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A celebration of tradition or of self? An ethnographic study of teachers' comments on student writing in America and in China

Xiao-ming Li
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Abstract
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The study consists of a case study of four writing teachers, two from China and two from the United States, and a survey of sixty writing teachers in both countries. Through extensive interviews, the reader is introduced to the lives of the four unique individuals and their reading of and comments on six pieces of personal narrative selected and recommended by themselves as samples of "good writing". Four of the pieces then were sent to sixty writing teachers (forty-five responded) in both countries, who were asked to rank order and comment on them. The result shows surprising similarities among teachers regardless of their nationalities, but also substantial "national" differences between the teachers of the two nations.

The study then examines some commonly shared criteria of "good writing" among the American teachers and the underlying ideology of these maxims to place the notion of "good writing" in a historical and cultural context.

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Too often writing teachers are portrayed as and believed to be "common readers", whose reading of student texts is no more than "dramatizing the presence of a reader", while in actuality writing teachers have the power to pass final judgements on student papers. To recognize the power is to accept the responsibility that power entails. It is important to recognize the culture bias in our judgement of student papers especially when our writing classrooms are accepting in large numbers students whose culture backgrounds have instilled in them different notions of "good writing".

Keywords
Education, Language and Literature, Education, Teacher Training

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Li, Xiao-ming, Ph.D.

University of New Hampshire, 1992

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A CELEBRATION OF TRADITION OR OF SELF?
-- AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TEACHERS' COMMENTS ON STUDENT WRITING IN AMERICA AND IN CHINA

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in English

December, 1992
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December, 1992

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for the Memory of My Father
Zhao-pei Li
1921-1991
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ABSTRACT

A CELEBRATION OF TRADITION OR OF SELF?
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by

Xiao-ming Li
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Commenting on student papers is a time-honored and widely used method of teaching writing. Nancy Sommers finds in her research that writing teachers spend an average of at least 20 to 40 minutes commenting on an individual student paper (148). Responding to and commenting on student writing is the only individualized interaction between a teacher and students, through which the teacher offers text-specific advice to each student. Not surprisingly students read their teachers' comments with greater receptivity and care than they read the works of professional writers that are assigned as models for their writing. The standards for good writing are communicated most directly and effectively to students through teachers' comments on their papers. As Hirsch puts it, "Well-conceived commenting on papers, ... is probably more effective than formal lectures on composition or even Socratic questions about composition" (159).

But what is "good writing"? What standards are we trying to communicate to students when we painstakingly write comments on each and every one of their papers?

Most of us would agree with Mr. Alloway, ETS Director of Programs for the Assessment of Writing, who, when asked the same question, said, "English teachers, though they may have difficulty in giving a verbal description of writing ability that is recognizable to all, can recognize good writing when they see it." (Clark, 134) This may be true (although a
number of researchers would argue the opposite\textsuperscript{1}), but the lack of clear articulation and examination of what we actively and even rigorously practice is troubling. Michael Clark sharply points out one of its consequences as, "That the criteria used for judging writing are so ill-defined, however, results in a much more naked confrontation between the Us and the Them of the Writing Race: the Us are the students, and the Them ... are us, the ones who have set the standards and who test the students' ability to meet them" (130).

The confrontation between Us and Them has become more naked as writing classrooms across the country admit more and more students whose native language is other than English and who attended schools before they came here that operate with different educational philosophies and praxes\textsuperscript{2}. It is estimated that more than 100,000 Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese students from schools based on the Chinese educational system are now in US colleges, and many more are in our K-12 system\textsuperscript{3}. As a result, many writing classrooms begin to look increasingly like ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, but most of our writing teachers are not prepared for the change. Ignorant of the writing conventions of other cultures and the kind of writing experience the students had before coming to this new land, teachers continue to apply uniform standards and approaches to the writing of these newcomers. The result, as Fan Shen, a

\textsuperscript{1} Griffen (1982), Siegel (1982) and Purves (1984), based on their independent researches, all claim that teachers apply very different and even conflicting standards.

\textsuperscript{2} It is estimated that at present over 30 percent of the student population in America consists of youth coming from non-English speaking families and the number is growing. (Harold L. Hodgkinson Educational Digest Nov., 1983)

\textsuperscript{3} "Foreign students' countries of origin (Sept 6, 1989). The Chronical of Higher Education Almanac, 18.”
Chinese who received his graduate education in America, tells us in his article, is a process of acculturation, for students from non-Western, non-mainstream backgrounds.

Fan Shen went through what he refers to as a "prolonged uphill battle" to adapt to the expectation of his English professors. He describes writing in English as an experience that "redefined--and redefines--my ideological and logical identity" [Italics original]. He learned, through trial and error (one instructor politely commented on his writing as "interesting, though a bit strange") that when his writing professors told him, "Be yourself", what they really meant was not to to his Chinese self, but that he "had to create an English self and be that self". He had to shed his "timid, humble, modest Chinese I" take on the facade of "confident, assertive and aggressive English I". And when teachers advised him to "Just write what you think", they actually meant that he should write the way that they think, meaning abandon his oriental approach of "clearing the surrounding bushes before attacking the real target", and take a more linear approach and "jump to the topic" right away. "... learning the rules of English composition is, to a certain extent, learning the values of Anglo-American society" Fan Shen concludes.

Referring to the brilliant study by linguist William Labov, who revealed the politics implicit in any evaluative situation, Clark suggests that "any assessment of language that purports to measure verbal capacity outside of specific context--"Good Writing"--is either deliberately misleading its users or is simply looking for something that is precluded by the test itself" (131).

The notion of "good writing" is more problematic if we accept the basic tenets of post structural literary criticism
and Reader Response theories. Although the differences among critics like Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and Norman Holland are large, they all oppose the traditional belief that meaning resides in a text. In Sensational Designs, feminist critic Jane Tompkins, by documenting carefully the changes in the composition of American literary canon in the last sixty years, refutes the assumption that the canon has been selected with objective, timeless and universal criteria. She argues eloquently that it is not some "intrinsic merit" that decides the reputation of the great literary works, for example, short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne, but an array of forces that have been played outside those works then and now:

When classic texts are seen not as the ineffable products of genius but as the bearers of a set of national, social, economic, institutional, and professional interests, then their domination of the critical scene seems less the result of their indisputable excellence than the product of historical contingencies. (xii)

Writing teachers who, as White describes, have responded to the post structural theories of criticism with "calm and even general acceptance" (186), should now bring them home to examine what consists our notion of "good writing." It does not take a huge leap in logic to argue that the goodness of writing does not reside wholly in student texts, either; it also resides with teachers who judge and grade their papers. Janet Emig and Robert Parker strike at that theme at a research seminar conducted at Rutgers University in the fall of 1973. They attribute our response to student papers to several factors in personal history: (1) our own experiences writing in school; (2) the effect of our critical training in literature; (3) the relationship between our own current
experiences and the experience the student sets forth in his paper (quoted by Griffin, p297). We can add more to the list, such as our political and religious beliefs, our view of the function of writing and even the writers we happen to be fond of—all aspects of the kind of culture that we have been exposed to and used to. Although we would like to think that we are fair teachers, we are not innocent readers applying some universally agreed upon standards in our evaluation of student papers. And we will not be effective teachers, unless we carefully examine our standards of "good writing" and come to terms with the arbitrariness and cultural situatedness of our criteria.

The examination of criteria for "good writing" can be accomplished in a variety of ways. It can be done through introspection, looking into ourselves to reveal our hidden assumptions and predispositions about the idea of "good writing", or by comparing great works in different cultures, or by looking at the commentaries of literary critics. But, as a writing teacher myself, I am more interested in what is actually happening in the writing classroom rather in the literary salons. Although writing teachers' views of good writing are probably heavily influenced by literary theories, the standards for student writing cannot be the same as those for professional writers. A more direct and effective method to reveal the cultural situatedness of our criteria of good writing, I suggest, is to look at how teachers from a different culture comment on the student writing.

In this study, I choose to study the written comments of teachers who teach grades 10-12 in America and the corresponding grades, 1-3 senior high, in China, because students in senior high are right at the threshold between adolescence and adulthood, a critical time of cultural
socialization on their way to becoming full members of the community to which they belong. In writing classrooms, senior high is the time when teachers have gradually shifted from teaching the local features of writing: grammar, spelling and other mechanics, to the global: meaning, organization, and style—elements of writing with which a professional writer would wrestle in his writing. Teachers' comments on student writing not only reflect their standards of good writing, but a microcosm of how cultural socialization takes place and is accomplished in our writing classroom at this critical juncture.

Outsiders often give insights that have escaped the insiders of a culture. In 1835, when most Americans prided themselves on being the chosen people who bore the ark of the liberties of the world, and attributed their peaceful prosperity to their founding fathers' legacy of democracy, a young Frenchman called Alexis de Tocqueville, after some travels in the country, gave an outsider's analysis of what he saw. His book *Democracy in America* taught more about America than what most Americans could see then or now: the danger of materialism, the mediocrity of the masses, the tyranny of the majority and the loss of private energy in a welfare state, as well as the effect of democracy on English language and literature. Reading de Tocqueville today, one is still struck by his penetrating analyses and accurate predictions. The reason why outsiders are sometimes more perceptive is not that they are more objective. Tocqueville's book reveals just as clearly his aristocratic upbringing and the effect the French Revolution on him. The outsiders' edge comes from bringing new perspectives to objects that are familiar to the insiders, enabling them to
see things that have eluded insiders because what is happening around them is too familiar, too much taken for granted. An opportunity to bring the writing teacher in American and in China together, asking them to respond to a same set of student writings would have the same effect.

China is remote from America not only geographically, but also historically and ideologically. It has a literary history of more than three thousand years, developed mostly independently of Western influence. Ever since the Confucius time, literacy has always been highly valued in China. For centuries teaching writing was at the core of Chinese education, partly because of the traditional bias against natural science, which looked down upon science as "trivial tricks" (dian1 cong2 xiao3 ji4), partly because of the Imperial Exam, the only avenue through which a commoner could become a privileged member of the ruling bureaucracy, which tests solely applicants' ability to write. Therefore, China has well-developed theories and praxis of composition, as well as widely accepted standards for "good writing." Since the turn of the century, China has undergone and is still undergoing radical political and social changes. It has changed from the longest feudalistic society to a short-lived republic to a "proletarian dictatorship". The economic reform that was started in 1977 by Deng Xiao-ping opened the door of China to the rest of the world, but the door slammed in the face of the world when Chinese students, who went to the Tian An Men Square to demand political power, were cruelly crushed by force. All these have a direct impact on the writing classrooms in China. Chinese teachers' standards for "good writing" are as culturally and contextually determined as any teacher's in the world.

This dissertation is not a journey to the "exotic land"
of China, or an exposition on the metaphysical scriptures of the ancient philosophies, or to meet some "inscrutable" Chinese. As Maucus and Fischer point out, anthropology is now moving from "a simple interest in the description of cultural others" to the new phase of "a more balanced purpose of cultural critique which plays off other cultural realities against our own in order to gain a more adequate knowledge of them all" (X). This paper will introduce some old Chinese philosophies and some ordinary Chinese writing teachers, but in the end, with the knowledge of another culture, it attempts to defamiliarize the familiar, question the accepted, and reveal the bias and prejudice that underlie our seemingly innocent judgement of student papers. In short, it aims to deconstruct the criteria of "good writing" we apply to student writing as if they were universal and timeless.

We can never totally discard culturally imbued lenses when reading and responding to student papers, but we can certainly do better by looking for a while through other lenses. This study is a pair of bifocal glasses, through which we not only have a glimpse of another culture, another tradition, another way of commenting on student papers, but get a clearer vision of our own practice.
CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

This is a cross-cultural study which compares the responses to and comments on student writing by teachers in American and in China. The research is a mix of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, combining case studies with a survey, and it leans heavily on ideas and procedures developed by recent ethnographic researches.

The study was carried out in three steps:

First, four "key" teachers were selected, two from American and two from China. Each of them was asked to recommend five to six pieces of what they consider the best personal narratives of their classes, and explain to the researcher the reasons why they considered those pieces the best by elaborating on their original written comments on the student papers. The discussion as such was between the key teacher and the researcher on a one-to-one basis.

Second, six pieces were selected out of the pool of recommended papers, and the four key teachers were asked to comment on all six pieces in the same manner as they did on their own student papers. They were also invited to discuss the comments of other teachers, and to explain why they evaluated the papers differently if there was a disagreement of opinions. The discussion as such was among the four key teachers, though they did not meet physically.

Third, four pieces were selected from the six papers and distributed to a wider audience of composition teachers in both countries (thirty teachers in each). The respondents
were asked to rank order the papers and explain the criteria behind their ordering. The last round of discussion was, therefore, in the form of a survey, among a larger number of teachers in both countries. The result of data showed how typical the four "key" teachers comments are.

The process produced a dialogue between the American writing teachers and the Chinese writing teachers, teachers and the researcher, outsiders and insiders, a text with theses and antitheses, and a story told and retold from different perspectives. The result demonstrates not only the arbitrariness of the criteria for good writing in each country, but also how the historical, ideological, and political forces in each culture have shaped and are still shaping notions of good writing.

This chapter consists of three sections that explain the methodology and methods employed in the study. Section one concentrates on culture and cross-cultural studies: their definition and validity, a short review of cross-cultural studies in rhetoric, and typical pitfalls in such studies. Section two discusses issues in ethnography to justify the choice of methods used in the study. The final section lays out the specifics of how the study was actually executed, and the rationale behind each important decision I made during the research.
II.1 CROSS-CULTURAL STUDIES

"Culture" is one of those terms floating all the time in the air, yet seldom clearly defined. Li-Rong Lilly Cheng in her recent book on *Assessing Asian Language Performance: Guidelines for Evaluating Limited English-Proficient Students* tries to find an agreed upon definition for the term. "When two anthropologists, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1954) examined more than 300 such definitions of culture, they still could not find a satisfactory definition," she reports. She reviews the definitions by seven of the best known sociologists and anthropologists, including Books and Boas, which range from "biological growth" to "historically created designs for living". At the end, she offers her definition of "culture":

Culture is dynamic, never fixed or static; is learned and shared by a people; is creative and meaningful to the lives or individuals; is symbolically represented through the interactions of people; is governed by rules; has value and belief systems that guide people in their thinking, feeling, and acting; and is a continuous and cumulative process. In short, culture is the total way of life of people in a society.

I am not suggesting that Dr. Cheng has reached the consummate definition of a very elusive and complex concept, but her definition offers a valid basis for my study. Her definition suggests that despite variegated and even many extreme types of human behavior, much of which shaped by each individual's genes, gender, class, psychology, and some unpredictable accidents and coincidences, there is, nevertheless, a rule-governed "way of life in a society" that
is shared by all its members. My understanding is that as soon as people relate to one another, culture emerges. It is a tacit contract among societal members as to the parameters of acceptable behavior necessary to sustain the relationship, a consensus constantly revised and renegotiated by all parties involved, although not all have an equal say in the final outcome, as Marxists and Feminists have long since discovered. The existence of such cultural contracts becomes obvious when we look across diverse communities. Over the years anthropologists have gone into different societies and brought to our knowledge the different cultures they have encountered and studied. As one anthropologist notes, "in addition to making the exotic familiar, [they] also can work to make the familiar exotic" (Tobin 10). The myth that each individual is totally different from every other is only sustainable if we choose to turn our backs on the common behaviors that individuals share. The myth explodes if we just pause for a moment to ponder the reason why some of the most obvious behavioral traits, such as dress, gesture, even the angle of one's upper torso in a conversation, readily allow us to tell apart, say, a Chinese from a Japanese, and an American from a Briton before they open their mouths. One's so called "national character" does not, of course, erase one's individuality. William Meissner explains the dialectic relationship between the two:

Each Child assigns different meanings to the cultural heritage and accepts or incorporates these meanings to a unique degree, so that his personal cultural heritage becomes something distinctive and characteristic of himself and no other. The evolving personality, therefore, selects and adapts a personal culture out of the cultural heritage presented him by his parents, family and society. The value-system of each individual personality is something unique and distinctive of that individual. But the unique quality of
its integration does not violate its capacity for shared meaning or the familial or communal aspects of its symbolic integration. (quoted in Holland 241)

Yet even if we all accept that there is "a way of life" shared by all societal members, the problem of definition is still not solved, for the referent of "society" can be of any size. Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary (Second Edition) has nine entries for the word "society", including "all people, collectively, regarded as constituting a community or related, interdependent individuals," and "people joined together because of some interest in common" (as in "The Dead Poets Society"). For this project I use society in its broadest sense, as synonymous with nation. When I use the term culture, it means the agreed tacit contract of behavior or ways of thinking among people of the same nation, people belonging to the same country under the same political system for a prolonged period of time.

Looking across national boundaries is not just something anthropologists have found to be a worthy enterprise; it is widely pursued in almost every academic discipline, particularly in the field of linguistics. Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, draws the distinction between "parole," language in actual use, and "langue," the general system of the language. The concrete data of "parole" are produced by individual speakers, but "langue" is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly within a collectivity (Sampson 46). Linguists sample "parole" from all linguistic communities to construct the complete map of "langues", different language systems.

Unlike linguists, who usually know a number of languages and can pick up a new language, at least to "know about" the language, with facility, compositionists have not raided the
realm of cross-cultural studies on a massive scale. Only in the last few years, have composition studies started to look outwards.

Ever since linguist Robert Kaplan initiated a study of cross-cultural rhetoric (1966), there has been a wealth of research on students' writings from different cultural backgrounds. Such studies, since conducted mostly by linguists, exclusively employed techniques developed in discourse analysis, and their approach is basically experimental and statistical (Purves, introduction).

Within the field of composition, however, there has been a scattering of narratives of writers' personal experiences writing in English as a second language (Min-zhan Lu, Fan Shen), which bring out the cultural differences in the praxis of writing. The recent publication of Writing Across Languages and Cultures, edited by Alan Purves indicates composition's growing interest in cross-culture studies. The purpose of Purves' book is to explore the organization of texts written in different languages in order to determine the nature and extent of cultural influence. Series editor Charles Cooper states in the preface, "Both the content and the form of various functions of writing are culturally determined. .... What may be valued in one culture may be disregarded or even stigmatized in another."

About half of the articles in the collection draw on data gathered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) for the Study of Written Composition, initiated in 1959 with 14 participating countries, but the more interesting articles in the collection come from other sources. An article that studies the cultural variation between American and Thai students in reflective writing, for example, compares the themes and perspectives, as well as linguistic features, when they wrote
under the same essay assignment, "The Generation Gap". The study finds that on the whole, "English language compositions tend to be more personal than their Thai counterparts". Also, for the American students, the problem of generation gap "is nearly always discussed in terms of the changes that adults need to make in order to accommodate the needs of the teenagers, while more than half of the Thai writers "balance their critique of the problem by including a treatment of the adolescent perspective and also one of the adult perspective." (Purves 163-165)

Such interesting chapters, however, are few. As one reviewer comments, "Readers looking for political insights about the influence of culture will be disappointed." (CCC 40, 492) The book is heavy with quantitative data, charts and numbers, which display in great detail how the student texts differ from one culture to another, but little is said about why. If there is any account of why, the researcher usually points to the structure of language. In other words, despite the claim made at the beginning of the book, it is actually a book about writing conventions in diverse nations; little is said about the larger cultural context in which the writing take place. The book gives a fairly good idea of the behavioral differences as manifested in student writings, but fails to go behind the phenomenon to explore the possible causes for such differences. Noam Chomsky once criticized such studies:

The term "behavioral science" suggests a not-so-subtle shift of emphasis toward the evidence itself and away from the deeper underlying principles and abstract mental structures that might be illuminated by the evidence of behavior. It is as if natural science were to be designated "the science of meter reading. (v)

Chomsky's criticism of "meter reading" type of research
applies to most of the articles in Purves' book. Studies that center more on the interpretation of rather than the mere gathering of linguistic data are now in order. This study goes beyond the mere display of the differences and similarities between the teachers' comments in China and America and invites the participating teachers to interpret as well as provide the data.

China has always posed a fascinating but baffling subject for cross-cultural studies. Because of the great distance between China and America and the formidable political and linguistic barriers, in-depth cultural studies have been few and far between, fewer still from educators. What has been done about China, most by missionaries, are notoriously ethnocentric or West supremacist. Han Suyin, a Chinese born Sinologist and novelist, expresses how she and most Chinese feel about such studies, "What perturbs me about academic studies in the West is an unconscious intellectual apartheid, disguised as concern, sometimes benevolent probing, or, what is worse, as objective scholarship" (X, preface to *Between Worlds* by Amy Ling).

In the last decade, however, since China opened its door to the world, many American educators have rushed in to look behind the mysterious veil that had never failed to fire Western imagination. Among them were rank and file teachers at all school levels, and distinguished professors from Ivy League universities. Many of them went in with curiosity and left with warm feelings about China and its people. Howard Gardner, a renowned educational psychologist at Harvard, was one of these adventurers. His study of Chinese education, which was published under the title *To Open Mind*, reveals ironically the same ethnocentricity that characterizes many of the early studies of China by Western missionaries.
His book came out of his four "official visits" (he went as a government guest) to China between 1980 to 1987. The book, however, only underlines the fact that to understand a distant culture, particularly something as interlocked with a nation's overall political and social arrangements and its entrenched values as the educational system, requires a lot more than just a genuine interest or affection (the book is dedicated to his newly adopted Chinese son, Benjamin). Although Gardner found much of what he saw in China reminded him of his early education in a German-Jewish family, an education he still cherishes dearly though he abandoned it when he entered more progressive mainstream classrooms, his understanding of Chinese education is unfortunately ethnocentric. He is at pains to be positive about what he saw in China, yet his feet are so firmly planted in biased ground, he cannot but waver between severely critical and patronizing. He tells us that his most enjoyable moment during the visits was when he finally met some Chinese scholars in Nanjing who could talk in his language, namely, to discuss Chinese education in terms of "Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner and other developmental theories" (222). What this episode tells me is that while the Chinese scholars are open-minded enough to look at Chinese education from Western perspectives, Gardner was not willing to discuss Chinese education from a Chinese perspective even when he was on the soil of China.

In one chapter, under the title of "Fitting the Key in the Slot: Five Perspectives on China", Gardner lays out what he considers "the most fundamental differences between Chinese and American society" (256). He generalizes that Chinese education values performance whereas the Western emphasizes understanding; that Chinese believe that art leads to good moral behavior and the West takes a cognitive stance towards art; that in Chinese education "Control is
essential and must emanate from the top," which is in contrast with American society, "a more meritocratic and pluralistic environment"; that Chinese see education as shaping and molding the educated and the West views school as playing the function of nourishing; and that Chinese education focuses on basic skills rather than creativity (257-284).

It is with the discussion of the last issue, basic skills vs. creativity, that Gardner begins to dwell on the complexity of cross-cultural studies, and his tone changes from authoritative and self-righteous to hesitant and self-doubtful. He finds that, first of all, there is no direct translation into Chinese of creativity as it is used in American pedagogy; such a notion, with all the implications that American academia would immediately associate, simply does not exist. Also, impressed by the ingenious art products of Chinese youngsters, he theorizes that the Western "revolutionary" view and the Chinese "evolutionary" view could be just different routes leading to the same end: the young Westerner makes her boldest departures first and then winds back to the tradition, while the young Chinese is well versed in the tradition first, and then gradually "possibly evolving to a point as deviant as the one initially staked out by the innovative Westerner." Here the line between black and white, right and wrong, blurs. Here Gardner is filled with uncertainty as to how to make a judgement and suggests instead to strike "an optimal balance between the poles of creativity and basic skills" (284). Yet, taken as a whole, the dichotomy remains, and Chinese education is dismissed as one that epitomizes an "authoritarian, single-curriculum, basic skills approach" (255).

