chinese society moved from feudalism to bourgeois capitalism (1911–49) to Communism (1950–89) and to transnational capitalism (1990–). Second, every social formation and its ideology produced a dominant pedagogy, such as Confucian pedagogy in feudal society, current-traditional models under

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