As a brilliant scholar, given Gardner's short stays in China, Gardner's book is filled with shrewd observations and
intelligent insights (Professor Gardner was perceptive enough to detect that many of the classes he went to had been rehearsed, yet how could he expect anything but performance when he entered a Chinese classroom surrounded with official entourage from the central government?). Yet his five perspectives are superficial and one-sided because of his insistence on judging Chinese education from his Cambridge version of Western standards. His book has the same effect as those studies which Han Su-yin calls, "only tasty rehash of what pleases ingrained prejudice" (Preface to Amy Ling). I am sure that is not what Professor Gardner intended. Actually Professor Gardner is so much bothered by the possible injustice he might be doing to his Chinese colleagues, that at the end of the book, reflecting on his so called "scientific method" and its inadequacy for studies as such, he calls on more in-depth studies, namely, ethnographic studies:

We will begin to approach authoritative answers only after we have carried out careful ethnographic studies in many different settings and understood the assumptions and values that permeate those settings. Scientific knowledge—rather than the informal reflections of these final pages—will begin to accrue when we undertake the time-consuming and arduous process of contrasting and then summing up the results of these studies. (307)

This is a call that we should heed.
II.2 ETHNOGRAPHY

Shirley Brice Heath's landmark ethnographic study *Ways With Words: Language, Life and Work In Communities and Classrooms* (1983) brings in new perspectives to the ways in which our classrooms are viewed. With her compassionate and detailed narrative, the study introduces us to three geographically close yet very separate communities: the white working-class Roadville, the black working class Trackton, and the middle-class townspeople consisting of both white and black professionals. We are led to the doorsteps of families in those communities and granted an intimate look inside each household: stories told by the parents to children at bed time, games that children played in the courtyard and jokes passed between the elder and the young in the porch, etc. Her stories, like all cross-cultural studies, familiarize the reader with those communities that most of us used to look at from a distance, and, meanwhile, shed new light on those communities that we take as "the norm". The ways in which middle-class families raise their children appear in the book as idiosyncratic and community-specific as others. Moreover, the myth that the classroom is a democratic haven is pricked like a bubble; rather, it is a place that privileges one socio-economic group to the disadvantage of others. Few educators could remain complacent when they finished the book, which ends with the warning note:

...unless the boundaries between classroom and communities can be broken, and the flow of cultural patterns between them encouraged, the school will continue to legitimate and reproduce communities of townspeople who

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control and limit the potential progress of other communities and who themselves remain untouched by other values and ways of life. (369)

The power of Heath's study is not built just on sound logic or ingenious experimental procedures; it comes from the author's careful and comprehensive observation of the everyday routines of each community, her long and intimate relationship with the community members, and her strenuous effort to understand the values and beliefs of those she studied. Readers feel that the author has earned her right to be the spokeswoman or the interpreter of the communities that she has researched with nine years of dedication. Whether the readers have lifted their guards of scepticism too soon is a matter I will discuss later, but the power of ethnography is real and strong: it produces insights that are unavailable to those more brief and distant and less personal research methodologies, and it evokes greater trust between the reader and the researcher.

The success of Heath's research brought ethnography, a traditional method in anthropology, to the lime light on the stage of the study of literacy.

Ethnography has been the traditional tool of research for anthropologists from the time of its formation. Yet never before has it received so much attention from other disciplines. Stephen North, in his well-publicized book *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* (1987), describes the sudden surge of interest in ethnographic studies as receiving "a general groundswell of moral support, especially from Practitioners and Scholars tired or suspicious of other Research methods" (273).

The sudden popularity of ethnography can be explained in most part by the changing epistemological climate in the last two decades. After the publication of *The Structure of
Scientific Revolutions (1970) by Thomas Kuhn, in which scientific endeavor is no longer portrayed as a completely rational and quantitative accumulative process, but rather, one that advances by qualitative leaps based on social and communal consensus, the objective, god-truth appeal of science now looks surreal, if not absolutely fake. Reality is harder to get at than ever before despite all the modern technology around us. It has become a black hole that no light can escape. Even people who accept Kuhn's ideas with strong qualifications agree that hard scientific methods are of little use to studies of objects that are unmeasurable and unquantifiable, like the study of human mind and human behavior like literary creation. Ethnography is one of the new upstarts among social scientists after the glitter of science began to fade.

Guba and Lincoln, for example, in their joint book, bring into direct confrontation the so-called "scientific paradigm" and what they call "the emergent naturalistic paradigm" -- terms obviously developed from Kuhn. The authors argue that the two paradigms are based on opposing epistemologies, the positivistic and phenomenological, which differ on a number of basic philosophical assumptions: the nature of reality, subject-object relationship and the nature of "truth". The naturalistic paradigm, according to Guba and Lincoln, believes in the multiplicity of "reality", holds that the relationship between the inquirer and the phenomenon being studied is intertwined to the degree that no data can be truly objective, and holds that there are no context-free generalizations, so it is more worthwhile to focus on the understanding of particular events (cases). The scientific paradigm, on the other hand, views reality as singular, fragmentable and subject to repeated tests, and believes that the subject and the inquirer are separable. Having reviewed
all the contrasting points between the two paradigms, the authors conclude, "the naturalistic paradigm should be the paradigm of choice" for all social-behavioral inquiry. Field work, the core of Ethnography, is recommended as "a fundamental technique" of the Naturalistic Paradigm.

It is clear that ethnography is advocated mainly as the antidote to the positivist-based experimental principles and procedures. It is supposed to be free of the vices of the scientific paradigm and having the virtues of a naturalistic paradigm.

Such a glorified view of ethnography, however, is not shared by its traditional practitioners. John Van Maanen, a well-known anthropologist, points out, "Ironically, this renewed interest in and enthusiastic embrace of fieldwork by the hoi polloi outside the temples of ethnography is occurring at the very time sharp critical questions are being raised by the high priests inside the temple" (24).

Traditional ethnography, what Maanen calls "the realistic tale," has come under severe criticism and is losing credibility, because it goes against the very tenets of phenomenologist and reflects a rather positivistic view of the world.

According to Van Maanen, a realistic tale is typified by "a studied neutrality" and is identified by the following characteristics: (1) the almost complete absence of the author from most segments of the finished text; (2) a documentary style focused on minute, sometimes precious, but thoroughly mundane details of everyday life among the people studied; (3) accounts and explanations by members of the culture of the events in their lives, which is particularly true of current work; and (4) interpretive omnipotence. The ethnographer has the final word on how the culture is to be interpreted and presented. Self-reflection and doubt are
hardly central matters in realist tales. Such realistic tales convey the false impression that "the views put forward are not those of the field worker but are rather authentic and representative remarks transcribed straight from the horse's mouth."

The idea that ethnography is simply observation, description and explanation of the life of another culture becomes obsolete in the post-Kuhn era. In his article "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight", Clifford Geertz explicates what an anthropologist work has become:

It shifts the analysis of cultural forms from an endeavor in general parallel to dissecting an organism, diagnosing a symptom, deciphering a code, or ordering a system -- the dominant analogies in contemporary anthropology -- to one in general parallel with penetrating a literary text. .... For the anthropologist, whose concern is with formulating sociological principles, not with promoting or appreciating cockfights, the question is, what does one learn about such principles from examining culture as an assemblage of texts? (325)

If ethnographers are playing the same interpretive game as literary critics (Stanley Fish, "Interpretation is the only game in town"), and they have no more authority over the ethnic rituals and cultural institutions under study than hermeneutic scholars over ancient scriptures, their readers should not be led to believe otherwise. The stance the author of a realistic tale takes, a spokeswoman for an alien culture, belies the fact that their chances of reading that culture correctly is no better than that of the literary critics' chance of reading correctly the authorial intention of past literary texts.

In the final analysis, an ethnography is a written representation of a culture by an outsider, so the relationship between the knower and the known is a most
problematic one. If we accept Kuhn's theory and believe that there is such a thing as "experimenter effect," if we accept the phenomenologist idea that no inquirer can ever be free from subjective tendencies, if we accept Bruner's assertion that there is no innocent perception untainted by conception, then it is important for researchers to examine and foreground their own preconceptions, biases, and motives, and more desirably, how those affected their final interpretation.

In the last decade, new experiments to counterplay what these "high priests" consider as "positivist-anthropologists" have come forth in phalanx. Joseph Tobin characterizes such new experimental ethnographies as reflexive approaches:

Reflexivity generally involves a focus either on the limitations of the individual researcher including ethnocentrism, professional anxiety and ambition, and counter transference reactions or on limitations of the discipline of anthropology including conservative, self-perpetuating conventions of discourse, intellectual elitism, and a tendency towards colonialism, sexism, and orientalism. (1989, p.173)

Compared with those more innovative and non-traditional types of ethnographies, Shirley Brice Heath's work, despite its accomplishments, is like Dickens' novel read in the post-structural era. It falls squarely into Maanen's category of "realistic tales", not only for the minute details a realistic novel typically piles up, but, more importantly, for the interpretive omnipotence of the author. All facts in the book were carefully culled to support one reading, the author's reading, and there is no space for the underanalyzed or the problematic. Men are conspicuously absent from child-raising in all three communities (Just as women are absent from Geertz's Balinese culture). What do they think of the
description that excludes them? The poor whites are depicted as the most boring and dogmatic of all communities. Do they agree with such a portrayal? They may very well have a different story to tell. Were there any incidents contradicting Heath's claim that the black residents in Trackton took the text merely as a basis for recreation while the white working class in Roadville viewed it as fixed and inviolable? I bet there were, but a realistic tale gives no room to any counter-facts, and it closes the road to any counter-claims. Everything in Heath's book converges, instead of diverging, into one unequivocal reading that the author has painstakingly constructed for the reader. Little is told about the narrator herself, and the reader is never informed of "the prior reality", to use Bruner's term, that the researcher brought into the study. Although ethnographies are supposed to arrive at only local knowledge and do not claim any transcendent "truth", realistic tales, by removing all uncertainty and contradictions from the text and repressing any suggestion of any peculiarity about the researcher and the case studied, actually present the families and communities as a kind of cultural prototype. And the readers read them that way, too. Most readers of Heath would put down the book with the conviction that now, without leaving the couch, they know how black families bring up their kids. The case is thus closed, put to rest, rather than opened up. This is the "reductionist stance" that Guba and Lincoln accused the scientific methods of being guilty of, and not the "expansionist stance" that they believe to be the birth-gift of the naturalistic method.

Realism is still an honorable goal in writing ethnography, but the goal of being truthful to reality has become elusive, and one is believed to have a better chance of reaching it by displaying the narrator's point of view
rather than hiding it under an invisible mask of fairness and truthfulness.

The reflective approach, however, does not solve all the problems that ethnographers have to deal within the Post-structural time of fluidity and uncertainty. As Tobin points out, "reflexivity, while successfully undercutting the researcher's omnipotence, often also has the effect of centering the text even more dramatically on the figure of the researcher-author" (1989, p.173).

During their research on the preschool education in three countries: China, Japan and the United States, Tobin and his colleagues experimented with a new approach, which they named "Multivocal Ethnography." Tobin explicates the thrust of their approach against the background of a changing time:

We have sought to develop a method for doing research and narrative stance for our writing that would decenter as well as deprivilege the author-anthropologist. Rather than replacing the persona of the omniscient, positivistic, confident, gentleman-scholar with the persona of the apologetic, soul-searching, self-centered, reflexive anthropologist, we strive to shift narrative attention and the authority to define meaning away from the author. We strive to give voice - the power to name, interpret and analyze - to the teachers, students, parents, and children who have traditionally been objects rather than partners in investigation (1989, p.174).

Tobin and his colleagues are not the first to use such a method, however. Norman Holland, in his 5 Readers Reading, did the same thing, though on a more limited scale. According to Holland's Reader Response theory, the reading of literature, rather than an act of decoding written signs or responding to linguistic stimulus, is actually an activity during which "Each reader takes in what he reads as the raw material from which to create one more variation of his
continuing identity theme" (201). Holland chooses three literary texts and invites five students, chosen because each has an identifiable defensive and adaptive structure, to relate at length the free associations that came to them in reading the stories. The result of the experiment shows that their understanding of the texts is more predictable from each reader's psyche than from the plots and characters provided by the texts. Literary texts, in that case, are no more than "so many marks on a page--at most a matrix of psychological possibilities for its readers" (12). In terms of the relationship between individuality and collectivity, he believes that each reader's unique personality sheds light on how "each individual has contributed to the collectivity" (244). In their study Tobin and his colleagues, though they may have drawn inspiration from his schema, come in from the other end; they concentrate on how each individual takes from the collectivity. They hold that the different responses to the same "text" are better understood in light of the shaping force of culture, and that their study reveals "the essential arbitrariness and culture-boundedness of taken-for-granted beliefs and practices" (Tobin, et al., p.11). This study aims at the same goal in a different field.

As Tobin and his colleagues later found, however, the equal distribution of power between the researcher and the researched, which they thought the method could achieve, remains an attractive goal beyond reach -- maybe it is too noble a goal ever to be achieved. The researchers who decided the procedures of the project and select the scenes for discussion and then finally put into print the words of the participants still wield a greater power than they intended to possess. They realized that the very act of textualization and contextualization opens the door to subjectivity. A simple analogy: When a person of average
height has a picture taken with a team of basketball players, no matter what his real intention, the viewers of that picture are inevitably struck, first and foremost, by the shortness of the non-athlete, who appears like a dwarf among a group of giants. The person is not short by nature—he is of average height; it is the company he was with that make him look short. By the same token, a Chinese kindergarten, well-equipped and properly managed from Chinese or most Third World standards, looks deplorably shabby and primitive when shown side by side with its counterparts in the two economic super powers in the world. The difference of the two cases is that in the latter, it is the researchers, not the nursery teachers, who decided who their company are. Reality in selection and collection, removed from the context in which it takes place, can never match the one in the real world. After all, ethnography is a way of knowing, not the way of knowing.

The study on preschool education in three countries consists of four major parts: (1) narration of videotapes made in comparable settings in the three countries; (2) discussion of the edited tapes at the places where they were filmed with people involved in the film, so that the so called "subjects" have a chance to interpret and explain what was taped; (3) discussion with the viewers of the tape in other two countries to inquire their judgements and comments; (4) the ethnographers' own interpretation of the data based on questionnaire surveys conducted on all three sites among much wider audiences.

Their study combines qualitative and quantitative methods, so it has both the depth of the so-call "naturalistic approach" and the better typicality and representation of "the experimental approach". What is unique about the method of *Preschool in Three Countries* is
that interpretation is no longer the privilege of the researchers, but a power shared by the researcher and the researched. Although the researchers give interesting in-depth analysis of the data at the end, the interpretations offered by local educators and parents, because of their intimate knowledge of the local history and social environment, are equally, if not more, insightful and illuminating.
II.3 METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Despite all admitted failures and problems, I still find the Multivocal Ethnography developed by Tobin and his colleagues most fascinating in that it comes closer than any other methodology to the principles of a phenomenologic view of reality, and that it gives greater power to the people studied. In my study of teachers' response to student writings in China and the United Stated, I followed the procedures set up in the pre-school study with some minor modifications.

This project is conducted at a reduced scale, compared with the Preschool Project. It involves two countries, China and America, and around fifty teachers, but the multi-perspective, dialogical nature of the pre-school project was carefully preserved and followed through. It also managed to elicit enough different voices and opinions to create "an ongoing dialogue between insiders and outsiders, between practitioners and researchers, and between people of different culture" (Tobin et al., p.176), that Tobin and his colleagues once built among the pre-school teachers in three countries.

There was one major change, though. In the pre-school project, the video tapes used as the primary elicitor of discussions were shot by the researchers. I had teachers in China and America recommend student writings, and then from them selected first six pieces and then four pieces from the recommended pieces for discussions. The teachers shared the power of deciding what they wanted to show to the public, instead of the researcher deciding it for them.

The project started by selecting four key teachers from
America and China, whose responses to and comments on their student writing, as well as their personal stories, would be studied carefully as four specific cases. For a better degree of representation, I selected the four "key" teachers from different types of schools in both countries. In China, one teacher is from a so-called "key" school in Nanjing, a medium-sized city in the South of China, and the other from a school in the countryside far from cities where most of China's one billion population reside. In America, where disparity is less apparent between city and countryside but evident between communities of different socio-economic make-ups, I chose one teacher from a public school located in a university town, which has a national reputation for its academic excellence, and the other from a school in a medium-sized town, the residents of which better represent the composition of most suburban towns in America.

How the four key teachers were selected was much affected by my knowledge of the educational structure in each country, yet it also had to do with whom I happened to know. I wanted to work with strong teachers, teachers who not only teach well, but can articulate their teaching philosophies or consciously test new grounds and new theories in their teaching. The University of New Hampshire runs an excellent summer teacher training program, and my dissertation director, Thomas Newkirk, is also director of that program. Through Professor Newkirk I was introduced to some of the

1. "Key" schools in China are officially designated on the basis of academic excellence. Once a school is designated as a key school, it is provided with well trained teachers and better educational facilities, and, more important, it picks the brightest students. The policy is part of the reform program in China to speed up "the modernization of science." The rationale of such program is basically economical: to make full use of the limited national resources to train the best scientists and other professional. It is carried out at all levels, from the elementary to the tertiary.
best teachers in the area, and from them I was able to find teachers from two distinctly different communities, as well as of different genders and political allegiances. It was much harder to reach Chinese teachers from America. I first enlisted help from Chinese graduate students on campus, asking them to think of teachers of writing they had in high schools that impressed them as good teachers and tried to get in contact with the teachers through correspondence. That did not work, since most of the teachers these graduate students remembered with gratitude have passed the age of retirement, and some have died. It was by pure luck that I found a copy of "Anthology of Award-winning Student Writings" published in 1989 in China. I was delighted, because there are teachers' comments on each piece, so I decided to write to the editor of the collection. After two months of anxious waiting, I received a long letter from the editor, under the pseudonym of Mr Wang in the study, in which he said:

After much consideration and delay—I assume you understand why [it was one year after the Tian An Men upheaval]—I decided to write you this letter. ... This project provides an opportunity to introduce to the West Chinese teachers' experience and theories in teaching writing and to learn from the West. If successful, it will certainly have a very positive impact on the understanding of the two countries. For this purpose, I would like to cooperate with you whole-heartedly.

Mr. Wang turned out to be an important figure on the educational scene in his home city. He is the vice president of the Society of High School Teachers in Nanjing and president of Young Teachers' Society in the same city, as well as a member of the Research Association of the Education of Chinese at the provincial level. After a few more letters back and forth, I was confident enough that I had found the
right person that I boarded a plane for China. It was a home-coming trip. Through Mr Wang, I made acquaintance with more teachers. Although I had not known any of the teachers before, I was received not as a guest, but as a colleague, and as we came to know one another more in the following two weeks, as a friend. I was led into their "humble cottages", introduced to their families and friends, invited to their classrooms, and trusted with their personal stories, few of which were coated with "sweet and honey". Although I would like to report all their stories, I had to pick two which I thought were representative according to the criteria I set previously.

I cannot claim that these teachers are so typical that how they respond to student papers can accurately reflect the standards of each nation -- there is no one typical American teacher as there is no one quintessential American, and the same can be said with the Chinese teacher. The notion that one can find the typical writing teacher is more absurd, if we consider the racial diversity in America (how do you find one person that can represent the actual racial ratio in America?) and the ideological jigsaw puzzles in today's China (how can it be possible for one person to represent all the conflicting ideologies in China?). "Typicality" exists only in approximation, and I believe that I am closer to typicality by selecting teachers who are different from one another. These teachers are typical also in the sense that none of them has ever received any education or training abroad; they are products of indigenous education, and they are all excellent teachers according to the local standard, whatever that means.

My second concern was the selection of student papers based on the dozens of papers recommended by the key teachers. It proved to be much more complicated than I
thought. I started with a wide search, collecting papers of all possible genres, but soon I found that students in both countries generally produce far more interesting writing when they are allowed to write about their own experiences. Maybe because it is a genre ideologically less restrictive than essays in China and formally freer than research papers in America\(^4\). So I narrowed the search to the personal narrative, writing that tells a story or events moving over a span of time and is narrated with capital "I"—supposedly the writer should have experienced the story or the events personally. Each of the "key" teachers carefully selected four to five personal narratives that they would like to share with other teachers. Yet when they were asked to reduce that number to one or two, it became almost impossible. They felt no one piece could present their idea of "good writing", nor could two pieces do the job, since each piece has its own strengths and weaknesses. But I could not possibly include all the papers unless I turned the dissertation into a collection of student papers. They let me make the decision. It was a tough negotiation between a manageable number of papers and fair representation. I finally chose six pieces that were comparable in content; I picked from each country one character profile, one reminiscence of earlier life experience, and one on resolving internal conflicts. For the last round of discussion, the tug-of-war between a manageable number and fair representation became even more tense. To have sixty teachers voluntarily read and respond to student papers in the midst of their busy schedules—one thing I learned through working with four key teachers is that all writing teachers, no matter where they teach, are survivors of

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4. Research paper is not taught at any educational level in China, and there is no agreed format for research paper, either. It is a genre supposedly one can easily learn through actual doing.
overwork--I had to reduce the number to four. All six papers were so different I was aware that the discussion could take a different track depending on which four would go into the final survey. I finally picked the two on character profile and two on resolving internal conflicts. It was an arbitrary decision made with much pain and hesitation, but I think each of the four pieces chosen for the survey has a distinct style hard to find in papers from the other country.

Interview was the form of investigation used in the first two rounds of discussions with the four key teachers. In China, because my stay there was short, I met each teacher twice, but each time we talked for at least three hours, and continued our discussion in letters after I returned. In America, the interview was divided into smaller units, and I talked with each teacher at least four times at various lengths. In the interviews, except for the questions on their personal history and views on writing, I chose to use open-ended questions in discussing student papers and in the survey. I did not use questionnaires which list all the categories of criteria and ask the teachers to identify the ones relevant to their reading and prioritize them in the way that reflect their judgmental values. Questionnaires as such are based on the assumption that teachers grade student papers on a set of discrete features, and that the best paper is the one that scores highest when separate counts are added. Such scenarios seldom happen when a teacher has to read more than a hundred papers in a week. Most teachers grade student papers holistically, i.e. they grade on "the rhetorical effectiveness" of the papers (Lindemann 215). More important, though, Chinese teachers may have a different set of "categories" from the American teachers. Had I been working with questionnaires with predetermined categories, I would have closed the door to the criteria that
I did not know. My interviews, therefore, usually started with questions like "Why do you choose this piece? Tell me more about why you consider it a good piece? What advice did you give the writer in revision? What improvements do you still want the writer to make? Why do you consider piece A is not as good as B? What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the piece? etc." By asking open-ended questions, I kept the door widely open to surprises. The same was true with the survey, in which I asked the teachers to comment on the papers in whichever manner they found comfortable, as long as they would explain the rationale for their ordering of the papers, in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Since the same criteria, even translated, often have different connotations or denotations in the two languages, I asked for definitions when an abstract concept was applied in their comments, concepts like realism, honesty, beauty, creativity, as well as simple epithets like effective, meaningful, healthy, well-organized, and even basic words like good and bad. I was a mediator when the interviews touched upon issues on which there was known difference among the teachers. When an American teacher talked about linguistic originality in student papers, I brought up a Chinese teacher's view of students as apprentice of language rather than creators and invited the American teacher to respond to that. When a Chinese teacher talked about imitation, I challenged him with the American value of individual perceptions and observations and gave him an opportunity to defend the Chinese value. The meeting of conflicting views was not confrontational, though; the teachers often readily agreed that there was a good deal of truth in the other party's view and would like to reconsider his/her own position on the issue. There was genuine
interest in what the other teachers were doing and thinking. The teachers were more eager to learn than to teach.

For the last round of discussion, the survey, different sets of data were collected in each country. In America, because the teachers I surveyed are from the state of New Hampshire, where the influence of the "process approach" is strong, the teachers were invited to specify whether or not they had been involved in programs similar to the summer teacher training program run by the University of New Hampshire, which is one of the major pioneers of the innovational approach. In China the gap between the city and country is traditionally large. Cities in China, especially coastal cities, are centers of commerce and politics, and historically they have been hotbeds of new ideas and new trends, yet the backward transportation and communication in China have kept the country the backwater of changes. The gap was more pronounced during the Tian An Men upheaval in 1989, when there were massive uprisings in almost every major city, yet the countryside at large remained silent--people there were, as they had always been, too occupied with economic survival to care about politics. Therefore I included school location in the survey, whether it is situated in a city or in the countryside, to see if that gap is reflected in teachers' criteria of good writing. The survey proved a necessary step, for although the four key teachers were carefully chosen, their comments were not always representative of the larger number of teachers. After the survey the discrepancy between the four key teachers and the majority of the respondents was examined.

Certain patterns of commenting on student writings, distinctive of each culture, emerged from the abundance of different voices, despite an ample show of the idiosyncratic taste of each individual. The result, however, is clearly partly decided by the many decisions I made during the
process: who to talk to, which pieces should be included, what information should be sought and what follow-up questions I asked on the spur of the moment. To achieve better objectivity, I believe, is not to subtract subjectivity from the research or even to cover it up, but to expose it and try to account for it. As one such effort, I include my questions at the interviews and my reaction to their answers right after each discussion. Fortunately, the study is neither definitive nor final; it is not meant to be and should not be read as if it were. Ethnography, by nature, can only give the reader a thick slice of reality through the representation of the researcher; it is never meant to write the closing chapter on the question under study.

A note on translation. Some questions have been raised about the validity of a study in which translated texts are used. It is a problem that any cross-cultural study that uses written text has to confront, and in this study it is more prominent, because the participating teachers were not bi-lingual, and their judgements, the principal source of research, were made on translated texts. Although great efforts were made to be faithful to the original style and phrasing, the translator had to balance between accuracy and readability, and a good portion of linguistic features and semantic nuances were lost in translation. Some things are simply untranslatable. I had to reject some texts because of the difficulty in translation, for example, some Chinese papers that quote too much from ancient texts and popular proverbs--how do you translate a Chinese poem, the beauty of which lies not just in its use of imagery but mainly in the musical effect created by the clever arrangement of characters based on their tones and pitches? Some American pieces that are written with too much slang and colloquialism were also put aside, because, translated, they would appear
inappropriate in style and obscure in meaning. But I could not avoid these problems altogether. "River in My Hometown", though less studded with quotes, uses many proverbs and ends with a line from a famous poem; I had to resort to italics and annotations to inform the readers of their origin and the grace lost in translation. In translating "Beat them 'til They are Black and Blue", I was stuck for a long time with the first sentence: "My grandfather was a redneck, poor-born Missouri farmer". "Red-neck" suggests to the Chinese reader a heavy boozer or a bawler instead of a hard-working farmer long exposed to the elements of nature. I had to use a Chinese colloquial phrase "xiang1 xia4 laor3", which is closer to "country bumpkin", a term not nearly as colorful as "red-neck".

But some things can be and were retained during translation: the traits of a character, the development of a story, the structure and the message, the same components that make it possible for the American students to study Chinese classic literature in translation and for Uncle Tom's Cabin to enjoy the same popularity among Chinese readers as among Americans. During the study, I concentrated on the more global characteristics of the papers: content, organization and style, and tried to stay away from the local features: syntactic and semantic sophistication and the mechanics. Even when some teachers, almost out of conditioned reflexes, red-slashed some phrases and underlined others, I did not include such comments in the report. I generally did a better job translating American papers into Chinese than vice versa, yet the result shows that, although my English translation is sometimes "slightly off" (one teacher's comment), the teachers were able to appreciate the pieces on their global features.

Finally, the writing of the ethnography. My dissertation
is a realistic tale in that I did not deliberately distort or
dislocate the story but, instead, tries to present the story
in the temporal and spacial sequences as it happened. But
the omnipotent narrator that dominates the realistic tales is
replaced by a Faulknerian type of narrative: a multitude of
tellings of the same story (even more than in As I Lay Dying)
which tells not just the story but shows each person
involved, his or her different personal history, living
environment, and personality. I tried to reproduce as
faithfully as possible the contexts in which our
conversations took place, and the larger contexts in which
each key teacher's ideology and ways of thinking have been
formed. Different narrators preside at different stages in
telling of the tale of composition in two countries. My own
reading, as an researcher and an outsider, will come at the
end, not as final and conclusive words, but to raise
questions and invite further discussion on the notion of
"good writing." I hope such a tale will achieve what
successful modern novels can achieve, that is, readers find
it necessary to work out their own version of the story, and
they will start to reflect on their own criteria and own ways
of responding to student papers. Some conventional readers
may feel uncomfortable with the lack of closure, focus,
confidence and authority in the report, as I still do with
modern novels, but it is the author's intention to give all
those privileges to the reader—to empower the reader.
CHAPTER III

FOUR TEACHERS AND SIX PIECES (PART ONE)

Chapter III concentrates on the cases of four writing teachers, Jack and Jane in America and Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang in China. Their names are changed to protect their confidentiality, which is necessary for the Chinese teachers for obvious political reasons, and also found desirable for the American teachers, because of some controversial views they hold on teaching writing and delicate politics in the schools they teach. The American teachers are called by their first name and the Chinese teachers by their last, the way I addressed them during the interviews according to the custom in each country.

Part one reports: (1) personal profiles of the four key teachers based on my interviews and correspondence with them: their personal history, their living and working environments, their personality, as well as their views on the function of writing, etc.—all for the purpose of showing who they are; (2) how the papers they selected came into being: the type of assignment they gave and the kind of environment in which the paper was written; (3) how the four teachers interacted with their own students after the papers were handed in: their conference with the students, their written comments on the papers and the revisions the students have done under the teachers' guidance.
III.1. JACK, A TOUGH-MINDED YANKEE

In his early forties, Jack teaches in a high school in a small university town in New Hampshire. Next door to a major state university, the school seems to gravitate naturally towards higher education. It boasts students' high SAT scores and upper level academic courses comparable to university courses. In 1990, seventy-five per cent (the national average is around 50%) of the school's graduates went on to colleges or universities. Like a magnet this public high school attracts students from nearby regions, students whose parents have high aspirations for their children but could not afford the high price of a private school.

Jack does not look like a typical Yankee at first sight. He is short in stature, and his voice sounds coarse and tired. With well-groomed hair and a corduroy suit, he walks in quick steps and talks in clipped and fast tempo and well chosen diction that conveys precision. He carries an air of formality. Yet deep down he is a man with strong conviction and high working ethics, qualities that remind me of those old tough-minded Yankees who descended from a Puritan tradition. The motto on the wall next to his desk, which is cluttered with student papers and newspaper specimen pages, reads, "Do not pray for an easy life. Pray for a strong person." In his daily swirl of teaching five classes a day, advising the student newspaper, coaching student drama group and other administrative duties, Jack still finds time to hold Bible discussions with students from his church once a week during lunch time. Jack has been teaching writing for twenty-three years. As an experienced teacher of writing, he
is able to read student papers with the same tempo and precision as he speaks. He seldom falters about his reading. Usually after he reads the student paper once, he can immediately write or talk eloquently about the strengths and weaknesses of the paper and deliver a grade. With a sharp hunter's eye he is also able to pick up typos and grammatical mistakes in the papers from drafts that have been proofread by several readers. Yet, despite his formality his relationship with the students is very close and warm. Our talks, held in his classroom, were frequently interrupted by students rushing in to seek his counsel on all kinds of subjects: schedule for drama rehearsals, recovering lost costumes, candidates for the volleyball team and even some mechanical problems with the light in the school gym. One day, two girls came to request his conspiracy in pulling out a practical joke on a friend of theirs, who, they claimed, had betrayed a "serious" vow, Jack winked and agreed.

Jack is a not a Yankee liberal, though; he is a political and social conservative. He loudly regrets that America has lost faith and good values, that students nowadays have little respect for order and tradition, as evidenced by their lack of civility. In our discussion about honesty in writing, Jack could not hide his disgust even though he was speaking with well modulated tones, "I would like a little polite hypocrisy. I would like to see somebody say to me 'Would you please open the door for me,' rather than have somebody bump into me and then just keeps on going." For him, what happened in the sixties started the country on the moral downslide. He described those activists in the sixties as "all these middle-class kids who from my point of view were scorning all the things that had come so easily to them. These spoiled kids who had everything were turning their noses up at it."
Jack grew up in poverty, first in the woods of northern New Hampshire, later in Florida and a succession of seacoast New England towns, as his father, an itinerant automobile mechanic, chased success. The first home he remembers was a one room cabin with no running water. In school he was laughed at for his "funny speech" and slighted for his "reading problem". "There is nothing either ennobling or picturesque about poverty," he concluded at a young age, and made up his mind to fight out of poverty. He became a serious student, and when he graduated from high school, Jack was class president and one of the top students at school. He planned to be a lawyer, yet an unexpected illness jeopardized his plan, and he found himself, instead of going to the Bar, back in high school, this time as a teacher.

His school years were in the time, as Jack recalls, "before the fall of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow from the position of a paramount poet of all American history". Jack still remembers vividly the day when this most respected poet passed away, "That day, the school had a long period of silence. The church bell was tolled by the president echoing all over the United States. Longfellow has a bust in the poet's corner in Westminster Abbey. He was sanctified." For him Longfellow is not just a poet, but "the symbol of hard work, moral uprightness, optimism—virtues of American agrarian workers." The fall of Longfellow signaled the passing of an era when the line between right and wrong was clear-cut, when hard work and faith were extolled. Then, Jack interposed, some radical changes took place after the turn of the century; the rise of Realism forces the reader to face the seamy side of reality. "Now in Modern art you see bums, hobos, sitting in the doorway of a vacant building with
trash all around. Literature portrays people as victims of their circumstances and living in 'the world between the gods'. Now people find Longfellow's poetry very distasteful, because it is so sappy, so sentimental. So he fell from grace," he looked back at the changes with mixed feelings of acceptance and nostalgia. "Now the amount of space to him in American literature is very small. There used to be his very long poems as a must for all school children. Today only a few of his translations from Greek or Roman are read." Yet virtues celebrated in Longfellow's poems are obviously well alive among the generation who grew up chanting his verses:

... and as I read
I hear the crowing cock, I hear the note
Of Lark and Linnet, and from every page
Rise odors of ploughed field or flowery mead.

(Longfellow, "Chaucer")

During a visit to his home, an elegant two-storied wooden house hidden beside a quiet road, Jack told me with pride that he built the house with his father-in-law seventeen years ago, and that the family had been living there ever since. Entering the house, what immediately caught my eyes was a huge fireplace in one side of the wall: its brick-laid chimney rising all the way to the roof, stacked wood on one side and worn-looking pokers standing on the other side, adding a flavor of antiquity and simplicity to an otherwise ordinary living room. In one corner of the living room is a narrow spiral staircase with wrought iron railing that leads to the second floor, which has an inside balcony overlooking downstairs and is heated by the huge chimney. Jack's wife came from one of the oldest families in the area and is also a school teacher. One of their daughters has married and the other is going to college this fall. Jack has come a long way from one-room cabin in the deep woods.
After a busy day in school, which can tax the strength of the strongest man, Jack still finds energy to write at home. He publishes on a regular basis, usually one article per year in some regional magazines. Jack considers himself a writer and views his relationship with his students as between writers, and his own experience of writing the best teaching guide.

Because the paper he chose seems to have a higher artistic quality than others, I asked Jack if art is what he is teaching. He disagreed:

The principal purpose of writing is to make people understand something they did not understand before. Art, communication are all secondary. Create something beautiful so it is pleasing to the eye, yet that is the means, not the end. Just like a beautiful painting helps me to understand something, even an abstract design of rug--in some ways there is an element of understanding. I go to an art gallery and look at the painting. I am trying to understand what human beings could paint, who painted them, what motivated them, why is that being produced. I understand them better. I just feel they come alive; I understand the way [the painter] looks at the world.

His understanding is obviously not confined to self; writing is a way of expanding one's vision, understanding the world around.

Understanding, knowing the world, is at the core of Jack's perception of the purpose of both writing and reading. The author he has liked through most of his life is Charles Dickens, "because his characters are so realistic, but compelling examples of types of people". Thomas Hardy is second on his list of favorite writers. "Because he helps me probing into the psychological truth of people without them [the characters] even knowing it," explained Jack. "I mean they even don't know why they are doing what they are doing.
That's very valid." When asked whether he is bothered by Dickens' thick and sometimes verbose description, he responded, "I am not saying I love the style so much as I love the characters. I think you can read Dickens despite Dickens' way. After you have read it ten times, you know the scene and you can go rapidly over. They [the characters] are so wonderful, you gloss over the rich description." Then I asked him to rate the writers in terms of their style. "Actually I wouldn't put Hemingway at the top, although he is very lean in style," Jack said without any hesitation. "I think I will probably put Steinbeck. I like him better than Hemingway or Faulkner. He has more poetry in his work than Hemingway, but not as obscure as Faulkner." Yet for him, content is far more important than style. "Style, that could get in the way, but when they [books] open up a new world, that's what I want to read," he said. "People can be taught. You can go to a publishing house, they can tell you how to structure a sentence, how a paragraph goes in certain ways, all that stuff, but if the person has nothing to say, all that style stuff is not going to make the book great. I read what I feel I need to know." Right now, Jack feels he needs to know about other ethnic cultures, and he is reading writers from Alice Walker to Amy Tan. Of all the minority writers he has read he admires most Toni Morrison, "Her books make me think in a way I never did before, maybe understanding the black mentality, their way of looking at the world, which I didn't understand very well." He read some time ago a novel written by a native Chinese writer, and, although he does not remember clearly the title and plot of the novel, he was impressed by the closeness between nature and people in that book, something he feels Americans have just begun to appreciate. He hopes to teach in China in the future to know the ordinary people there and to write
about them. His warm feeling towards the oriental culture and his eagerness to open his horizon made him an enthusiastic participant in this project.

"Beat Them Black and Blue" was pulled out a stack of papers by Jack as one of the best pieces written by his students when I was interviewing him. The topic was chosen by the student, the form of personal narrative, assigned by Jack.

"The writer," Jack says, "is an exceptional student, certainly at the top of the class. She is in the advanced writing class. This piece has been with her for quite a while, and this is the polished piece."

Beat Them 'til They're Black and Blue

My grandfather was a redneck, a poor-born Missouri farmer; never had a full day's rest in all his seventy-two years. A skinny, crooked man, his back was bent forever towards the relentless sun. Squinting eyes and leathery skin were steadfast reminders of the land and life he inherited from his father.

If he had any love in him, something locked it up behind the hardened grimace he always wore. Sometimes he would slip, and the stern frown etched into his face would lose its conviction. The story’s told that when I was born, his first grandchild, he actually hugged my mother, something he never did when she was a child.

Old age seemed to mellow the man. A lifetime of withholding affection ended with me. Unlike his six daughters, I didn't know what it felt like not to be touched by your own father, unless accompanied by the bite of a switch.

I would lie in bed night after night under a wilted cotton sheet waiting for the oppressive Missouri heat to lift. Near my bed was a window which was always open to the sweet-smelling fields. The fireflies which performed their dazzling dance for me never ceased to amaze my little six-
year-old eyes as I waited for the familiar creak of my grandfather climbing the stairs.

He would come into my room and tuck the cotton sheet around my chin. He stayed with me for hours past my bedtime, telling me stories of when he was a little boy. He told me how his family never owned a T.V. or a car. Instead of Saturday morning cartoons, he had Saturday morning chores. After two years in high school, he dropped out because his father needed all the help he could get on the farm. When he was sixteen, his father died, and he became responsible for a family of five. He grew up that year, working in the fields, the only life he knew.

With all the tales that he told, none of them ever included my mom or her sisters. It was like he had willfully erased that part of his life. Some deeper awareness told me to be content with his stories, so I filled in the empty spaces with make-believe stories.

His stories held me until my eyelids became heavy, and his soft Southern drawl lulled me to sleep. Each night before he left me, he kissed my cheek, tickling me with his prickly white stubble. Then he would whisper into my ear:

"Good night, sleep tight,  
Don't let the bed bugs bite,  
And if they do,  
Take your shoe,  
And beat them 'til they're black and blue."

With that he would leave me, but the scent of his pipe would linger, protecting me from the bedbugs.

Unknown to me then, each night my mom would come and kiss me good night. She and her father would pass each other in the hall, never touching, never loving. She was a stranger in the house she grew up in.

Jack graded the paper "A" and wrote the following comments:

The point of view is reflective first person -- from the present looking back. This allows you to understand now what you didn't then. If you want to tell the story from a young
child's point of view, the verb tenses would have to change. However, you are commenting on your grandfather in terms of what you understand and saw then, leaving out the understandings you have now. This seems to work very well because it leaves the reader with the job of assessing what it is in him (and in many people), to have a much easier time with unfettered expression of emotion with grandchildren than with children. Your story gives us some clues, but we know there are many factors, different in different cases. The issue isn't so much an explanation of the reason anyway. It simply looks at how this behavior affects others -- you and your mother.

In the margins, Jack only indicated a few sentences that were unclear to him, but he did not change anything in the paper. He explained, "To put the word in their mouths to me is a violation of the process, which to keep the ownership of their own paper means the words have to be their own."

In the comments at the end and in the margins, Jack continued his dialogue with the writer that started after the student handed in the first draft. Initially Jack thought the beginning "My grandfather was a redneck, a poor born..." was a kind of background, not strong enough to be a good beginning. "Although it was ok," Jack reasoned, "for many noted authors frequently introduce their stories with that, but I felt I was not fascinated by him as a character." He suggested to the writer that the second paragraph be moved to the beginning, "because the mystery of him, what is behind his hardened grimace may be more interesting as a lead". But in the group discussion, eight of ten students in that group said no, they liked the beginning with the red-neck, and the writer herself did not want to change either, so Jack decided that he was not going to impose any change and just stayed with it. In the margin, though, he reiterated, "This para. (the second) is an alternative lead, but your lead is
effective as is."

In the final comment, Jack continued his discussion with the writer about the paper's point of view, a discussion started in their conference. The writer said that she was telling the story from the point of view of herself when she was a little child. Jack disagreed, but was unable to convince her. Now with the final draft, Jack put an arrow beside the sentence "Some deeper awareness told me to be content with his stories, so I filled in the empty spaces with make-believe stories", and wrote "That key sentence justifies the approach you have taken." The approach, as he understood and restated in the final comment, is "reflective first person -- from the present looking back." Jack, however, was not suggesting any change, for he considered the point of view that the writer was taking in the paper was quite effective. He was only discussing with the student an issue he considered important for writers. Jack talked more about the piece in the interview:

In a lean and simple way it shows just enough of the surroundings, as well as a picture of the person. She lets us know that her grandpa is more drawn to the grandchildren than with his own children, but she does not allow us go off at a tangent that might be interesting, but waters it down to a simple story. That's very powerful. She does not rely on phony language. She has a more fluent vocabulary than indicated by this piece, but she is talking about a red-neck Missouri farmer, so she picks vocabulary appropriate to the topic as well as to her level. It is also written with a natural style. She has a powerful way of suggesting the whole impact and significance. She does not go into the detail whether she ever beat the bugs, but that is the title. Maybe the title suggests some physical abuse in the family, or her mother was beaten metaphorically. It's subtle and suggestive, and that is excellent.

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III.2. JANE, A CONVERTED LIBERAL

Jane, in her early forties, is mother of two young adopted sons. She teaches in a high school in a sizable, very affluent town, inhabited mostly by upper-middle class business people and professionals. It is more than half an hour's drive from where Jack teaches. While the town where Jack teaches and lives has only one main street that has no traffic lights and is lined with various stores, mostly small restaurants and snack shops, the town where Jane teaches is crisscrossed with streets most of time jammed with cars and people flowing in and out of exclusive stores. In the town there is a nationally reputed private school, and, as a result, the best students are attracted to that school after they have finished junior high in Jane's school. "I don't get to teach the best students," Jane lamented.

I met Jane in her home. She is of medium height with blond hair curling and hanging loosely over her shoulders, giving a look much younger than her age. Her words are enunciated with such a crispy edge that they came through clearly even when my tape recorder was dragging on low battery. Whether it is a natural gift or a result of teaching English for nearly two decades, I could not tell. Occasionally Jane dresses elaborately in flowing stylish clothes with slightly puffed sleeves and lower cut in the front, but most of the time, she is in shirt and jeans, which nicely set off her slender figure. Our talks were frequently broken with laughter, giggles and sidetracks to our favorite topic of parenting. Her house was built by her husband, who is a school counselor on week days and does some construction work during week ends. The house is different from any houses I have ever seen in the area. It is connected to its
garage with an vestibule, opening to the outside with a round door consisting of two half circles, resembling very much the doors in Chinese gardens. Inside the living room, when a four-door closet is pulled opened, Jane's hidden study is in sight: a computer on a shelf-like desk and piles of paper spilling from the shelf onto the floor. When the doors of the closet are closed, the clutter is snatched from view, leaving only a grand piano and a round oriental rug in the room. The house is spotlessly clean inspite of two young boys running around, one a toddler, leaving a trail of toys wherever he goes. Jane lives a fast-paced life. I have to call her before six in the morning if I want to catch her before she takes off for work, dropping the two boys with a baby-sitter on the way. At home, she can, when hastily fielding phone calls, appease the two most active boys in the world, one determined to cry his heart out until Dad lets him play with the real screw-driver, the other quietly but with the same determination reaching for the boiling chocolate water on the burner.

Jane said from the beginning that she felt very uncomfortable commenting on papers whose authors she did not know, still less to grade them. Only after I urged her to read them as drafts and conference them with me as if I were the author, she finally accepted that role. As for the grade, I soon realized that it did not mean much anyway when the value of grades varied so much from one teacher to another. Jane often began her comments with "I like" or "I love", and her criticisms were never phrased as passing a judgment but more as tentative advice, "I might ask her to...." or "I would like to see more..." She handles students papers like a caring mother holding a delicate baby.

Jane grew up in a very intellectual family; both of her parents are well educated. Because of the role models at home, Jane had always been a good student, "I bought into
the educational system, because my parents bought into it and I respected them very much. I respect them both intellectually. I never thought I could match them, so I struggled. Grades were very important to me." In the sixties, she could not understand why her friends were so discontented, and felt embarrassed being unable to side with their cause. After college, Jane was single for the next fourteen years, during which she began another educational process, this time, in the real world. She travelled to Europe and met so many different people there that it did not take long for her to discover what an inadequate education she had received in school. "These were very sophisticated and capable people. They lived a simple life style but had a rich spiritual life. It was very exciting. Yet I was not taught to think; I was taught to take in what they [the teachers] understood and to express back to them in their terms." At the age of 22, Jane became an English teacher, but she did not want her students to be what she used to be, an echoing machine without a mind of its own. She wanted them each to be an unique individual who can think on his or her own. She became more idealistic at the age of forty than she was at twenty.

Jane's idealism, however, is put to test daily at school; she is fighting a system for which democracy is more an ideal than a realistic goal. Students confessed to her, with no qualms, their secret formula that guarantees success in most classes: "We just pretend to understand something and use a little bit of the instructor's language and ramble on about something but not too much." "Is that lying?" "Yes," the students were frank about how they cope with the system. Such a system produces "winners" who get good grades but have no language of their own. Both the system and the students lose. "They speak in such cliches and such slang, they speak
all the time in cliches and slang, that you can almost take everything that the students say during the course of the day and find that nothing is new. There is no new thought. They are afraid to appear intellectual, for they feel it is phony to be philosophical or to try on more sophisticated language," Jane was pained.

Teaching writing is her way of fighting back. Jane looked back at her teaching career and said:

As a writing teacher, I really take an extreme stand. I want my students to be more sophisticated than they are used to, to try on lots of different things. I throw problems at them and ask them to learn new ways to read and write. I want them to dig inside, to discover life for themselves and use language to express their thinking and feelings. Otherwise you only get what you want. Now I am getting papers I am pleasantly surprised. I believe they can learn.

Writing for her thus first happens at a very personal level. Jane loves Don Murray's definition of writing: "All writing is autobiography". Contemplating the function of writing, she said:

All writing is persuasive. A narration persuades people to see their experience, see their perspective. One of the purposes of writing is to clear things for themselves. First and foremost is to relate to themselves, to see clearly how much they know, or they don't know, how much they feel or they don't feel, and then to say something to people. Once they make the breakthrough that writing takes them deeper and helps them see things more clearly, then they can begin to choose purposes for it. The question I throw at them is, "So what?" "What is your purpose?" "Do you want me to laugh or want me to feel?" Writing should have significance.

She believes writing class is a place for experimentation, not perfecting what one already knows, and the students are graded according to how successfully they
have discovered new language, new ideas or something new about themselves. "When I am grading, I am looking at the writer. Very often my A- is to indicate something was done very well, but not all is right." One student summarized her learning experience in Jane's class, "I have learned a lot about myself." That's exactly what Jane wants to accomplish.

To name her favorite authors, Jane paused for a while and then said, "Faulkner comes to mind. He blows the language and grammar apart." She was using *The Sound and Fury* as the text in her literature class at the time of our interviews, but she said, "I am not teaching. I am not saying a word. They love it and get it." She also named Toni Morrison for her book *Song of Solomon* as one of her favorite authors.

"Good writing," she generalized, "has to have an impact. It has to move me in some way, whether it moves me to be disgusted, moves me to fall in love with the writer. It has to move me into some kind of emotion." Good writing, for Jane, starts at a personal level and connects with the reader at a very personal level.

As she was transforming her students, Jane has transformed herself, "I think I am more liberal now. I think if I were shot back to the sixties, I would be a different person."

Jane has strong religious beliefs. She was raised to believe in God and perceives herself being "still very Christian", even though she does not go to church regularly now. She does not consider that liberalism contradicts her religion. Religion for her is not taking on a blind faith; it is a way of life. "A very positive view of life", she told me. But she is careful not to bring her personal beliefs into students' school life, because the last thing she wants from her students is to "think all like me".

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The two *untitled* pieces, one on a friend's suicide and the other on a summer vacation, were both selected by Jane from her own student writings. The topics were, as often happen in her class, generated from talks in workshops and individual conferences in and after classes.

**No Title (1):**

The world is still going to revolve, the calendar pages are still going to turn, and life will still go on as usual for most everybody. That's why it makes me so mad that you committed suicide. What could you have hoped to accomplish? Yes, your problems are solved now, but ours have just begun. You've not only left your problems behind, but also an entire lifetime of love from family and friends and me. But you will never feel any love now, because you're dead! How could you do this to me? I'm sick and tired of taking other peoples' feelings into consideration! How about me? I have feelings, too! You were my best friend, and now you've left me to sink and swim on my own! I am so angry and confused. Why? Why did you do that? Life would have gotten better. I know it would have.

I remember the day we met like it was yesterday. Both of us so alone, scared and nervous. But we met and talked. It was both of our first time at camp, so we didn't know anybody else, remember? We became immediate friends. It was the funniest week of my life. We shared our life stories, laughed and cried when the week ended. Fortunately, you lived a mere half-hour from my house. Remember all the late phone calls, telling about my first boyfriend, first kisses, and your parents' divorce. We were always there for each other when we were needed. But where are you now? I really need you now, and where are you? You aren't here where I need you the most, and I don't think that I can forgive you for that.

Soon after we met, you told me that I was your best friend. I was so glad! I had never had a best friend before, and I felt the same about you. We always told each other everything. Why was this any different?
Maybe it was me. I thought about it a lot. Maybe you tried to tell me and I wasn't listening. But you left no explanation. Just a heart-wrenching puzzle for the people who cared about you to piece together.

But now who am I going to talk to, listen to? who can I count on? Not you, because you're gone. You're gone, and it hurts so much. I really need you now. I loved you like a sister. We called each other every night, filling hours with dreams, fantasies and hopes. But who can I call now? I have new dreams, new hopes, ones that you will never know about. There are so many things that I want to tell you, but your ears will never hear me.

Of all the jumbled emotions I feel, angry, confused and hurt, I just need you to know that I miss you. I hope that wherever you are, that you can lend an ear to listen to me. I want you to watch me grow, as my anger disappears. Your life is over, at such a young age of fifteen, yet mine has just begun. I just want you to know that until we meet again, I love you, friend.

Jane's written comments were very simple, because in her class most of the interaction happens in the conferences she holds with each student writer:

A- This is a moving piece, ______ (name of the student). You found what it was you had to say.

Yet the student did not find out what she had to say all by herself; it was a process cautiously prodded and aided by the teacher. The process of the piece well illustrates how Jane nurtures the student writing the same way she nurtures her two intractable boys.

It started as a piece described by Jane as "a poor attempt at formal essay, a piece that says nothing", and also one in which "authority is missing--she didn't say anything that we don't know." The first draft begins with: "You know, every day I hear people complaining that their
life "sucks", because their parents won't let them do something." Then she went on to write about a movie, her aunt's attempt at her life when drunk and the threat of nuclear war and drugs. In the middle of all these she mentioned, "I read about suicides all the time, and a person I know committed suicide, so I know the effects."

The piece ends with some general advice about life and upbeat calls:

Put down the weapons and shake hands. Try life without drugs for a chance.
This is it. No curtain calls.

The piece is obviously poorly focused, and the writer does not really know what she wanted to say. The only place in the piece where the writer showed personal interest in the topic was the part on her friend's suicide, so at the conference Jane asked the student what really happened with her friend. The student became emotional and detailed their relationship and the impact of the death on her. Jane then wrote beside those disturbing lines in the paper, "Use this experience to show the effect on others!" But the student resisted. The next draft instead of writing about her friend, she wrote about a film:

I've recently watched a movie called "permanent vacation". It's about a gifted high school boy who committed suicide because of his scholastic and social pressures. The movie focused on the effects of the suicide on his friends and family. It really put things into perspective for me.

Then she goes on with four more paragraphs on life in general, and the ending comes back to the suicide issue, "Suicide is not the way to do. Live for yourself and life will become quite a bit better."
Jane asks her students to keep a journal to reflect on the their writing process. The writer, in this case, realized that her writing was hitting the wall, so she wrote in her journal to Jane:

My subject was suicide. It was supposed to be a story, but it came out more as a lecture. With topics like suicide I couldn't find a way to have somebody die by suicide without giving a message that is strong enough to say don't do it... I felt that I made a few good points about the topic, but it just didn't seem strong enough or story like.

Jane was less concerned about the genre, whether it is a story or an essay; she wanted the student to connect writing with real feelings, and to use writing to find out what she really thought about the topic. So she had another conference with the student to see what was significant enough to develop in the piece. Again the student mentioned that she had been unhappy after the death of her friend. Jane suggested that maybe she should confront her feelings and write about them. A few days later, the student came back with a piece charged with heart-breaking emotions and "a strong message". Jane suggested some corrections with spelling and sentence structures and let the student decide if she wanted to do more about it. This time the student wrote in her journal:

On this piece, there wasn't much I could change because this wasn't a "story". It was a letter to a friend. I did change a few lines as I realized new things while I wrote. But mostly I just copied it down. I am glad you told me to try again with the suicide piece, because even though it's very personal, its come to help me realize a few things I hadn't know before. (underline added by Jane)

Jane was pleased, not so much with the final product as with the discovery the student had made through writing. She
sees authority in this piece, which was missing in the drafts. "Authority comes from the fact that she had a personal experience, she has strong emotions, and she expresses them. It is not clicheish; she says something no one else can say," said Jane, her eyes sparkling with delight. "Writing in this case has become meaningful, because it is used to deal with life, and that is what writing is for." Jane underlined the last line and wrote beside it, "Good for you!"

No Title (2)

With the arrival of summer my thoughts would turn towards the unkempt lakehouse with the shaggy lawn and ancient appliances. It wasn't spectacular to look at, but it was a refuge from the modern, fast-paced world.

I spent the last two to three weeks of every childhood summer at the family summer house in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. It was located on a small, peaceful lake in a hamlet. There weren't enough people to call it a town.

Although there was a lack of children to play with, my brother and I were never bored. We would spend hours on the rocks surrounding the lake catching crayfish. We would use these creatures for bait on our long trips in the rowboat. Occasionally one of us would catch a wall-eye or a trout, but for the most part we arrived home with a bucket full of rock bass. We proceeded to skin these fish, and my mother would fry the miniscule fillets for appetizers.

I remember well carrying my father's golf club bag down the first two holes of the course across the street. At this point the five-dollar bill waiting at the ninth hole would seem like so little, and I would abandon my father to scamper through the woods, looking for golf balls. I would emerge covered with dirt and with burs tangled in my hair, but I would be smiling as I proudly unloaded my pockets and made a mountain of golf balls for my father.
In the heat of the day I would happily plunge into the cold mountain lake, and Erik and I would play many games. Late afternoons were usually spent climbing trees and exploring the woods where it was cool.

As each day came to a close, I would sit alone on the end of the dock with my legs over the edge, letting the water swirl around them and soothe my tired feet.

I would gaze toward the mountains and watch the sun sink behind them. I would bathe in the mirage of color that reached out from the sky. The lake would turn pink, violet, copper, and gold. I would catch my breath as I beheld the natural painting that inspired so much feeling within me.

Then the image, as if it were afraid to give too much pleasure, would retreat to the mountains. Darkness would settle and a silent calm would come over the lake. Occasionally I would hear a canoe slipping through the shadows or the splash of a fish jumping. Then all would be still. I would quietly stand up and tip-toe up to the house, careful not to disturb the peacefulness.

When I entered the house, I would immediately be surrounded with laughter and chatter. My great aunt would always be sitting in her wicker chair concentrating on a crossword puzzle and would look up at me with a knowing look and smile.

After dinner my cousins, my brother, and I would pull on wool sweaters, gather up a flashlight and a container, and head for what was by day the golf course, by night - hunting grounds. Our voices would be reduced to whispers that were barely audible and our feet would hardly move one in front of the other. When we spied our victims, we would slowly move into the circle of light formed by flashlights and approach. When close enough we would lunge and pull out of its hole a long, fat nightcrawler. Hours were spent at this, and we caught one after another. They were to be bait for the next day. When we finally tired of this game, it would be late.

We would slowly return to the house, too tired to run. After cleaning up in the washtub and brushing my teeth with bottled spring water, I
would drag myself up the creaky stairs. I would cast my tired eyes over
the balcony and let them come to a rest on the deer head. It protruded
from a hand-built chimney made of stone and below it hung guns that had
been there for decades.

I would shuffle down the hall, undress, and slip in between the sweet
smelling sheets. The broken-down cot felt so wonderful and allowed my
muscles to release their final grasp. I allowed the weight of my eyelids to
shut them. I listened for a moment to the voices floating over the wall that
didn't quite reach the ceiling. Then I drifted off, knowing that I would be
awakened early the next morning by birds chirping, by delicious smells
from the kitchen, and with the sunshine warming my face.

Again, Jane did not write long comments on the papers and
made few editing marks; most of the job had already been done
by talking in the conferences. The piece had been through a
number of revisions before it reached this stage. Now on the
final product, all she wrote at the end of the paper was:

A- Images are wonderful!

In our talks, Jane said more about the strength of the paper:

It is unusual for our students not to have cliches, to
find language uniquely their own, because that is imbedded in
their life. I like the line "the unkempt lakehouse with the
shaggy lawn and ancient appliances". I like the line as
simple as "late afternoons we usually spent climbing trees
and exploring the woods where it was cool". The best writing
is simple and clear, you don't have to use big words. I like
her play with the color: "I would bathe in the mirage of
color that reached out from the sky. The lake would turn
pink, violet, copper and gold." That's very unusual. It's
personification, but it's very natural. It is not contrived.
This came out of her again and again revising her pieces, and
finally for the first time [she] felt comfortable to let her
writing happen without trying to formalize it, to make it
into an essay.

The writing, judged by Jane, has its own natural voice, own language and its natural form. That, in Jane's judgment, is good writing.
III.3. WANG, A "NEO-CONFUCIANIST"

Wang is tall and bony and looks much older than his age of forty-nine. His back is bent and his complexion wan and winkle. He smokes one cigarette after another, occasionally puffing energetically at it, but lets it burn slowly by itself most of the time. His apartment is on the sixth floor of a newly-built "teachers' complex", which has neither elevator nor air-conditioning. Such complexes have become a familiar sight in Nanjing, the city where Wang now lives. Located on the northern bank of Yangtze, the longest river in China, Nanjing has a population of more than five million (including the suburban counties), and is considered a medium sized city in China. It is known as one of the three "oven cities" for its unbearable heat in summer. Since houses in China are owned by the government and rented to the people at a rate lower than the cost of two pounds of pork, there is always a great shortage of houses, and owning an apartment is a privilege. In the last decade, because the central government issued favorable policies towards intellectuals, a fund was allocated by the local government to build more houses for teachers. Mr. Wang was assigned an apartment four years ago after his family of four had lived in one room (a plastic sheet separated the room of 22 square meters into two sections, one for the couple and the other for their two sons) for six years. This new two bed-room apartment was designed to make every inch of the floor available for the most essential uses, so, the "unit", as it is called in China, not out of neglect, has no living room. Moving in a couch along one side of the hallway and a coffee table in front of it, and hanging an enlarged picture of a field
overgrown with blooming tulips on the wall facing the couch to create illusionary depth, Wang has ingeniously turned the narrow hallway into a small yet cozy living room. The hallway, though, after the renovation, has left only enough room for one person to go through at a time. Climbing six floors is hard every-day exercise, and a two bedroom apartment without a living room is by no means spacious for three grownups (one of his sons is now working in another city), but Wang is sincerely content, "Most people in Nanjing still dream of having an apartment like this."

The time I went to visit him, Mr. Wang's school had just celebrated its first centenary. The school was founded in 1891 by an American missionary known to the faculty then as Mr. Ferguson, a graduate of Boston University, and it had been managed by American principals until 1926. Time has changed; now only the rebuilt bell tower on the top of the school auditorium reminds the visitor of the Western presence on this campus a century ago.

Mr. Wang himself is well read in Western literature and philosophies. He likes, in particular, works by French novelists, like Balzac, Maupassant and Hugo, "because these writers try to be true to reality, and, at the same time, express their own opinions and sentiments." Russian was the most taught language in Chinese colleges in the Fifties. Mr Wang learned Russian and read Tolstoy, Chekhov and Gorky in his college days, but did not like too much Tolstoy's lengthy preaching style. Of English literature, his favorites are Shakespeare's Hamlet and Whitman's Leaves of Grass, as well as short stories by Mark Twain and Martin Eden by Jack London. He did not like Dickens' novels too much, because "they are filled with trivial details and the mood is too depressive", and he also found it hard to appreciate contemporary American works, for three reasons: the lack of
interesting plot, the dislocated structure, and lack-luster language, although he suspected the last was the fault of the translators. Of all Chinese writers, he admired Lu Shun most for his noble character, his insightful analysis of the so-called Chinese "national character" and his relentless fight against any form of hypocrisy.

Wang did not go out and join the student demonstrations during "the Tian An Men incidents", but there was no question on which side he stood. Talking about the present political situation in China, he had two comments to offer, one pessimistic, "My generation is not going to see democracy, probably not even my son", and the other more hopeful, "You watch out, the whole thing is not finished (mei2 wan2)." He pronounced the last two syllables with the typical Peking "r", making them sound both casual and harshly satirical. With some self-deprecation, he commented that the greatest virtue of Chinese intellectuals was their forbearance. "The character of 'forbearance' is very interesting," he observed. "If you look at it carefully, you can see that it actually consists of two characters: a knife and a heart. Forbearance means you can stand a knife pointed at your heart. That's very painful, right? But you have to bear it." Often our talks on student papers turned into his deliberation on China's present political situation. He confided that he believed nothing reported in official newspapers (there are no private newspapers in China) "other than the date and the weather". Without reliable sources for news, he had to depend on hearsay, many of which sheer concoctions. One of the "news" items he related to me was that former Premier Zhao (a leading reformist and former General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party) just committed suicide according to a Hong Kong newspaper, yet he had no access to any newspaper other than "People's Daily". I sensed that the frequent
meetings of his colleagues and friends in that "living room" are his major source of information. Despite his interest in the West and his years of Marxist and Maoist education, Mr. Wang is a firm believer of Confucianism in his modified version. Although sometimes he blames Confucius' influence for some of the educational problems in China, he believes that many more are caused by regression from Confucianism.

The last day I went to Mr. Wang's school was the day of the middle school entrance exam. The school gate was heavily guarded by teachers wearing red arm-bands to keep anxiety-ridden parents out, and I was let in through a side door when they found out who I was--Mr Wang had notified them ahead of time.

With hundreds of students waiting for the exam, the campus was weirdly quiet, many students nervously sitting and wandering along the ivy-covered corridor, some murmuring softly to themselves. They reminded me of those scary "defining moments" in my own student life. In China, only one out of seven high school graduates can go to college (The proportion between elementary school and high school can be twice as high, depending on where you live, city or country). The battle to college usually starts from elementary school, and, in some families, as early as the time when the child starts talking. The first, and maybe the most important, "moment" is the middle school entrance exam, for admission to a "key" middle school is almost a guaranteed seat in a college classroom. The school where Mr. Wang teaches is the second best middle school in Nanjing, and the competition to get in is fierce. Mr. Wang attributes this phenomenon, which he describes as "all armies marching to one single-plank bridge", to people's disregard for Confucius teachings, "Now we have given up everything to prepare students for the college entrance exam. Students have no pastime, no weekends, and some parents even use financial
incentives or physical punishment to keep their children at their books. We are going directly against Confucius teachings." He explained that Confucius, the saint-scholar who always advocated all-round character development, specified six skills essential to students, which included horse riding and archery. The use of money and beating is, of course, a glaring violation of Confucious' ideology, which is first and foremost moralistic.

Yet Wang also criticizes without reservation what he views as the down side of Confucianism. In an article he recently published in a national journal for writing teachers in China, he attacks strongly the Confucian tradition that one should subject all his desires to "the will of the heaven", namely the power of the central government. He argues that this tradition creates an educational system in China which "gives priority to knowledge, skills and grades and almost forgets that students are what we are here for." He warns, "We are human beings dealing with human beings. That is at the core of our education. If we forget that basic fact, education has lost its soul." This is hardly revolutionary if it is said in America, but in China it was like a stone thrown into a serene pond and the splash was loud enough to make him a controversial figure.

Mr. Wang tries to build a new relationship with his students. He asked me to attend an after-class activity of his students. The students were putting on plays adapted from O'Henry's short stories, and the whole show was presided over by a student. Mr. Wang appeared on the platform only at the end, introducing briefly O'Henry's life and his impact on literature. The class was not orderly as I would expect in a normal Chinese class; it was noisy, and students came in and out and even chatted with one another, yet Mr. Wang did not seem to mind and never interfered. He told me, "In my class
I allow students to discuss with each other and even disagree with me. I want them to be involved and not just listen to me passively. This is an after class activity; I let them do what they want." He also tries to create a relaxed political atmosphere in his class, "Students can write literally about anything in my class till the final year, when they begin to prepare for the entrance exam," Mr. Wang said. "I told them, 'Put aside whatever new ideas you have for the time being. You can pick them up again after you get into college.'"

Good writing, for him, has to have emotions, "Writing does not have to be very political; it even does not have to have an explicit moral message, but it has to have some kind of feelings, for what one hates and loves expresses one's moral standard."

For Mr. Wang the future of Chinese education lies in "the critical inheritance of Confucianism by borrowing from the West", but Confucianism has to be the foundation as well as the core. Self-perfection is the goal of his teaching. "I believe writing should be used to understand, improve and perfect oneself," wrote Mr. Wang in a letter. "In final analysis, learning to write is not just learning some techniques of writing. It is to enable people live a meaningful life and be useful to the society." To achieve that goal, he believes that teachers should first of all set an example. His motto is "in peace with poverty, find pleasure in Tao." (an1 ping2 le4 tao4) Tao is translated as "the way of life" in America¹, yet it actually contains a lot more than that; it can be morality, justice, ideals and principles. Confucius' idea that " Inferior men strive for self-interest; great men strive for righteousness" has

provided the inner strength for Mr. Wang to bear many political and personal setbacks in his life.

Mr. Wang is proud to be part of a tradition created by men of not only high intellect, but admirable character. "Chinese intellectuals have fine moral traditions that are well exemplified in literature," he says. "Du Fu writes, after the roof of his dilapidated thatched house was ripped off by the storm, 'If only I had thousands of great mansions to house all the poor in the world, so that everyone will be happy!'" Tao Yuanming, another poet, declares in his poem, 'never bend [my] head for five dous (Chinese ancient unit for dry measure) of grain.' They all demonstrated to us that poverty is not as shameful as the loss of one's moral integrity." He wants his students to be part of that tradition which he believes crystallizes the essence of Chinese civilization, although he is aware that he is pointing them to a tortuous road that promises neither fame or fortune.

Mr. Wang ends the interview with the observation, "China is changing. Old values are being replaced by the new, very often the old coexists with the new. But one thing is certain: Chinese tradition will not die."

"There was Such an Old Lady" and "Me, Before and After the Exam" are recommended by Wang as typical of the kind of traditional writings that most Chinese teachers would appreciate, and they also reflect values that he would like to preserve. For the first piece, the assignment he gave was to write about a good person, a person who has a noble character and is worthy of our admiration and emulation. If the students felt that they did not know somebody of that high morality, they could write about an ordinary person, but a morally wicked person fell out of the realm. The purpose? Discover the good, the beautiful and the real in the
students' life through writing, Wang stressed.

THERE WAS AN OLD LADY

There is an image I carry in my mind. Although memory has locked it up for many years, the image remains sharp and clear.

When I was in elementary school, my family lived at the far end of a small lane, quiet and peaceful. Especially in summer, walking in the shade of French parasol trees, one felt restful. Across the road from where we lived was a wall of vermilion color, within which was a small Western-styled house. Often some tiny violet flowers overgrew the wall and spread into the open space in front of our house. I did not know who lived in that small house.

One day after school, I found that I had forgotten to bring my key with me. Having waited outside the home for a while, I was so bored that I put aside the school bag and tried to pick the flowers on the high wall. The wall was so high that I could not reach any flowers and, on falling, sprained my ankle and cried. Pretty soon a small door in that enclosing wall opened and out came an old lady. After so many years, I still remember clearly the first sight of her: medium stature, with a straight back, silver-white hair, and a face cut with deep wrinkles, between the layers of which seeped profound kindness. There was nothing extraordinary about her dress, either. But for some reason, at that time, even at that young age, I sensed something special about her. Now I know it was her disposition. But I did not know what to call it then. The old lady smiled at me affectionately and led me into her small house. Once inside, she applied a medicinal ointment on my ankle and invited me to visit her later on. Returning home, I told my parents that I had met a kindly old lady. Yes, kindness was exactly what I felt from her.

From then on, every time I played in front of the window, whether kicking shuttlecock or jumping rope, the small door would open with a creak and that old lady would kindly invite me to come in and play. What did I play in her house? Nothing -- I just told her things about school, about my teachers and my classmates. And she would listen to me quietly,
her face radiating ever brightly with smiles. Finally, one day, I could not help but ask her, "Where are the others in your family? Where are your children?"

She was speechless for a while, and then her eyes slowly looked up to the sky above the enclosing wall, saying, as if to herself, "I had a son, but later I lost him."

"What? Lost?" Stricken, I stared at her and said, "My mother always holds my hand tightly whenever we go downtown. You did not hold his hand, did you?" She looked away from me, eyes moist, and then she turned round with her thin back to me -- it was still very straight.

At home, I told my parents that the old lady had carelessly lost her son. My parents looked at each other, unable to stifle their laughter. Father told me that the old lady was a veteran revolutionary, thrown into the jail during the Canton Great Revolution. She had joined the Long March, and her son was probably lost during the Long March. My eyes widened: this loving and lonely lady once lived behind bars, and even climbed the snow mountains and crossed swamps? But why did she look no different from my grandma? A hero in a child's mind is like ... , well, a hero should look close to the sculptures in front of the Monument to the Revolutionary Martyrs. How could she be one of them?

After that when I met her, I became more respectful and reserved, but she acted as if nothing had happened and one day even consulted me about growing more trees in the lane. I then realized that she was responsible for the shade we enjoyed in summer.

Later, the old lady moved away. Before leaving she gave me some flower seeds. Later, a fat man with a big belly moved in, always bragging, "When I joined the revolution...." Later, my family also moved, leaving that wall and that house. Later still, that Western-styled house was demolished.

Ten years or so later, I occasionally went back to that small lane where we used to live. The French parasol tress were still towering and straight. The image of the old lady occurred before me: a modest, affectionate, kind, and ordinary person. She gives me strength and
inspiration; she teaches me to be sincere.

Wang began by saying that the writer of this piece always had a good grasp of the language, and the paper was excellent when it was first handed in. He changed a few places in terms of phrasing and suggested changing the topic from "There is such a person" to the one used now. Other than that, he did not make any substantial changes at all, because he felt the paper was good as it was. The following is his comment on the paper, "There was Such an Old Lady":

86. Through direct (what you saw and heard by yourself) and indirect (what your parents told you) description, you quite successfully portray an image of a revolutionary veteran with an admirable character. For the cause of revolution, she sacrificed her son; for the future generations, she planted trees with her own hands. She not only inspired you, but also educated me.

The ninth and tenth paragraphs are somehow rushed. For the rest please read my comments in the margins.

"Grades higher than 85 are good grades in most schools in China," Wang explained. "Rarely does the teacher deliver 90, and 95 is almost never given, because we do not want the student to think that they have reached perfection; we want them to feel that there is still some distance for them to close up."

In the margins, Wang made four major comments. He underlined the sentence in the fourth paragraph, "She was speechless for a while, and then her eyes slowly looked up to the sky above the enclosing wall...", and commented, "a good detail, accurately depicts the expression of the old lady at that moment." He praised the parts where the narrator says, "You did not hold his hand, did you?" and she reflects on the image of heroes as the monumental sculptures, for being "Very realistic". Mr Wang also liked the contrast created by
introducing the fat man into the scene at the end, "This contrast sets off more emphatically the nobility of the old lady." For the last paragraph, he commented, "The fine character of the old lady has already exerted a subtle influence on you."

Asked whether he ever held individual conferences with students, he replied that they were held "only when the paper is of such bad quality that I did not want to grade it or the paper has some political problems better handled in private." Once a student wrote about the the border war between China and Vietnam in 1984, which, as declared by the Chinese government, was "a self defense war to teach the Vietnamese aggressors a lesson". The student, however, expressed doubts in his writing, "Why do we fight the so-called a war of self-defense in another country? Is it just or unjust? I don't know. This is an odd [mo4 min2 qil miao4 de] war." Mr Wang called the student to his office and talked to him alone. First, he repeated to the student the official line, "The war is fought in the best interest of our country; every one who loves our country should stand support it." Then he offered advice of caution, "There are things we don't understand, and if we don't, we don't have to write about them. You are safe with me, for I will not report to anyone, but if what you have written leaks out, you will be accused of 'smearing the self-defense war' and you can be in serious trouble." Mr. Wang related to the student his own experience in the past: he was incarcerated for nine months in the cultural revolution for having made some off-the-cuff political comments. When he came out, his hair and teeth were both falling like an old man; he aged years in those nine months. After the talk, the student never wrote on any "dangerous" topics. Mr. Wang encourages his student to be critical of trendy thoughts and to expand their horizon
outside the classroom, but, to protect the students, he also teaches them to draw a clear line between what can be said in public and what should be kept only to oneself and best friends. He felt guilty for having to do that as an educator; the only justification he offered was "it is better to have a double life than not to have a life at all". For a man whose whole purpose of life is striving for integrity, that is a painful concession.

"Me, Before and After the Exam" is from an anthology of award-winning student writings edited by Mr. Wang. The piece was written during a composition contest in which the student could choose to write one of three given topics. Such contests are held frequently in China to simulate the condition of the college entrance exam, and the prize-winning papers are anthologized afterwards to provide models for other students. The other value of composition contests, as Mr. Wang sees it, is to train fast thinking under pressure, because on such occasions the time is usually limited to two hours, and the topic given on the spot. (What Mr. Wang did not mention is that this form of exam, writing on a given topic in a restricted time period in a competitive situation, started from 196 B.C., and was then called "Imperial Exams for Civil Services").

Me, Before and After the Exam

The bell rang for class.

Miss Lee walked into the classroom. When her eyes, obviously searching for someone in the classroom, landed on me, she smiled understandingly. My heart sank, weighing me down so much that I was afraid to look her straight in the eye. How could I misunderstand? There was going to be a preliminary composition test tomorrow, and students coming out of that test would be qualified for the formal composition
contest. She hoped that I would represent the class in the preliminary. I felt as if she were saying, "Come on! Win it for our class!" However, my heart was troubled. If only she knew there was another test tomorrow, too.

At dusk, I was strolling along the main street. The setting sun was so beautiful, red as fire, as blood, like a dazzling beauty ready to depart, and whose beauty people were allowed to admire up to the last moment. I walked back and forth along the boulevard, recalling what happened in the class that morning. Tomorrow -- there was only one tomorrow; me -- there was also only one me. Should I attend the composition preliminary or the ornithology test? I could not answer my own question, and nor could I convince myself either way.

As I strolled on, words of a classmate a few days ago came back, "You, silly you! What's the problem? Of course you'll go to the composition preliminary! Don't you realize that you can get extra credit if you do well in that preliminary? What does a bird contest matter? Besides, Miss Lee will be disappointed if you don't go."

"But I ..."

I did not know what to say. My classmate was busy, and he ran off, leaving me alone and still undecided. Standing there for a long time, I wanted to cry.

I paced along the endless boulevard. "He is right. If I do not go to the preliminary, Miss Lee will be really disappointed." In order to prepare me for the preliminary, she had tutored me individually, brushing up my skills in writing during her break after the lunch, and borrowing supplementary materials on composition for me. At noon the day before, Miss Lee had called me to her office again. I watched her going through the supplementary materials carefully, her lunch and several bottles of pills pushed aside. Recalling the scene, my heart winced. Disappointing Miss Lee was the last thing I wanted to do.

Maybe my mother was right. As I sauntered along the road, I remembered the long talk between mother and me the night before. Mother didn't agree or disagree with me. She stroked me with a loving hand and

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said, "A person who can conquer many opponents on a battle field is a hero. Yet in everyday life, a hero is someone who can conquer himself," quoting the famous saying by the Indian leader Nehru. Mother left me deep in thought....

Looking up, I watched the clouds gradually disappearing beyond the edge of the sky. Yet the setting sun was still so charming, red as blood, as fire, more beautiful in her final glow. A flock of wild ducks flew in front of her, and a minute later, a flock of doves, flapping their joyful wings, flew towards her. What a beautiful sunset! Yes, that beauty belonged to Mother Nature, belonged to all mankind. Let's take care of birds, because they embody the beauty of Nature. Loving birds, taking care of birds was what my heart desired. I said to myself, "Love the birds and do something for the birds. This is what you can give to Nature." I looked up at the setting sun again: happy ducks were charging towards the sun and flying away. I must conquer myself for those happy birds, for the magnificent beauty of the nature before me!

......

After I had taken the ornithology test, I returned there. Watching the scene of the setting sun, the ducks were still charging towards the glowing sun and then flying away. No! They were flying faster and more forcefully; they were flying with more beauty and strength! I felt they were singing to me, and my heart opened up to them.

I ran toward the sun, the ducks. I believed I would see my teacher's understanding smile; I believed I would be greeted with the outstretched hands of my classmates; I believed I would hear mother's loving words. Yes, all these would happen! I may have lost something, but what I had gained was more! The beauty of Nature, the joyful songs of the ducks belonged to me forever!

The person I became was not the same person I was before the tests: free from hesitation, free from conflicts, my heart sings with joy! Toward the setting sun, I fly with the wild ducks.

This piece won a first prize in the contest, and the comments in the anthology are as follows:
This composition is exquisitely designed. The story flashes back as the narrator walks along a street and through the description of her psychological development. The whole piece is, as a result, focused yet natural, warm and touching. Episodes of "classmate's advice", "teacher's tutor" and "talk with mother" are woven together naturally.

The most outstanding merit of the piece is its repeated brilliant descriptions of the setting sun, which sets the atmosphere of the time, the narrator's character and spirit, and also leads the movement of the narration. Please read:

The first time when the beautiful sunset is described, it serves as a contrast to the hesitant moods of the narrator, unable to decide which test she should take.

In the second description of the beautiful setting sun, the narrator concentrates on the wild ducks flying high in the clouds and the happy flapping doves to express the narrator's love for the nature, which foreshadows her resolution to conquer self and go to the ornithology text.

At the end, when she comes back to the setting sun for the third time, the narrator is at one with the wild ducks flying towards the sun, her heart singing with joy. As such, she powerfully expresses the theme of the piece: natural beauty cleanses human souls, and mankind should love Mother nature. The ending triggers off the reader's imagination.

The three repeated descriptions of the beauty of the setting sun are imbued with strong feeling and sensitivities, which also enable the piece to flow naturally, as if written in one breath, reflecting the real life.

Mr. Wang personally felt the piece a bit over dramatized the conflict between going to an exam and an ornithology test, but still likes the piece, because the writer is dealing with a very real issue for Chinese students, which is how to balance the exam with one's other social responsibilities. In the piece the narrator triumphed over self and made the right decision. He also agreed with the technical merits praised in the comments.
III.4. ZHANG, A LANDLORD'S SON WITH AMBITION

County L, only twenty miles from Nanjing, is under the administration of the same provincial government, yet the two places seemed to belong to two worlds. As the bus left Nanjing for County X, I was struck by the feeling that I had not only left behind human and metallic noises, endless bicycle streams and sundry stores, high-rises and narrow alleys, but was heading to another China, where time flows slowly, if not stagnates. Looking out of the bus window, I saw a peasant woman scrubbing clothes against a slabstone by the river, and an ox was half bathed in the same water. Every inch of fields, miles and miles extending to the horizon, is carefully cultivated and grown with crops. I was almost certain the same scene was there a thousand years ago.

Mr. Zhang's school was built fifty years ago with the donation of some local gentry and land owners. Although the gentry classes are like historical relics today in China's new political system and money now comes from entirely different sources, people's attitude towards the school seems to have changed little. The campus, cut across with a winding river said to be filled with lotus flowers in early summer, has a reception room furnished with chandeliers and shiny brass-edged tables and chairs. It also boasts a spectacular five-storied lab building, an architecture that combines Chinese up-turned eaves and color-glazed tiles with a steel and concrete body. The building was completed in 1987 with about 60% of the funding from the government and the rest from the school-run factory. The school is, as it has always been, both the pride and hope of the county parents who see education as the only way through which their children can leave the land, where hard work earns a living
barely above poverty. Education, "reading books" as the local people call it, has been revered and aspired since the time Mencius preached, "Those who labour with their brains govern; those who labour with their muscles are governed." The school has not let the local people down: for the last ten years, it has sent 70% of its graduates to colleges and universities each year, a record that puts the school on the top of the best high schools in the province.

Mr. Zhang lives in a small court yard on campus. It is a typical Chinese peasant's house: a two-bed room, mud-floored bungalow with a big brick stove in the kitchen that burns rice stalks and dried grass. There is a small living room in the front, decorated with some scrolls of classic poetry and Chinese brush paintings, a table and two wooden benches. The back door of the house opens to the "lotus pond", the name for the river that runs cross the school. Zhang's wife is a school nurse in a nearby school and his daughter an honor student in the same school where Zhang teaches. Zhang's life on the surface looks as unperturbed as the serene "lotus pond" on a sunny day. Zhang steered clear of any politics, never even alluding, in any of the private talks we had, to what happened two years ago in China's political arena or the corruption running rampant, a complaint I heard in trains and buses and almost everywhere I went. Yet it is hard to stay away from politics in China. Later I found out that his very taciturnity towards politics results from a life much shaped and twisted by politics.

At the age of 51, Mr. Zhang is, besides a recent college graduate, the youngest of a group of all male teachers of Chinese at the county high school (which is not at all atypical in China. In Mr. Wang's office, only one senior teacher out of the ten is female). The other eight teachers age from 52-60. One of the reasons why Zhang is relatively
young is because he never went to college. He is the youngest son of a rich peasant, so he was labeled a descendent of "class enemies" from the time he was born, and that decided his future as having little to do with higher education. Yet this young man did not give in to his fate. He worked harder than his classmates, with the belief that top grades would make up for his "faulty" family background. Although he still did not pass the strict screening for college, finally one of his high school teachers, who is now the principal of the school, recognized his superb academic performance and made the unusual decision of hiring him, a high school graduate and a landlord's son, to teach Chinese in the county high school. Now he is teaching at the same school he graduated from, and he is working with the same zest and determination that took him there. His knowledge of Chinese classic works and his devotion to teaching put him on a solid stand among his colleagues. Thin and short, he is a powerhouse in its true sense. At a phone call, he took the first morning bus to Nanjing to meet me and noon bus back to teach in the afternoon. His reading of student papers is the most careful and detailed, and he wrote pages of comments for each paper I sent him.

Although Zhang was almost ostracised by the system, he seems more determined to succeed within the system. In his class, he asks all students to bind their writings into booklets at the end of the semester and choose their own titles for the booklets. I looked through a few of them and was impressed by both their beautifully designed covers and the unique titles. One student names his collection "Morning Dew" and, in black ink, draws in a wood-cut style four upright tree branches with two little buds growing on them and a sun rising half way behind the trees. Another author, who has a fancy for bright colors, uses orange and pink for
the background of the cover, on which are the three Chinese characters for "Notes of Searching", and above the characters is a bee, one wing orange and the other pink, surrounded by flowers of assorted colors. The first page of both booklets is the table of contents, written in neat handwriting. Every page of the writing is marked in red ink, its margins filled with comments—they were by Mr. Zhang, in equally neat and careful handwriting. There is no plastic spiral or velo binding; all booklets are threaded or pasted together, all bound by hand by their own authors. Evidently the students are very proud of their work and will cherish the booklets as part of their personal archives.

Zhang is very critical, as most Chinese teachers are, of the present college entrance exam system and mocked it as the "modern imperial examination". He knows too well that such exams hurt his students in the long run, because "they do not write how they really think and feel; they only write what is good for the exam". Yet Mr. Zhang works long hours in the school coaching his students to pass that exam. Schizophrenic as it appears, he feels that he has no other choices:

I love my students. They are country kids and they work very hard. Their lives are much harder than the city kids, so they want to change their life through education. To change their lives they have to pass the entrance exam to colleges, and writing is part of the exam. In the last few years, the writing exam counts for 50 points of the total score (100 points). I told my students, 'If you can score 30 points in writing, you will have a good chance.' If most of my students score less than 30 points, it is my responsibility—I have let them down. Personally I do not like the present exam system, yet I have no other choices.

Education has given him a better life than he was destined to have, and now he is helping his students fight
for a better life. The stakes are so high that Mr Zhang would not do anything to sabotage the chances of his students until the overall environment changes. To help them means to gear his teaching to the entrance exam and to teach the students quick recipes for getting good grades. He provides them with formulas for writing essays, and coaches them to write on safe topics.

He stresses that the content of writing should be healthy and politically correct. When asked the meaning of "healthy and politically correct", Zhang recalled two nation-wide discussions, one in the sixties, the other in the seventies. The first discussion centered around a student composition entitled "Jasmine Flower". The student described with tender and loving sentiments the quiet elegance and dignity of the flower, and her teacher gave her an excellent grade. But, when the piece was carried in national newspapers for public discussion, it was criticized as expressing "unhealthy bourgeois sentiments" and, therefore, the teacher was denounced as having failed to measure student writings with a correct political standard. In the seventies, another student wrote about a beggar he saw around a corner near the movie theatre he was going to, which was incidentally called "All Bright". The student writer contrasted the "bright" life portrayed on the screen and the dark and sad corner in the real world and concluded that "all is not bright". The conclusion of that discussion was that both teachers and students should learn to look at the society with an objective eye instead of distorting reality with isolated incidents. This paper was distorting reality, because it concentrated solely on one beggar, ignoring the fact that in the new China, the majority of its people are well fed and sheltered, thanks to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and our superior socialist system.
Mr. Zhang believes that having a healthy and correct theme is compatible with Chinese literary tradition. In the preface to The Literary Mind: Elaborations, the most comprehensive classic of literary criticism in the Song Dynasty (420-589AD), Liu Xie says in effect that, "The value of writing lies in the fact that it branches from traditional classics and is an indispensable assistance to government and education." In Tang Dynasty (618-907), Han Yu, the leader of literati, further expounded the purpose of writing as disseminating tradition and being the vehicle of "Tao".

Writing, to a large degree, plays the same role today in China. Mr. Zhang cites Guideline for High School Chinese Education, which says, "Chinese is the basic tool of learning and working." He interprets that as "writing is a tool used for expression, for communication." Yet he emphasizes that it is different from Western view of "self expression":

We think that writings should have "personality", should come from self and express the author's unique understanding and genuine feelings, yet the self in the West is in our view a small "self", and what we are talking about is a big "self". That is, through the writer's personal observation, discovery and understanding to produce works that will contribute to the life and future of the nation and its people, to the health and progress of the society. ... "Self expression" is too easily confused with bourgeois ideas like "self-inflation" and "self-centeredness", has the danger of turning writing into a means for narrow and selfish interests. "Self-expression", if used as a goal of writing, weakens the social function of writing and has the danger of encouraging the student to indulge in decadent and unhealthy sentiments. We want students to produce writing that can inspire others, and at the same time, enable themselves to think more positively of life, to love life and have more confidence in life.

In his own reading, Mr. Zhang undoubtedly favors the the Chinese classics over the modern and the Western. He feels
most at home with Chinese classic poetry, and among his favorites are poets from Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD): Li Bai, Du Fu and Bai Juyi. He regards Li Bai as a Romantic poet and the other two as belonging to the school of realism. Of contemporary writers, Mr. Zhang is very fond of Ye Shen-tao's works, a writer who started from an elementary school teacher. He feels that he can identify himself with the characters in Ye's novels, most of whom are poor intellectuals struggling near the bottom of the society. He has read some Western literature when he was young, but has not read much contemporary works, nor is he very much interested in it, for he found the few he read both boring and hard to comprehend.

"River in My Hometown" is selected by Mr. Zhang as representing the high quality papers of his students. The topic was picked by the writer and finished in two classes, namely an hour and a half.

The River in My Hometown

Life in childhood is like scattered pearls, bright and shiny, and the river in my hometown is a thread that strings together those pearls of joy and misery, so that I can cherish them forever.

Ever since I can remember, I could see the river flowing in front of me. The river came quietly from the horizon, turning and twisting, making a detour around our small village, and then flowed quietly into the distance. We, as country boys, did not have a playground as city kids did, so the river was our paradise. When winter was gone and spring came, the ice and snow melting, the earth waking up and seeds sprouting \(^2\), the willow trees on the river bank showed green, and their branches danced with the spring breeze. The river, which had been lonely all

\(^2\) The original sentence consists of four short phrases, each of four characters. The effect is very rhythmic.
winter, chuckled like silver bells. This was the time when the kids who had huddled in their homes all winter became spirited. Sneaking out of our low-thatched houses, we came to the river bank and climbing up the trees like monkeys, and broke off branches and wove them into crowns. We played the game, catch the bad guy, with those crowns on our heads. When exhausted, we lay on the river bank, looking at the white clouds and the blue sky, while listening to the gurgling river singing. We were even happier when summer came. Not a thread of clothing hanging on our bodies, we jumped into the river one after another with loud splashes. We competed diving or, divided into two groups, fought in the water until our parents came and yelled, "Time to fill the stomach." Dragging and cursing, they forced us back home. In fall, the river became shallow and pure and one can easily see luxuriant waterweeds and big fish and shrimp underneath. We came in flocks to catch fish in the waterweeds. With good luck, sometimes everyone caught a string of fish to show off to their family. The long faces of the parents would then relax for a while.

However, the river in my hometown did not just flow with the kids' innocence and joy, it flowed with the misery and sorrow of our ancestors. My grandparents worked day and night to fill the stomachs of the whole family. The heavy burden of life bent their backs; the knife of wind and the sword of frost carved deep wrinkles into their faces. One midwinter, in the midst of wind and snow, Grandma struggled to the river bank with a basket of yams. Half a day passed, and whole family was waiting with rumbling stomachs for Grandma and the washed yams for dinner, but we never saw her again. When Grandpa found Grandma at the river, her body was frozen stiff – she was long dead. Whether Grandma drowned or fainted from hunger and then froze to death remained a mystery in my young mind. From then on, the river lost its attraction for me. Only Dad would sit on the river bank, mumbling. Was he trying to call back Grandma's soul or complaining about the ruthless and cruelty of fate?

3. Words or phrases in italics are originally four character phrases, which are either proverbs or common sayings.
4. The original four-character phrase literally means "(with) one stumble, one slip."
Oh, the river of my hometown left me a grievous 5 elegy.

"Day and night, passing by like the river." 6 Finally, out flowed the blood and tears, and in flowed today's river, full of rosy clouds and happiness. Grandpa did not live long enough to witness that day, and he would never have dreamed that his grandson would now sit behind clean windows and bright furniture in the classroom of the County High School, turning the expectations of his ancestors into the dreams of tomorrow.

The following is Mr. Zhang's comments:

(grade 90) This is a lyrical prose, with the beauty of poetry. The story takes unexpected twists and moves fast in time and space, yet, with the river in your hometown as a thread, you managed to link the materials together, which demonstrates your ability to control materials. In terms of expression, you organically combine emotional expressions with the narration, creating a piece that not only has a strong flavor of rural life, but is permeated with your love for your hometown and people. It draws from both the colloquial and the classic poetry and proverbs, and the language is simple and natural, demonstrating good "literary grace".

It is a narration written with strong emotions. The last paragraph, though, is not as specific as the foregoing ones, therefore the final effusion of emotion is not well founded.

Mr. Zhang explained that he often responds to the student papers in three ways: one, written comments; two, oral comments in the student's presence; three, an individual talk with the student, in which the student is directed to revise the paper by him/herself. The first method is more often used than the other two. The student-author of "River in my Hometown" wanted to send the paper to the school student publication after the paper was finished and graded, so he

5. The original phrase literally means "like grieving, like crying."
6. Quoted from a well-known poem.
approached Mr Zhang for advice on revision and Mr.Zhang talked with him individually. The final draft shows a number of major changes compared with the first. The beginning of the third paragraph was crossed out, "My hometown is a tiny village in the country. The diligent country folks there were simple and honest, but also very ignorant; they believed in the power of heaven and ghosts." Also crossed out was the second sentence in the fourth paragraph, "For years and for generations, people on both sides of the river lived in low and yellow mud cottages. Here the earth was yellow, the cottages were yellow, so were people's complexion and even their teeth." The whole concluding paragraph was rewritten, which originally was, "I love the small river in my hometown. On its sand river bed, on the branches of the willow trees along the riverside, in the cattail clumps and the clear water are my childhood dreams and joy, as well as the sweat and blood of my ancestors." The whole episodes of Grandma's death and Dad's lonely mumbling at the bank were added. The paper has undergone a surgical operation, to say the least.

The revision is based on the understanding of the theme of the paper, which, according to Mr. Zhang, is the contrast between the past and the present, and the lives between the generations, to underline the great changes in people's lives brought by socialism. The parts about "yellow faces" and their superstitious beliefs are, therefore, not relevant to the theme, and the change of the conclusion has the effect of highlighting how the memory of the past influences the author's life now, which echoes back to the beginning statement "I can cherish them forever". The added episodes, he explains, dramatize the theme further. The paper was later accepted and published by the student literary publication of the school.
CHAPTER IV

FOUR TEACHERS AND SIX PIECES (PART TWO)

In Part Two the focus shifts from the teachers as individuals to their comments on the six pieces. The six pieces, three recommended by the American teachers and three by the Chinese teachers, were presented to all four teachers for their comments. They either wrote detailed comments in the margins and at the end, or talked about them as if they were drafts—all presumably did what they would usually do with their own students' papers. Their comments written directly on the student papers are kept intact and reported in italic, but their additional conversations and letters are edited.

All the teachers, except for Jane, graded the papers. Chinese teachers used a percentage system (grades under 60 are failing grades), and American teachers used the letter system of A to F (grades under C are below the average). Grades should give some sense of a teacher's criteria, yet they should be used with caution for comparative purposes, not only because the grading systems are different between the two countries, but the value of grades varies drastically from one teacher to another even within the same country. Nevertheless, the fact that "There is an Old Lady" receives a perfect 100 from Mr. Zhang and a B from Jack shows clearly their different assessment of the same paper. Grades also have good referential values if we look at the fluctuation of grades one teacher assigns to different papers, for teachers
are usually quite consistent in their own grading. The fact that Mr. Wang assigns a grade of 82 to "Beat Them 'til They are Black and Blue," yet 83 to "Untitled II (summer house)," whereas Jack grades the first piece A and the second a questionable B+, illustrates graphically their diverse evaluation of the two pieces.

After presenting the teachers' comments on a certain piece, I will comment briefly on their comments, reflecting on what I have read and heard. That in turn is followed by a discussion with the teachers of the issues I find interesting or puzzling in their comments. I put the issues either to the teacher who selected the piece or to the teacher(s) who might have a different perspective on them. Although I try to hold a separate discussion for each issue, the issues are so closely related that often the discussion of one subject extends or shifts to another. As we discussed the question of contrivance, for example, the question of form and style became critical, and when I tried to inquire into some teachers' views on effective endings, their perceptions on what is "truth" emerged. Setting up topics is more out of the need for a "neat" organization than an accurate representation of reality, for it has the obvious problem of sidestepping the connections between the issues.

Although the four teachers never met, they were brought together by responding to the same pieces of student writing and exchanging perspective on the same issues related to their comments. It is a dialogue among the four key teachers despite the distance that separates them. So this part, instead of moving from one country to the other, is organized around the pieces and issues they discussed. Under the title of each piece are three sections: the first about the three teachers' comments on one particular piece (comments by the
teacher who selected the piece have been reported in part I); second, the researcher's observation on the teachers' comments; and finally, an exchange of views among the four teachers, as each responds to questions related to their comments asked by the researcher.
IV.1. "Beat Them 'til They're Black and Blue" (Grandpa)

Jack: (Grade: A) Comments see page 50.

Jane: There are lines in this paper that go far beyond others' attempt to come up with a philosophy. It seems deeper. "It was like he had willfully erased that part of his life," is really a strong line. "Some deeper awareness told me to be content with his stories,..." and it comes back to mother at the end, "She was a stranger in the house she grew up in." The writer goes beyond the scent of the pipe to prove her perception of her grandfather through mother's life. Strong use of language. (Li: So you like the piece for its keen perception and strong language?) Yes. Is that rhyme original? "If they do, take your shoe, and beat them 'til they're black and blue." It must be added by her grandfather.

Mr. Wang: (Grade: 82) Written comments: "Your grandfather is really a bit strange, but he is still a lovable person. You aptly describes his temperaments and personality. The scene in which your grandfather sat at your bedside, smoking a pipe and telling stories, is written with such affection that I felt I was there too. The fifth and sixth paragraphs are too simple; they should be further developed, because they tell about an important part of grandpa's character."

In the margins, he comments on the first paragraph, "The description of his physical appearance is very vivid," and on the fourth paragraph, where the narrator waited in bed for grandpa's footsteps, "the psychology is realistic."
In his talk, he elaborated further his criticism: The fifth and sixth paragraphs describe grandfather's past, and before those, the writer has mentioned that he had mellowed with age. But how did his disposition change from being severe to loving? Little is said in the paper. That process of his change can be described in the fifth and sixth paragraphs, but the writer does not go into it. There seems to be some barrier between the grandfather and mother, but it is not explained, and we don't know what really happened. The writer only says that she "filled the empty spaces with make-believe stories," but that is not enough. So there is a blank; the story is not complete.

Mr. Zhang: (Grade 75) Written comments: "The depiction of his physical appearance, simple account of his past, carefully selected details and his contrastive attitudes towards his own daughter and granddaughter, all these portray an eccentric old farmer. His image is vivid and fascinating. But what is the significance of presenting such a character and his story? Writing is for educating and molding people's minds. It should, first and foremost, have meaning."

Mr Zhang further stresses the last point in his letters: I don't know what the young writer is trying to say to the reader, what exactly the theme of the paper is: Although the piece brims with feelings and expresses well the love for Grandpa, what kind of positive effect does the piece as a whole have on the reader? I don't see any.

At first glance, it must appear ridiculous to use the strict Chinese moral standards laid down by our ancestors to measure the writing of those care-free American kids. Yet I believe 'writing is the vehicle of Tao' is a universal principle. Isn't it true that the three hundred and eight
free verses that make up Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* acclaim the working people and their optimism and strike at the hypocrisy of bourgeois democracy? Isn't it true that Mark Twain takes shot at slavery in *Huckleberry Finn*? And Hemingway's works like *Old Man and Sea*, imbued with admiration for the working people, express his pursuit of man's high ideals?

**Li's comments:** Both Jack and Jane applauded "Grandpa" as a piece far superior to the rest, yet this assessment is not shared by Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang, who graded the paper 82 and 75 respectively. Their estimation of the paper, it seems, resulted from their different reading of what the writer was trying to accomplish with the piece. Both Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang read "Grandpa" as a character profile of an eccentric farmer. Although they both were very impressed by the student's writing skills, they found the piece fell short of its goal. Mr. Wang considered the piece incomplete for failing to explain the relationship between Grandfather and the mother and the temperamental change in Grandpa, and Mr. Zhang questioned the significance of presenting such a strange character. Jane, on the other hand, was much impressed by the piece's philosophical depth and linguistic sophistication. I relayed the Chinese teachers' responses to Jack.

**What is the Point?**

**Li:** (Talking to Jack) The Chinese teachers raised a number of questions about the piece: what was really happening between the grandfather and mother? What changed the old man from being severe to gentle? Why does the author mention the problematic relationship between grandpa and
mother yet not go into it? What do you say to them?

Jack: Responding to the piece would be difficult for the people who were not raised in contemporary America, even older Americans, like people of our grandparents' generation, will have a hard time with it, because it does not come to a clear resolution. In fact it is very ambiguous as to what factor in the man's life made him feel differently about the granddaughter than the daughter.

From the contemporary American point of view, Americans would see the situation as too complicated and too individualistic for us to make a judgement, and it would be just, "These things happen to people, and we can't figure them out," and he might not even know himself what factor has caused that. This is the understanding people have today of all the influences on our lives. In a way, that's the point of the paper. The point is that the dramatic difference between his reaction to his daughter and his granddaughter shows something to us mysterious about transformation of people's lives, and it is beyond our full grasping. Although Americans are as fond as any other people in the world about looking into psychology and we are so up to our eyeballs with psychology on our television talk shows, Oprah, Donahue, all trying to explain human behavior, a lot of more sophisticated Americans like to believe that we are being vain and arrogant to think we can decipher human motivation. So this paper really deals with that. When we get to the end, she said, "Unknown to me then," she stresses that these were unknowns, that "each night mother would come to kiss me good night. She and her father would pass each other in the hall, never touching, never loving." That passage helps us to understand that the author deliberately leaves us nebulous, amorphous,
because she did not know. Just like two ships passing each other in the night, father and daughter passed each other in the night, and communication remains distant and cold. And she, the granddaughter who wrote this, does not recognize nor understand the problems either. So it is a recognition of gulfs that separate people. It is simply a statement of the sadness of it. She does not say it is sad, only this is the way it happens in life. If she had said that, it would probably be more pleasing either to an older audience or to an audience outside the United States.

To sophisticated American readers we very often prefer that we readers draw that conclusion, and it had got to be well enough written so the readers will ask the right questions. If people, if Chinese teachers reading this, ask why this transformation took place, why the author does not direct us to the cause, they are asking all the right questions, but they are frustrated by the lack of answers. Many times we would feel the same.

Li: What is the value of a piece like this, which describes an old farmer who, as you said, may have physically abused his daughter?

Jack: This is the tradition in America for previous generations, and it is the tradition in many other cultures, that if a piece is worth writing, it is worth having a point. I agree with that. I think a piece should have a transcendent theme. We don't want just an amusing story, but a story that has implications for people at large. Then what is the point of this story? Well, the point is life is unexplainable and inexplicable in certain ways. I think in many ways Americans are inclined now to accept more of the moral gray areas, partly because America in the last twenty-five years has lost a sense of absolute values, and in many
ways that is a tragedy of the United States. In order to be the open, flexible society in which we can live in peace with one another, we have to be open to all cultures and religions, we very often have to bury our absolutes.

The reason why America functions and survives, hasn't dissolved, is largely because there is tolerance of differences. But in order to tolerate differences, we have to accept that there aren't absolute universal truths. That's difficult for me as a Christian. I have to accept certain universal truths, what is right and what it wrong, but sometimes I have to accept that they are not culturally and socially acceptable by everybody else, and I have to live with that. This paper deals with that attitude.

Li: (Asking Jane) Do you think the paper has a meaningful theme?

Jane: It is not my place to tell the student what to write, what not to. Once a student in my class wrote about drug abuse. It is my place to help him and ask, "What are you trying to say about this drug experience?" (Li: You are a teacher. What's wrong for you to tell the student, "You should not use drugs"?) The student has the right to. It is my place to let the students express themselves as effectively as they can, regardless of my opinion of the topic. We are not supposed to give values. I am much more directive asking student to think carefully about the values in literature, about how they would respond to those values. But with writing, we are not trying to produce a group of people who all write the same way and have the same values. When the student engaged me in the conference about drugs, I finally said, "Don't you think for a second that I condone your use of drugs." He was shocked, because I had been so
non-committal about it. But I think we should allow them choices, and allow them to think independently. We can't say that we want them to learn to think, when what we really want them to do is to think just like us. This, in a way, is our moral dilemma.
IV. 2. Untitled 1 (To a Friend)

Jane: (Grade: A-) Comments see page 59.

Jack: (Grade B+) Oh, boy, I was very pleased with this paper. It is agonizing to go through, of course. The structure is great. It starts off with this powerful opening that, "The world is still going to revolve, the calendar pages are still going to turn, and life will still go on as usual for most everybody. That's why it makes me so mad that you committed suicide." Here we have the honesty of the written voice. The spoken voice wouldn't have been so nicely crafted and polished, but it still sounds like the kid. She uses the word "mad," and some people would object to that. If you craft it, you should use angry, which is the right word, but there is a direct addressee, "make me mad at you." So I say, yah, I would probably have said "mad" instead of "angry." It preserves some of the authenticity of the way this person would speak to his or her friend.

It does very nicely on giving the background of their relationship. It does not give me incredibly personal glimpses, the quotes, or a particularly day they went out together, but I don't think that is necessary. I get a picture of her friend, and the pain she feels for losing her. The only disappointment with this paper was when I got to the second page and saw it was pretty short. The final paragraph summarizes, "I just want you to know that until we meet again, I love you, friend." That's a good point to end on because the person feels better, the person has come to some resolution. That paragraph would work fine in a closing
paragraph, if it were not so abrupt. There is no transition here. Because it labors a lot on the pain of this experience, yet it doesn't trace any of the process she went through to finally get to that point of ending with a little bit of forgiveness. But still it is nicely written except for that. I will still put it in B+, because I think many readers who read it would feel there is some part of this relationship underdeveloped.

Mr. Wang: (Grade: 90) Written comments: "The entire piece emotes in the form of a direct conversation. It is written with tears and anguish. Your genuine love for your friend moves me deeply.

"With one after another rhetorical questions, you express to the fullest your grief for losing your best friend. There is no single word of flowery language or a false statement. This is natural beauty, genuine beauty! This is excellent! Would you like to be my friend?

"I wish you greater success with the next piece. I believe you will succeed, because you have a genuine heart."

Mr. Wang had added the title, "Listen to Me, My Friend..." to the piece before its Chinese version was sent to Mr. Zhang. He fills the margins of the paper with similar hearty praises. For example, on the opening sentence, he comments, "Expresses you sincere feelings right from the beginning," on the second paragraph of recalling past friendship, "What affectionate memories!" and on the conclusion, "Brace up amid sorrow and pain, good!"

Mr. Zhang: (Grade: 85) Written comments: "You write straight from the heart, expressing thoroughly your anguish, loss, remorse, confusion, and all the painful feelings. The 'anger' at your friend, which permeates the whole piece, for her act of suicide has the paradoxical effect of showing
your intense love for her. Such an unusual way of expression shows powerfully the pain in your heart of hearts. But the piece could be more specific in content, especially the basis of your friendship needs to be explained more. Only then will the feelings expressed be more fully accepted by the reader."

Li's comments: It is interesting that all three teachers were deeply touched by the emotional power of the piece. Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang liked the piece even better than "Grandpa" for its intense emotion, both giving it a higher grade (Mr. Wang graded it 90, compared with his grade of 82 for "Grandpa", and a 85 from Mr. Zhang compared with his 75 for the last piece). Mr. Wang was most profuse in praise, and Mr. Zhang and Jack were equally impressed, although they would like the piece further developed in certain parts. Ironically that is not what this piece is supposed to accomplish. Jane warned, when first introducing the piece, that its purpose was, "not to emote, but to persuade," presumably to dissuade potential victims of suicide by showing them the pain their act could cause to their friends. "To emote" is not an acceptable function of writing in America, but "to persuade" is.

I am immediately struck by two questions: first, Why did the Chinese teachers, Mr. Wang in particular, give such high grades to a piece brimming with emotions, yet not as well written as "Grandpa" from a stylistic point of view? What is the value of writing whose major purpose is to emote? Second, If the Chinese teachers like a piece that releases agonizing feelings so much, why is it that few student papers they selected deal with private feelings—"Me, Before and After the Exam" is as private as I could get, and, although
it deals with the author's internal struggles, its topic is about what happened in the writer's public life, i.e., taking exams. All the papers from China, more than twenty of them, are so formal in that they only write about emotions that the writer would not hold back in public and topics that one can discuss with any stranger. Why are Chinese students' personal narrative so impersonal?

_Qing_ is a term that keeps coming up in the Chinese teachers' talks. It does not have an exact equivalent in English; _qing_ can mean feelings, sentiments, passion, love or sexuality, and is also used to refer to the emotional appeal of a piece of writing. But it does not have the negative connotation that "sentiments" often carries in the English language, neither the overtone of manipulation that "emotional appeal" often implies. It is the opposite of intellect, rationality, reason, and is close to the Western concept of heart, intuition and other emotional faculties of a healthy human being. The following discussion is about the issue of writing about emotion.

"Qing" and "Sentimental"

Li: (Asking Mr. Wang) You seem really moved by the piece "To a Friend" and give it a higher grade than "Grandpa". What is the value of a piece just giving vent to her personal grief?

Mr. Wang: This is in Chinese literary tradition from the very start. The first poem ever recorded in Chinese literature is a poem of _qing_:

1. Translation by John A. Turner, _A Golden Treasury of Chinese Poetry_. Scholars suppose that this first poem (anonymous) was written for the marriage of the Elegant King and T'ai-Szu in the twelfth century B. C. (McNaughton, 56)
Sea-hawks are calling
By the river board.
...
A modest sweet maid
He seeks dark and light.
Seeking her in vain
Dark and light he yearns.

The main purpose of writing in ancient times was to give vent to one's emotions, to express in writing things you can't say in life. That was how literature started. Tang shi and Song ci² were not written for publication as people nowadays do. They were written for the poets themselves or their friends, expressing and sharing their private feelings, unless there were important political incidents, like the "An Shi Mutiny"³, that so disrupted their lives that they would write on social topics. It was not until Ming and Qing⁴, the last two dynasties, that novels began to gain popularity in China.

Qing has great persuasive powers. Li (reason) is inseparable from qing: qing is couched in li, and li is couched in qing. Li (reason) is different from lizhi (rationalism). Being rational, one is emotionally controlled, somber, composed, exercising only your intellectual and reasoning faculties. Reason, however, deals with truths. Truths, though existing in objectivity, are approached and understood only through subjectivity.

2. Both 'shi' and 'ci' mean 'poetry' in translation, yet they are different. The latter was written to certain singing tunes, which require strict tonal patterns and rhyme schemes. "Ci" originated in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and fully developed in the Song Dynasty (960-1279). It is generally believed that Chinese poetry reached its peak in Tang and Song and never surpassed thereafter.
4. Ming Dynasty spans from 1368 to 1644, and Qing Dynasty from 1644 to 1911.
should be learned with passion and conviction. This is stressed as early as Confucius' time, who says that good writing should be qing wen bing mao (excellent in both 'qing' and content). So according to the Chinese traditional point of view, you cannot produce powerful writing if you do not feel strongly about the truth. If the writer is not excited about the topic, how can he produce exciting works?

On the other hand, it has always been dangerous to write about truths in China in the realm of politics. When Emperor Li Shi-ming was in power, anyone who used the character "ming" could be executed, because that character was part of his name. In the Qing Dynasty, a poet was beheaded for writing, "Fresh wind does not read characters. Why should you ruffle my book?" The only place where writers can be themselves and tell truth is with their own personal feelings. They can write their genuine feelings about nature, about their friends and about art. I dare say Chinese love poetry is the best in the world. Great poet Su Tong-po's poem in memory of his deceased wife has passed from generation to generation, because it expresses his genuine grief and undying loyalty for his wife. Qing is indissoluble from virtue; the expression of qing is, in the end, to express our admiration for lofty ideas and morality. Genuine emotions have the power to affect readers, and it is an important means for human understanding and connection because universal feelings resonate with all readers.

It may also have to do with the Chinese national temperament. Because our emotions have been so much suppressed in public life for so long, we have become emotionally vulnerable inside and are prone to more emotional

5. "Fresh" in Chinese is a homonym of the character "qing1" of Qing Dynasty.
6. Su Tong-po (1037-1101), poet, painter and a social reformer.
writing. What is written in this piece hits me so strongly that I was on the verge of tears when reading.

I graded it highly, because I believe that writing should come straight from the heart and that we should write with passion, and this is what this piece does.

Mr. Zhang: (Responding to the same question) Zhuangzi\(^7\) says, "Without sincerity, there is no power to move. A forced cry, though sorrowful, does not sadden; pretended rage, though grim, does not inspire awe," Bai juyi\(^8\), also points out, "To touch the heart, nothing compares to qing." We all respond to qing that is sincere and comes from the heart, yet affected and exaggerated qing, like moaning and groaning without being sick, won't work.

Li: (Asking Jack) You seem to be deeply moved by the piece "To a Friend", but do you think some people may think it too sentimental? Why does "sentimentalism" have such a derogative connotation in this country?

Jack: Since the Vietnam War, people in this country have become cynical in many ways, and this aversion to sentiments is one of them. Sentimentalism is perceived as purposely creating or evoking in people a beautiful, emotional response to something they consider lovely and endearing. Many Americans today chuckle at that. They think it ridiculous, because it presents a phony impression of how things are. (Li: Do you mean that Americans suppress their emotional expression?) No. People are more likely to express emotions like rage, contempt or truly vulnerable emotions, those like

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7. Zhuangzi (around 369-286 A.D.), a philosopher, often mentioned in juxtaposition with Confucius in Chinese philosophy, and said to be the principal follower of Laozi.

8. Bai ju-yi (772-846), one of the most celebrated poets in Tang Dynasty.
sorrow, loneliness, despair. Those are perceived as honest feelings. American democratic principles have so overly inflated the American individualist ego that we think everything is our right. Everything that bugs me, bothers me, is an infringement on my right, and it is my right to tell you exactly how I am thinking about it, which tends to be negative emotions.

Now there is a counter-movement, because people are feeling so battered by the society that is so negative, and so self-centered. Women have support groups, and men now are doing all this drum-beating to get back the feelings that bound us with one another. When there is a beautiful story, for example "Driving Miss Daisy," it captures American imagination right away. The movie, as well as the novel, is very very powerful. It is honest, showing both the negative and the positive qualities, but clearly it evokes sentiments of nostalgia and care and love, and all that. (Li: I have not read many modern novels like that.) No, but in popular literature, Harlequin romantic stories always sell well, along with murder mysteries and science fiction. But they have appealed more to the working class than to the upper-crust readers. They are a balance to that upper-crust literature. I read recently a romance called Possession. It is a story about two writers, a man and a woman in the nineteen century, who corresponded with each other by writing poetry back and forth. It is very difficult reading with all kinds of allusions to poets of the nineteenth century, but it is a romance, very sentimental and touching. (Li: Is it viewed as sentimental?) I don't think so, because it is so scholarly and esoteric, and that somehow gives it credence. So it has to be highly sophisticated to get away with that.

Li: (To Mr. Zhang) Students are very good at taking cues from the teacher. Why is it that none of your students write about very personal experience and express such strong personal feelings, when you teachers all like such writing so much?

Mr. Zhang: That is a very good question. "Words express the intent of the heart," and students should open themselves up in writing, yet that rarely happens in today's China. This is the result of "exam education". Talking about taking cues, both students and we teachers have to take cues from the college entrance exams. If we look at all the composition topics from the entrance exams to college in the last ten years, disregarding what happened before the Cultural Revolution, the students were either asked to compose on an assigned topic or on provided materials, topics always predetermined or narrowly defined. In the classroom, most teachers model their teaching on the entrance exam and ask the students to improvise on assigned topics. Where then is the place for students to "express the intent of the heart"? Many students fill their writing with "phony talk, big talk, empty talk." The exam system is the cause of all these. In recent years, a uniform textbook of Chinese is being used throughout the nation, and the textbook after each unit of texts provide exercises and topics for student composition. Rarely is there opportunity for students to choose their own topics. Composing on supplied material and topics certainly has its role in writing exercises and in exams, yet an inevitable result is that students are being trained to write only what they are asked to write, not what they want to write.

If you want to find writing that comes from the heart,
the only place is student diaries and journals—there you will see a different world. In the early sixties I had a glimpse of that world. National politics, personal concerns, nothing was untouchable; joy, anger, sorrow, all emotions were let out. Words on paper came alive with flesh and blood; their writing was real and fascinating. If there was an ideological problem, the teacher wrote to the student or talked with them to exchange thoughts to give them guidance or help. Teachers were equals, not ideological door keepers. We did not report what was revealed in the student writing. If that happened, the student would clam up immediately.

Some teachers and people with foresight have long noticed these problems and cried out for reform. Respected educator Ye Sheng-tao suggested, "We should understand the students and assign topics close to their hearts." Model teacher Hong Yu-li appealed, "Boldly let the students write themselves." I think problems caused by "exam education" will be solved gradually, and we will have more and more student writing straight from the heart.

There is another factor, though, concerning the choice of topics. Chinese tradition sets strict moral codes for young people's behavior. To speak ill of one's parents or siblings or to wash the family's dirty linen in public is considered improper and disgraceful. How can students write about very personal topics? Also politically you are not supposed to write about the seamy side of the society, because that would "distort reality." What is left for the student to write about is very limited.
IV.3. Untitled II (Summer Camp)

Jane: (Grade A-) Comments see page 64.

Jack: (Grade B+ or B) This paper is such a considerable departure from the paper yesterday, "To a Friend", as we got into the discussion of honesty. This one is an attempt by the student to be literary, a movement far away from one's natural voice to want to sound like a writer. "Then the image, as if it were afraid to give too much pleasure, would retreat to the mountains." It sounds phony.

Overall, I would say that's my only objection to it. But I will be very careful how I handle this, because it could be the end of the student's whole writing experience if I give a B on this paper and say that it is phony or dishonest language. That will be a terrible setback. I may be inclined to hike it a little bit and give it B+. I would say it is quite lovely for the capacity you have shown and it is crafted in certain ways, but let's look at some contemporary writers. Such style leads you away from what is good in your natural voice.

(L: What's the point of the paper?) It states in the opening, "With the arrival of summer, my thoughts would turn towards the unkempt lake house.... but it was a refuge from the modern, fast-paced world." So from that standpoint, this person is trying to show that he needs that experience in his memory to be able to distance himself from the pressures and the pace of our society today and be more connected with nature. I can identify with that.

(L: How about its structure?) The structure is very
good. I have no problem with that at all. It starts off with a general reference to how the author felt about that time, and then he goes into details. Each one is interesting to hear about: going off with the father and just spending the time alone, reflecting, looking at nature, and trips on the canoe and going to bed in this house which is like one of those old-fashioned log cabins. I thought it was vivid. I can picture them. Then it just goes through a day and ends with waking up in the morning with birds chirping. As a descriptive piece and a reflection of the past, it works nicely.

Mr. Wang: (Grade: 84-1, one point deducted for two typo errors) It tells about the activities in a day with completeness, and the order is clear, and it has all the four basic elements of narrative we have been teaching in class: time, place, character and incident. Certain passages are particularly well-written, even very poetic, for example, the passage about sitting at the dock at sunset, "I would bathe in the mirage of color that reached out from the sky. The lake would turn pink, violet, copper and gold. I would catch my breath as I beheld the natural painting that inspired so much feeling within me." The writer is admiring nature and indulging in a flight of fancy. This is what we call "the blending of emotions and scenery" (qing2 jing3 jiaol rong2). (Li: What kind of emotion?) The emotion is intoxication by the beauty of nature, the joy of being at one with nature. The language here is quite beautiful.

There is one problem, though. We think narratives should have focus. Were there one or two incidents that were most memorable, even one piece of conversation, one activity that can be described in more detail? The piece as it is is somewhat dull and flat for lack of any climax. For that, the
piece cannot get a higher grade.

Mr.Wang asks on the top of the paper, "How about titling the piece 'A Happy Day in Summer'?

Mr.Zhang: (Grade: 65) Written comments: "Perhaps because you spent two or three weeks every summer at the lakehouse as a child, and everything that happened there left a deep impression on you, some descriptions of the natural surrounding are written beautifully and movingly. It is indeed a good place to stay away from the fast pace of modern life.

"Yet looking at the structure of the piece as a whole, there lacks a thread that runs through from the beginning to the end. As a result, it is disorganized, and there is no connection between the opening and the ending. To some degree, it weakens the theme. When writing narrative, keep in mind that it should be structured as an integral whole."

Mr.Zhang also notices the absence of a title. He remarks, "A title is the 'eye' of a composition. A piece without a title affects the reader's comprehension," and writes, "Lakehouse in Summer" at the top of the paper. He also puts two circles at the beginning of the two passages that describe the scene at the dock and commends, "careful observation, keen experience, you have shown a vision." For the conclusion, he first comments on the last sentence, "[It] shows further the characteristics of idyllic life, and leaves an aftertaste in the mouth of the reader." And then he suggests, "Since the whole piece is about past memory, should it have an ending that echoes the opening?"

Mr.Zhang later wrote to me: If this were written by a Chinese student, he or she probably would have cited the famous lines: 'The woods are quieter when cicadas din; the mountain is more peaceful with chirping birds,' (chan2 cao4
ling2 yu4 jing4, niao3 ming3 shan1 geng4 you1) The poem would add grace to the piece, but it would not have the same style as it does now, which is all written in the student's own language.

He also says: It is unfair to judge an American student's writing against our Chinese ideology, but in China the most common topic in students' writing today is to "realize modernization," which has become the aspiration of the whole nation and the guideline for our actions. Yet on the other side of the Pacific, an American kid wants to get away from "the modern, fast-paced world." How very strange this is!

**Li's comments:** It is interesting to note that Jane chose this piece because it is "natural", "simple and clear" and does not use "big words". Yet Jack saw just the opposite: an example of moving away from the writer's "natural voice," of using outdated and phony language. It is also interesting that both Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang picked up the same part from the piece for using "poetic" and "beautiful" language, the part to which both Jack and Jane paid little attention. It shows that although Jack and Jane do not make the same judgement about the use of language in a particular piece, they share the same criteria in theory, and using "natural" language is as essential to them as "beautiful" and "lyrical" language is to the Chinese teachers.

There is also a strong sense of timeliness for the American teachers not shared by the Chinese teachers. An imitation of the Victorian language is considered phony and pretentious, whereas a mix of ancient poetry and proverbs with more colloquial modern language is not at all inappropriate, if not preferable, to the Chinese teachers.
The second issue here is the question of form. Both Jack and Jane were pleased with the natural and simple chronological structure of this piece, yet Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang were dissatisfied. As their comments indicate, they believe good writing should focus on one or two most significant events, be linked together as a whole by a "thread", preferably a memorable image, and end with a conclusion that both wraps up the piece and reminds the reader of the opening. For the Chinese teachers, a glaring indication of the lack of a proper form with the American student writing was the absence of a title, an anomaly both of them noticed immediately, and both suggested a title to the writer. Yet neither of the American teachers ever made an issue of it.

The theme of the paper, too explicitly stated to be missed, is one that Jack could easily identify with, yet Mr. Zhang felt hard to accept. Their attitudes, I surmise, are very typical of their own countrymen in this particular case, given the ideological climax in each country.

Since the issues of form recurred in later discussions, here we confine the discussion to the question of title and the criteria for good language.

**Where is the Title?**

**Li:** (To Jack) Of all the American student compositions I have collected, more than twenty of them, only a few have titles, yet all the Chinese student writings have titles, not necessarily exciting ones, but a title is an integral part of every piece of their writing. Why don't American students title their writings?

**Jack:** This is my own theory. We have a lot of kids with all range of abilities resistant to titling things, because
you have to draw from all of the details to get a single principal meaning as reflected in the title and make the point. Yet there is so much resistance to telling somebody what it is about or what it means. Americans in the last twenty-five years are so much into the idea that everybody's opinion is as equal as everybody else's, so in writing we only repeat experience or present it as personal and avoid telling other what it is about. Then you wonder why talk, why write, why communicate. We certainly have gone to an extreme.

Jane: This is interesting, because I do believe as Murray showed me that a title really can help define the purpose of the piece, and that's part of the process. Students have a hard time coming up with a title, so I used Don Murray's exercise and just say, "Well, let's just sit and write the first twenty-five phrases that come to mind." Inevitably they come up with one that they like. But I did not even realize that it was not there. Laziness. Listen (laugh) we are lucky to get anything from these students. These kids are just not trained to think about what they write. I think many of the students make leaps and bounds in attempting these pieces, not that I don't want them to do more with their writings.

Natural vs. Poetic

Li: (To Jack) Did you think the writer dishonest? Why did you say he uses phony language?

Jack: No, I think it is this person's real feelings, but when it is translated into a language that is not part of this person's normal way of expression, it sounds phony.

I admired some of the descriptions, but when I got to lines like, "I would cast my tired eyes over the balcony and
let them come to a rest on the deer head." Oh, dear, "my tired eyes", it's old fashioned. It's nineteen century language, right out of the Victorian era to choose such a phrase. It seems to be too slavishly imitative of the phrasing that you associate with that period of the language.

Li: Why cannot the student imitate others' language in their writing? Where else do they get their language if they don't imitate?

Jack: Freshness of expression is important in my judgement, especially in description. I find it very distressing if somebody talks about the long, lush, green grass, or even, in Kentucky words, blue grass. Somehow we anticipate green grass, and lush grass. Well, maybe you can use a better description, or use a metaphor for it, just avoid conventional ways of describing things.

"The broken-down cot felt so wonderful and allowed my muscles to release their final grasp." Nobody that I have met who was under seventy-five ever talked like that. (Li: But this is writing, not speech.) Ok, it is writing. If you send this to a publisher, you wouldn't get it published. "I allow the weight of my eyelids to shut then. I listened for a moment to the voices floating over the wall that didn't quite reach the ceiling." That is a situation in which the author has stopped to try to visualize it in a metaphorical manner, imagery of poetry and all that sort of thing.

Li: What is wrong trying to be poetic?

Jack: Poetry is a highly contrived art, and in a way we admire that, but it is no longer the literary medium by which the typical person communicates. I would say this piece falls in the direction of too much craft.

I said it is crafted, because of the value we currently
place on a natural and honest voice. That's a value 
judgement of our society, especially in terms of what sells 
in public, what we read in the papers, the way we 
communicate. It is a funny thing, though. If it is judged 
by a group of high school students, they will give it an A. 
They will say that is impressive, because they are often 
impressed by beautiful wording.

We have this balance between striving to make a piece of 
art, a thing of beauty, idealized, better than the way we say 
it at the moment and the other side, just write the way we 
talk. It is on a continuum from one to ten, from gut level 
honesty, like four letter words, whatever the way you say it, 
all the way to ten, which is you scrub it clean of everything 
to make it lofty. I tend to be happier when the balance 
falls between four and five. It is not necessary for a 
writer to writer in his conversational voice, but a voice 
that readers would say that sounds like the way this writer 
would tell the story. So it is not so far removed from a 
person's natural language, but it is polished, perfected.

Should our voice be the same all the time? What I say 
about George Bush will be quite different if I talk to the 
Christian Women's Club annual convention from if I talk to a 
friend while I was fixing a car. Not the content, what I feel 
about George Bush will be consistent in both occasions. It 
will be a matter of how I phrase myself in a different 
situation, facing different audiences, playing a different 
role. I have multiple voices, and I think any writer does.

**Li:** (Asking Mr. Wang) Why do the Chinese teachers like 
the poetic language so much?

**Mr. Wang:** There are historical and linguistic reasons. 
For centuries, whoever ruled China, free-thinking was taboo,
and politics a risky topic, so Chinese men of letters were forced to channel their energy to the perfection of their techniques, and their writing mostly communed with nature, which for them epitomized beauty. In the past, poets vied with each other to produce the perfect verse, deliberating on every character and every line to conform to the tonal patterns and rhyme schemes to a tee. That tradition is still alive. Teachers still prefer writing that demonstrates a good grasp of vocabulary, history and classic works, uses vivid imagery and employs a variety of rhetorical devices. The use of the colloquial and the vulgar is considered a lack of elegance and beauty and is looked down upon.

There is also a linguistic reason. Chinese characters were pictographic at the beginning. For example, the character of water has flowing lines, the one for mountain resembles a rolling mountain range, and the character for tree literally grows roots. So even now people like writing that is beautiful visually. Symmetry is more beautiful than asymmetry; proverbs, which usually consist of four characters, are more pleasing to the eye than phrases of two or three characters. So a student who uses more proverbs tend to get higher grades.

Ye Shen-tao, who passed away only recently, is one of the most respected educator in China. He had long criticized teachers who encourage students to produce what he called "beauty texts", texts that appear and sound beautiful without substantial contents, yet this practice is still common. Personally I encourage my students to feel more comfortable bringing the colloquial language into their writing and prefer a plain style, but I also appreciate more lyrical images and language.

Mr. Zhang: Good writing, no matter what one writes
about, should have "literary grace" (wen2 cai3; literal translation: literary colors). Good language is drawn inevitably from two sources: either from our ancestors' works or from today's everyday fresh oral language. The former is acquired by reading extensively good classic works.

(Li: Are you concerned that students may slavishly imitate what they read in classic works and lose their natural voices? Is it boring if everybody talk the same?) This issue should be looked at dialectically. First of all, Language is a means of communication. If a word or phrase is not imitated and used by a lot of people, how can language be the mediator of the community? Secondly, we have different criteria for professional writers and students. A professional writer who imitates others' style and repeats the same word too often is not a good writer. But students are like apprentices, still learning the craft, and imitation is one way to learn. Students cannot invent words or expressions; they learn those things from reading. Of course, high school students often mindlessly imitate terms they consider "hot". In the last few years, students have suddenly become very fond of the phrase "the sense of loss", and throw it in their writing a lot. That's why in our teaching we also stress that good writing should accurately reflect reality. We tell them to write about their real feelings about life and express them in their own words, and don't try to sound like everyone else, particularly don't try to sound like an adult. We are against using pompous language just to impress the reader. So, for us the question here is not imitation, but appropriateness. As long as they can use what they have learned appropriately, it is their language. You are worried that by using the same language we
will all talk the same, or as Cao Xue-qing, author of *The Red Chamber*, says, "a thousand people all wear the same mask" (qian ren yi mian). Chinese language has such a rich pool of synonyms and antonyms, that scenario is very unlikely to happen. Actually the more vocabulary a student masters, the richer the feelings and ideas he will be able to express, the less likely they will all write the same. (Li: What if they all write green, lush grass if that is what they see?) I don't see anything wrong with that if the grass is green and lush. As I said, the key is accuracy and appropriateness, not novelty.

Li; (Asking Jane) Some teacher feel this piece sounds phony, because it is too crafted. What is your response to that criticism?

Jane: Writing has to be craft. I encourage students to play with language, but some kids are ready to do that, some are not. I encourage them to experiment with language, to try something that they don't think they can do. I am not trying to get them break the rules of English; I am trying to get them to break their own barriers that language put on them. These kids not primarily but only speak in cliches. They don't think much. Everyday, everything is the same. Maybe it is our fault they are not in formal situations where they need to be articulate. I think I try to get them to do that. I say, "Your writing is just like your oral language," but I don't really mean that. What I really mean is that I want it to be as spontaneous as if they just get down ideas without thinking how to say it nicely, and then I want them to begin to craft it. Crafting starts with them beginning to look critically at what they have written. This piece is a nice attempt at craft.

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IV.4."There was an Old Lady" (Old Lady)

Mr. Wang: (Grade: 86) Comments see page 75.

Mr. Zhang: (Grade 100) Written comments: "The composition that portrays a veteran who dedicated her whole life to the revolution, delivers a distinct and profound theme. The writer delineates the character by showing her physical appearance and demeanor. The description of the surrounding also sets off the lady's character well. The process of coming to know the old lady is used as a thread to link the whole piece together, which follows a chronological order but is interrupted once in a while by some background information. It integrates narration, description, reflection and the expression of emotions."

He further explained some of his comments in a letter: The message sent by the piece which portrays a character who sacrificed everything, including her own child, for the cause of revolution and then lived an ordinary life has a profound meaning today when many people, including some party veterans, are abusing their power for personal gain.

The straight back of the old lady, still straight after the talk about her lost son had obviously shaken her, leaves an indelible impression on the mind of the reader. "The towering French parasol trees" resembles her "thin" and "straight back" and her undaunted spirit. The cool shade of the trees in summer reminds me of the proverb, "One generation plants the trees under whose shade another generation rests." All these descriptions help portray a strong and lofty character.

The introduction of a fat man at the end who always brags about his Revolutionary past sets such an effective contrast
with the old lady that the reader comes to respect her even more, which further strengthens the theme. The final conclusion is like adding the eye to the dragon (hua4 long2 dian3 jing1).

The narrator's reaction, "My mother always holds my hand tightly whenever we go downtown. You did not hold his hand, did you?" and her reflection, "A hero in a child's mind is like..., well, the sculptures in front of the Monument to the Revolutionary Martyrs. How could she be one of them?" is written in plain and natural language, like a child's speech.

All considered, this piece is better written than anything ever produced by my own students, so I graded it 100.

**Jack**: (Grade: B) Written comments: "What about the author's understanding of what constitutes a hero and the impact of this old woman on that perception?"

Jack likes some parts of piece: the description of the lady's appearance at the first meeting ("Nice.") and the conversation between the child and the lady ("Very touching, nicely narrated."). But he raises more questions. For the opening, he is confused as to what the "image" refers to, "Is she the image or the house? Misleading lead." He underlines, "Now I know it was her disposition, but I did not know what to call it then," and suggests, "weak, omit?"

With the part in which the narrator reflect after she heard about the old lady's past, he remarks, "Focuses reader on a general concept: what does a hero 'look' like?" He is unsatisfied that the reflection does not go any further.

**Jane**: (Commenting while reading) Good description. "Especially in summer, walking in the shade of French parasol trees, .... Often some tiny violet flowers overgrew the wall and spread into the open space in front of our house."
But the "later" syntax, later this, later that, does not sound good. I like the laughter, I think, why did they laugh? I like the statement of the individual, "My mother always holds my hand tightly whenever we go downtown," although the "fat man with a big belly moved in, always bragging about ..." Is that real? Is this a fiction or non-fiction?

(L: The assignment was to write about a good person that you know. It is supposed to be about one's real experience. Just assuming it is non-fiction, how will you confer with the student? ) I would read the last paragraph aloud and ask her how it sounds? Would she keep the four "later's"? Is it a choice that she likes? Was there a fat man? Or is it a contrivance to show something about her? (L: What if I say, ok, I made this fat man up, because I feel it makes the piece better?) I would say, you don't need the fat man to show your point. The fact that she is no different from your grandmother makes the same point in a very subtle way. I think what is happening is sometimes they are trying the writing so hard they lose sight of what is moving and what is not, and what motivates the piece in the first place.

"She gives me strength and inspiration; she teaches me to be sincere," is not understated. I am not sure that tag is necessary. I am not even sure it is believable. Where is the woman being sincere? I believe her that the woman is affectionate and kind and an ordinary person or let herself appear to be an ordinary person when she is actually an extraordinary person. But "she teaches me to be sincere"--I don't think it is honest that something in the piece taught her that.

I guess I see it as a strong piece. I like the
descriptions of the lady and of the place. I like the door, yet the last line has got to go. That's not what comes through. It's like the moral of the story that the kid wants to add at the end. I can see the discovery that an ordinary old lady was a national hero would have a profound impact on a child, but that's what I want to see developed, as opposed to just saying it had a profound effect upon me. The reader does not need that. I think that's all that ending does.

I am not sure the opening is as strong as it could be. It's well-written, but I think everybody can start with that line because that's where we begin, "Oh, gee, there is a memory in my mind and it is strong, so I will write about it." I think it takes much more creativity and decision-making to begin to play with leads after the piece is written. The image is at the beginning and the end, so it is a kind of formalized standard framework. It is an introduction, not a good lead.

(L: How about the portrayal of the lady?) It is not strong in my mind. I think there is a good attempt at it. I like "straight back", "silver hair", but "faces cut with deep wrinkles, between the layers of which seeped profound kindness", that is contrived. That is just the first sight of her. It is too soon, it is too contrived.

(Li: So what is your final suggestion for revision?) I want to talk to her. I hope in the conversation, she will begin to talk about this woman, if she really feels strongly about her, and her image is really clear to her, because the image of that woman is not that sharp and clear in my mind. I will listen carefully to what she has to say about the woman, and I will say, "You just give me a clearer image that you did not give me in this piece. Could you get some of that down? Is there some more?" She went into the woman's home
and had conversation with her, but I don't see the woman's home; I don't see anything in fact—I just see the door. I would say to the student, "Do you want me to see inside the home, or is the door the most important image?" I will tell the student the things that strike me as vivid. I will try to give them my reader's response, so that they can decide.

I really like this part, "A hero in a child's mind is like...how could she be one of them?" Here seems to be the realization, but there is little internal reflection. I guess I will ask the student to go back to take that question and do some thinking about that on paper and see if it helps, and not try to write the piece or to try to make the piece work, but just to see what questions come out of that, "What did she expect of a hero? What is a hero?" because the piece says that she learned something about human nature, about what a hero really is, and then go back to the writing and see if there is enough there.

**Li's comments:** I am surprised with the mismatched responses to this piece and how clearly the line of difference fell between the two countries. Although there are parts that all teachers liked: the conversation between the child and the old lady, and the reflection of what a hero is like, the overall evaluation of the piece could not differ more. Jack gave it a B, the lowest grade he has ever delivered, whereas Mr. Zhang gave it the highest and perfect grade of 100, for its outstanding portrayal of a veteran revolutionary and the delivery of a profound message, besides its other merits. Yet profundity is exactly what Jane and Jack considered the piece lacking. They both wanted the writer to do more soul-searching on the critical question of what a hero is really like. Again that mismatch arose partly
from the teachers' disagreement as to what the piece is trying to accomplish or what they think the piece should try to accomplish: to present an exemplary character to educate the reader or to reflect on the experience of meeting an unusual person who educated the writer?

The strongest criticism came from Jane, who considered the piece very contrived. Her criticism was based mainly on three observations: a formalized structure, a moral tag that does not suit the content and dramatization, and particularly, the fat man who is seen as being put there just for more dramatic effect.

Honesty, subtlety, good leads, reflection on the experience described are apparently important features of good writing for the American teachers, while a complete and deliberate structure, a positive message and good characterization are appreciated by the Chinese teachers. It should be noted that the word "complete" (wan2 zheng3) in Chinese means literally to draw a complete circle—the end comes back to where the piece started, yet in the West a complete piece is like a finished jigsaw puzzle with all the pieces in the right place.

There are quite a number of issues involved here. The following section concentrates on the discussion of issues of honesty and form, which are closely related, because, as Jane points out, a too-formalized structure smells of contrivance. I leave the questions of subtlety and leads, which come up again later, to the next section. But first, Mr Zhang talked about the Chinese way of characterization, which is triggered by my question on reflection.

The Internal and the External

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Li: (To Mr. Zhang) You have given "Old Lady" the unusual grade of 100, but American teachers feel the author should be more reflective of the experience and do more soul-searching. What do you say to those teachers?

Zhang: They probably want the narrator to dwell on her mental activities, maybe "the stream of consciousness", but that is not what we do. I have read Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. What I remember most clearly about that novel is the male protagonist's repentance after he heard the death of Maslova. Tolstoy spends an entire chapter, translated into five to six pages in Chinese, to describe his internal pain and remorse, which cleansed his soul and all that stuff. I asked several people what they thought of the chapter, and their answers showed that most Chinese readers find that chapter hard to go through and terribly boring, even though they knew that it is a world classic. It is all internal monologue, no conversation, no movements, no description of the natural surroundings. That is not the way we Chinese write about a character's internal world.

We use speech or external action to express what is going on inside the character. In *Waterside*\(^{10}\), for example, what the character thinks is directly stated, like "Wu Song thinks so on and so forth", with only a few simple sentences. Or their motive is openly expressed in their speech or through describing the character's actions. Let me show you another example in the textbook. Sun Li, one of the few founders of Chinese modern literature who is still alive and in good health, is the author of the lyrical prose "Lotus-flower Lake" (*He2 Hual Dian4*). It has been included in every Chinese textbook for decades as a fine model of prose. When

10. *Waterside* (*shui hu*), one of the three Chinese best known classic novels. The other two are *The Dream of Red Chamber* and *The Tale of Three Kingdoms*. 

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he describes the mind of Shuisheng's wife, he does not use a long internal monolog like Tolstoy. He writes, "When Shuisheng's wife heard that after the meeting, Shuisheng was going to leave home to join the army, to receive training in order to fight the Japanese, for a second, the woman's fingers quivered." Shuisheng's wife was then knitting mats with reed stalks, so the writer continues, "Maybe the end of the reed stalk had hurt her fingers." This scene is regarded as one of the best description of the character's mind in the history of Chinese modern literature. Every time I teach this short prose, the students were greatly excited and inspired by this scene. This is absolutely a Chinese style. Sun Li does not spend pages to write how painful Shuisheng's wife felt, how she was unwilling to let her husband go; all he puts down is "for a second, the woman's fingers quivered." and let the reader imagine and feel how she really felt. The author of "Old Lady" says she went back to visit the lane and noticed the towering trees, there is enough for the reader to imagine what an impact the old lady had on her, and she does not need to dwell on it or start an internal monologue. Such narrative is reserved, which is in keeping with Chinese temperament. Chinese readers like such descriptions, and when they read the internal monologues like in Resurrection, they tend to skip them to find out the next development of the story. Maybe this has to do with aesthetic taste or the reader's level of education, but I think it has more to do with our tradition.

Traditional Form, a Liability or an Asset?

L: (Talking to Jane) You want the students to discover forms for themselves. But they are students, they are learning like apprentices. Why can't the teacher just teach
them the forms?

Jane: I guess the traditional training I had did not teach me to think like a writer. Teaching writing is to teach them to be conscious of the choices they have, and I was not aware of my choices. Many of my students follow formats and really say nothing or don't know how to make choices about developing and what details to put in or take out. I think they become better writers for being able to. This is an excellent draft, I would like to get hold of the student. And that is the problem, making all these decisions about what the writer might do and might not do without the writer, I do not feel comfortable.

I show forms to my students, but we are not discussing as much about form as about "focus". I tell them, you have to make a decision as to what to say in this piece and then you have to follow it through.

I don't believe in teaching form first, because it is not going to do anything but destroy everything I try to get them to learn. Because these kids can follow exactly what the teacher ask them to do, but they have to learn that writing comes from themselves, whether it's about a book, about an issue, or about personal experience. When they leave school, I don't like that they can write five-paragraph essays, but that they believe they can write. I know they will be ready to be shot down in other writing courses, but I believe they are ready to take criticism.

I don't say this to others because I feel I could be caught short before people who want to teach forms. They will say, "What? You don't teach form?" Then I think, all right, so I am not teaching what I am supposed to be teaching, but, from seeing their writing before, I know that they are learning.
Form is important, but form that is organic could be as strong as form that is taught. If the organization does not exist, I'll take a scissors and cut out all the paragraphs and say to the student, "Take these, go home and play with them." And then they begin making decisions. I have to encourage them and let them alone, encourage them and let them alone. Just let go.

It is a lot of work both on my part and theirs to trust spontaneous, non-judgmental writing. All we do is free writing and let surprise happen, and learn to trust that will happen.

Li: (To Mr Zhang) You find the structure of 'Summer House' incomplete, because there is no connection between the opening and the ending, and you like the structure of "Old Lady", in which the same word "image" is repeated in both the beginning and final paragraphs. Why is it important to have an ending that sort of correlates with the opening?

Mr. Zhang: We are different from the Americans. American kids' writing seems to drift a lot, just putting down what comes to their minds. There is no structure. Chinese traditionally attends to the art of composition. Confucius says, "Speech without style does not travel far," and "wen2 zhi4 bing1 bing". The latter is now used to describe someone who is properly dressed and has impeccable manners, but originally it meant writing should conform to the standard both in content and form.

For example, the first story in Annals by Zuo, (zuo zhuan)11 a short biography of a general called Zhen. The

11. One of Thirteen Classics "shi-san jing", written in early time of Warring States (475-221 BC), known for its rich and authentic historical data and an exemplary literary style.
story begins with "At the outset, General Zhen married Wu Jiang in Sheng" and ends with "Thereafter, the mother and son got along as at the outset." The story is regarded as a model of composition not because of the story itself, but for its well conceived structure, which begins and ends with exactly the same character "Chu" (meaning, "at the outset").

Li: But wouldn't it be better if the student can think of his own structure? How about cutting out the last paragraph, since it is not saying anything new?

Mr. Zhang: There is no one fixed form, but there are some basic forms. Basically we think a piece of writing should have four components: introduction, development, transition and closure (qi3 cheng2 zhuan3 he2). I think this basic format is still valid because they are in accord with the way we think and are effective in expressing what we want to express.

I am talking about traditional structure, yet the student does not have to use it, if it does not fit the content of the paper. Generally we believe that restating what is said at the beginning or relating to the beginning at the end helps focus the paper. The piece is incomplete without the final paragraph, which sums up what the writer has learned from this. We have three thousand years of writing history and our ancestors have written so many books and generalized excellent approaches to writing. They are our valuable inheritance. Teachers have the responsibility to teach the student the successful writing experiences of our forefathers.

It is not that we refuse to accept new forms. Lu Xun employs "stream of consciousness" in his works, as does the contemporary writer Wang Meng. To be honest, I personally find works that use "stream of consciousness" hard to follow,
and I am more comfortable with traditional and realistic works. Maybe because I was exposed to the traditional type first, and as we say, "First impressions last."

Mr.Wang: (Responding to the same question) It is very unlikely that one would start a piece from a form; we all start from ideas or from some experience in life. We teach form mainly through reading. We believe the more one reads, the more models and forms one absorbs, the better you write. When you have assimilated all kinds of forms, you can easily find a form appropriate for your writing. Teachers give them recipes and students can select from and modify them, but they can cook well with no recipes at all.

It's like teaching a baby to walk; you first have to hold his hands, and then let him walk on his own. We teach students some approaches, like analogy, contrast and ways of structuring writings, but these are not restrictions, only approaches or ways of writing. How a student actually writes is determined by his life experience, knowledge, his ability to think and other factors.

Creativity is built on inheritance, on the valuable experience of the previous generations. Especially in a country like China that has a literary history of thousands of years, it is arrogant to think that one can surpass his predecessors without first learning from them. Besides, every era produces only one or two great writers, and China has not seen one in the last forty years.

Do Americans imitate others? They probably deny that in words, but they also have great writers. Their students also read those writers and are inevitably influenced by their works. They probably just do not recognize their influence.
Is it Honest?

Li: (asking Jane) How do you know whether a piece is contrived?

Jane: I think real honesty comes through. It is sincere; it is not contrived. But very often the student has to dig to find the real honesty behind the piece. It has to be their piece, not somebody else's. Writing has to start from self.

Li: Do you think that, at the same time, writing is a public act, and writers can't be just themselves?

Jane: But they have to explore more what they really think and what they really feel. I just spent five weeks getting them writing fast and furiously, so that they can't rework to make it sound good. They have to discover whether they have feelings at all, what they are and what they think first. I do not make corrections, for once the process of correcting and editing and polishing begins, the writing stops. I act as mediator between the students and their subjects, in a nonjudgemental, encouraging, questioning way, to help them search more deeply about their own thinking. After they have discovered what they really have to say, then they can be directed to choose what audience they want to address and revise their writing accordingly. But again, revision is a matter of learning to make choices not following a format handed down from the teacher. I ask questions as a reader would rather than giving answers. This way they can develop a sense of audience and learn to ask the same questions. To produce honest writing, we have to let them take charge of their writing. It's not easy. It takes patience and trust on both our parts. I just assume students can explore more about their subject, focus,
audience, purpose, meaning, language, organization, and they do. Once they learned to make their own choices and decisions and stop relying on our answers, they become more independent thinkers and good writers.

Li: (To Jack) Why is honesty so important? Do you think the fat man at the end is contrived?

Jack: No, that does not bother me at all. All arts are contrived, poetry is highly contrived. It is very important for writers to deal with life, to be reflective, to look into themselves and the meaning of their lives. That's the whole purpose of writing as far as I am concerned. But that's not the whole thing, the other side of the coin is to communicate to other people about that. But certainly fifty percent of it is to come to grips with yourself. Writing is above and beyond everything else, a means of communication. It is so American to say, oh, it does not matter, well-phrased or not, punctuation marks out of place or it's spelled wrong, the main thing is to somehow feel better, to learn something about yourself. That is damaging to a child, because it leaves them trapped inside themselves, all obsessed with how they feel, how they think without feeling they have a responsibility to deal with the outside world, to communicate with the outside world, to find truth with other people.

We have such an obsession in our culture now with honesty, an honesty I see defined as things are much more inferior than they are presented. One of the worst words we use nowadays is image, people's image. Everyone is very critical and cynical about image. So honesty is turned into a cynical concept. I would have to say the pendulum has swung much too far in the direction of honesty, and not enough in terms of civility. We need to bring back the balance, and
the balance is very much reflected in the way how people evaluate writing in these days. (Li: But you think it very important to have an honest voice.) Oh, sure. It's not either-or, it's balance.

**Li:** (To Mr. Wang) Do you think good writing should be honest?

**Mr. Wang:** No doubt about it. As I said, we don't just teach writing for writing's sake, instead, through writing, we teach the student how to be a useful person in society. Of the three criteria for good writing, real, good and beautiful, real comes first. Without the real, the good and the beautiful are ill-founded. To be real is to tell the truth, which is not only the prerequisite for a good piece of writing, but for being a man. If I find falsehood in my students' writing, I would point out, of course, in a way that would not hurt the student's feelings. Our education would be a big failure if we don't set down that principle. But in this case there is no reason to suspect that the student is being dishonest.

**Li:** (To Mr. Zhang) You said you like realistic works, but what do you mean by realistic? Do you think it important for the student to be honest in writing?

**Mr. Zhang:** Realistic works are works that are true to reality. Du Fu, for example, is a realistic poet, because he was more objective in his time. He quite truthfully records with his poems the war-ridden life of the people around the time of the "An Shi Mutinies," so now we can learn about the society during that time through his poems. That's why his poems are often referred to as "poems of history". If he wrote eulogies that presented a false picture of peace and
prosperity, then he would be unrealistic.

Generally we expect the student to write about real people, real incidents and real feelings in their personal narratives. But the criterion is somehow different for creative writing, which draws from real life but has to be more artistic than real life. Marxist Realism allows typicalization and dramatization on the basis of actual experience. When my student decided to send out "River in My Hometown" for publication in a school literary magazine, I added some details to enhance the theme, but the piece was still based on the writer's real experience. As long as the artistic creation is not far removed from what could actually happen in real life and does not violate common-sense logic, it is in line with Marxist Realism. From the teaching point of view, we want the students to write about their real experience, especially in their personal narratives, yet since students are just writing as a kind of exercise, we allow them to make up some stories, under the condition that the stories are believable. Actually in a composition exam, provided the writing is good, who would check out whether it is true or not?
IV.5. "Me, Before and After the Exam" (Exam)

Mr. Wang: Comments see page 80.

Mr. Zhang: (Grade: 95) Written comments: "This is lyrical prose [san wen] that expresses the writer's feelings elicited by an event in her life. The theme "conquering self" is extraordinary, and the structure is also well conceived. The change of the narrator's feelings before and after the exam threads the piece together. It employs various means of expression, mingling narration, description with the expression of emotions. With a few touches, it also presents the characters around her with vividness. The language is simple and beautiful."

Mr. Zhang explains some of his comments in a letter: The theme [liyi] of the piece is both new and a cut above most student papers. It is new, because the narrator would rather pass up an exam, from which she may earn extra credits, to go to an ornithology test to be part of the effort to protect the environment. It shows that the present generation of high school students reject being crammed with exams and want to become well-developed people. The message that one should conquer oneself is one that is inspiring and up-lifting. That's why I say it is "high."

The writer, by fusing the process of "conquering self" with the scenes of sunset along a boulevard, creates a piece that has the beauty of poetry and painting.

The piece is organized along the emotional changes of the narrator: first her confusion before the exam, then her mother's words and the scene of sunset evoking in her
feelings for the nature, and finally the joy and relief after the exam. One climax following another, it presents its ideas in a clear and logical manner.

**Jack:** (Grade:A-) Written comments: "The catharsis you went through is nicely presented. You made your own choice—a hard one—but with great sensitivity for the teacher of composition whom you respect. It implies your point well: you must take responsibility for your choice, but that involves cherished relationships, and such choices, when maturely made, aren't simple.

"You establish the conflict between the characters well. Your ambivalent attitude is effectively shown in your self-reflection as you walk the boulevard.

"The title is not subtle or metaphorical—could you consider another?"

He talked about the piece: This is an important catharsis for the person, and the person is at peace with the decision she made. She felt so sure of her decision finally that despite all the struggles along the way she just knew that her teacher, whom she respects, will understand. To me that is what decision-making surely is all about. So I get the point. She implies this very well by showing the process she went through, just using the particular cases involved, not making a direct, general statement, so it has very strong power of subtle implications and that's why I marked it very high.

The only reason why I will take off a little and not give her A is there are a few moments that do not seem quite as strong. The very opening, "The bell rang for class," is just not a good beginning. I think the opening can be much stronger if it starts with the sentence in the third paragraph, "I walked back and forth along the boulevard,
recalling what happened in the class that morning."

The dialog is believable, for example, the cut-off dialogue. The paragraph I particularly admire is the one with the mother. I found it a very strong paragraph, because it brings in another factor of mature decision-making, that is, the influence of authority figures. If you are doing an essay on this subject of mature decision, you do consider the wisdom of people before you, the experience of other people, and you also consider the feelings of people involved and how much damage could be done, and write very explicitly about it. But instead she makes it very personal, and brings in all these things very subtly in those five paragraphs. The ambivalence comes back again and again, looking at the clouds disappearing.

She uses a lot of atmospherics. She chooses to begin two paragraphs with atmospherics rather than directly come back to her mind. (Li: Do you like that?) I can buy that. Maybe I should add "The atmospheric and setting also advance the theme through mood", because that is definitely true.

The last paragraph, "The person I became was not the same person I was before the tests: free from hesitation, free from conflicts--my heart sings with joy!..." I would say that is not a paragraph that stands out to me as wonderful. Is all ambivalence erased? I think that held down a little bit my estimation, because it made it too neat at the end. I am not sure it is real either. I think it may be a feeling that is more pleasing to the reader to know that it is solved; you came out and you made a good decision and it was a right decision.

The title of the story is not strong, because the tone of the paper is very much into symbolism: the birds, the ducks, the sunrise, the atmosphere, and then to come out to say,
"Me, before and after the exam" is very bland. It sounds like something in the seventh grade, very explicit, but the paper is very subtle and powerful. That puts you off.

Jane: A lovely piece. The beginning is more standard, talking about Miss Lee. I love the image of sunset, "like a dazzling beauty ready to depart, for whose beauty people were allowed to admire up to the last moment." Lovely conversation about the mother and the saint, and the way she made decisions. She did not say how she made the decision about the test. She returned to the same scene again. It is wonderful here, the imagery of the ducks at the end.

(Li: Why do you like the scene of conversation with mother?) It is very brief. The stroke of the loving hand, the words of the Indian saint, I read that twice to capture his wisdom, so I saw a loving, wise woman. We don't really see the teacher; the only thing I remember about the teacher is the bottles at the lunch, and the classmate was just busy and said something she obviously shouldn't consider too seriously. The mother is the deciding factor; she gave her the answer: to conquer herself, and that was the struggle.

She does well integrating those three scenes with people and very briefly, and still make that sunset, which can be very conventional, work very well towards the end. She did the ending in a lovely way. The beginning is pretty conventional, "The bell for class rang." I like the way she uses one line. My students wouldn't think to do that. It's fine, but it's not moving like the other parts. I might ask her to play around with other ways to open this. I might ask her to find a line that she really liked, and ask her what she will do if she begins with that line and how the piece would be different.
(Li: How about the atmospherics? Do you encourage your students to do that?) No. Most of them like to write that stuff, and very often it doesn't work, very cliche. But it is not cliche here. She gives the sunset new meaning. It helps her to make the decision. The ducks, though, surprised me. Birds have a different meaning, but happy ducks? I guess maybe that's what Donald Duck did to us. I assume it was part of her culture's difference from my students'.

I find it a very important theme for me and for my students. It is about the process of making decisions. Sometimes they are struggling and they are unaware of the real dilemma they are in. I really think it is a very important theme that I encourage them to write about when they come upon this sort of thing.

It is kind of unstructured. I don't see a contrived structure that makes it very sophisticated.

Li's comments: "Exam" is a rare, happy coincidence. Not that all teachers agreed on the theme of the paper, but they all liked what they think the paper is about. For Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang the message of the paper is obviously "conquering self", as put by the Indian Saint in the most critical scene. Jack and Jane picked up the same scene, but came to a different interpretation: a critical scene in the process of making an important decision. For them it is a piece about making a mature and responsible decision. Whatever their reading, all four teachers thought the piece handles an important theme well.

Again, as with "Old Lady", both Jack and Jane find the opening and ending of "Exam" less than satisfying. What Mr. Zhang regards as the four essential components of all writing, "introduction, development, transition and closure,"
are apparently not essential to the American teachers, who want the opening to put the reader directly on the scene and an ending that does not close up all possibilities. The word "introduction" is replace by "lead", a journalistic term, in the talk of Jack and Jane. Introduction for the Chinese reader is like the Chinese' custom of chatting over a cup of tea before the guests move to the dinner table. Using lead in narrative writing is as American as MacDonald, both invented for maximum efficiency.

Subtlety is another important feature of good writing for American teachers. Subtle writing, is for Jane, more honest writing. Dramatization, on the other hand, can be suspected of contrivance. The word "subtle" occurs four times in Jack's comments on "Exam", and the reason why the ending "holds down a bit of" of his estimation it is it is too explicit, too neat, erasing all ambivalence and doubts. As it happened with "Old Lady", such an ending is the "dragon's eye" to Mr.Zhang, but "a moral tag" to Jane, and to Jack "too neat" to be good. There are two related questions to me: What is a good lead? What is the difference between introduction and leads? Why does an explicit ending damage the credence of a piece? What is the difference between a message and a moral tag? Why is it so critical for a narrative to be subtle, instead of straightforward, or just to tell a good story?

The discussion, therefore, focuses on these related questions under the title "Dragon's Eye and Moral Tag".

"Dragon's Eye" or "Moral Tag"?

Li: (To Jane) What is the difference between introduction and leads?

Jane: With introduction the writer often thinks it
important to give the reader some background to get into it. The lead takes the reader right into it. The first thing that it hit me in "Old Lady" was the small lane in summer, so we tend to scan until it drives in, if it drives in at all. It is hard to convince an inexperienced writer that they don't need to give us this background. What they do need to do is to decide whether they can involve us in the scene. Usually I ask them to read their piece silently and find the first line where something is really happening. And they will read that line aloud and I would say, why don't you start your piece there?

Li: But what's wrong with using the introduction to prepare the reader for what comes later?

Jane: But it doesn't say much yet. It doesn't start to say anything yet. This is an American thing, isn't it? I was trained in this: The opening should introduce you, lead you from the general to the specific, and the ending should summarize and conclude. But for the reader that has already happened. I tell students the writer owes the reader more than just restating in a different way or in the same way what they have already said. I ask them what you like as a reader, how effective it is to you as a reader. I ask them to think about something that can lead the reader. I told the class the other day, "It is like sitting in a car, if you slam the brakes on, the person goes flying forward, and that's where you leave the reader, in an unexpected position where they are still moving.

Li: Let me ask you some question about conclusion. It seems to me you want the students to arrive at some universal ideas in their writing, but you also do not like generalizations at the end. How do they walk that line?
Jane: They make that universal leap when they begin to draw meanings for themselves. Many times, they are not thinking, and their writing gets so trite. When kids try to do the moral, it becomes corny and cliche, so they will say I learned from this, "ta-la-!"). That is what I try to keep them away from. If they add that moral tag, they blow the piece.

Li: What is the difference between a message and a moral tag?

Jane: A moral tag repeats what is established, but meaningless to that individual. (Li: Some traditional moral still can be meaningful to the writer, can't they?) It can be, but these kids have been trained to look for a moral. It's a false attempt to make a statement, to make a generalization that really isn't necessarily true, and certainly not true for the reader for that particular piece of literature. Where in the piece did the old lady teach her sincerity? That ending is just added like a tag, not grown naturally out of it.

Li: (Asking Jack) You mentioned before that you believe that writing should have "a transcendent theme". How different is that from having a moral at the end?

Jack: A transcendent theme does not have to be serious; it could be just an amusing portrayal of life, jabbing at technology, for example. It's not moral. It's an observation of life.

We used to believe that literature presents a universal truth of human life. Well, you get into more contemporary literature, that view of literature is no longer valid. In recent years, particularly woman poets, like Ann Spencer, Adrienne Rich, will concentrate on the truth of woman's
existence as to man's.

Li: Why did you say that the ending of "Exam" is too neat, too explicit?

Jack: It is also a culture thing. I think Americans are much more likely to come to conclusions that allow for ambivalence and tentativeness, "Well, it maybe right, it maybe wrong. I don't know." I am so imbued in this culture that I find it hard to accept that this person is truly in her heart totally at peace with the decision and sure it was right.

Li: One reason why you like the piece "Grandpa" so much, as you told me, is because "It's subtle and suggestive." You like "Exam" when it is subtle and suggestive and like it less when it is too explicit. You seem to have a special fondness for subtlety. But as you said before, understanding is the purpose of writing. Won't the purpose of understanding be better served if the point of a paper is explicitly stated?

Jack: The means is as important as the end. For example, if I want to get my child to stop doing something, I could just tell him that it is forbidden. That might seem most effective, but there is no understanding of the other messages that go with it. I also want him to know it is for his own sake, as well as for mine. So the directness chews off all the other messages. If the message is subtle, it is richer, it takes all the innuendoes and clues and nuances that are going on right at that point. It holds them together.

And also it is more important for a reader to reach the conclusion for him or herself. This is the reader's ownership. Readers do not like to be told to think certain ways. When a subtle approach is used, for instance talking

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about capital punishment both at the emotional level and the psychological level, it causes the reader to search many levels of his reaction and come to a conclusion rather than keeping it at one level.Explicitness tends to force people to accept at one level.
IV.6. "River in My Hometown" (River)

Mr. Zhang: (Grade: 90) Comments see page 89.

Mr. Wang: (Grade: 86) Written comments: "Clear organization, sharp contrast of the past and present. The whole piece reflects the change your hometown has gone through and your love for the river. It has very positive significance.

"The second paragraph is particularly vivid. The joy of the children is infectious. The third is also fine, but compared with the second paragraph it is not as specific. It seems much easier to write about one's own experience.

"The language flows well, and the choice of words accurate, particularly the use of verbs, yet it is a bit too "literary." It would be more appropriate if the language is less polished. Do you agree?"

In the margins, Mr. Wang complimented the following as using "concise language", "When winter was gone and spring came, the ice and snow melting, the earth waking up and seeds sprouting, the willow trees on the river bank showed green, and their branches danced with the spring breeze." The sentence in Chinese starts with four short phrases and each phrase consists of four-characters, creating a very rhythmic effect.

Jack: (Grade: A-) Written comments: "The image of a river linking all childhood experiences—the joy and the misery—into a single positive force for character growth is well established.

"The proverbs are woven skillfully into the text also
helping to establish the continuity of the river in the lives of all the people who live along it. Older generations have learned the same lessons and the future is built on the past.

"I am less sure of the use of pearls, because they are so positive an image, but that objection is minor. (The first paragraph could be omitted.)

"The other problem is an early reference to the river as "paradise", but several negative references to it come afterward. "Paradise" is only about certain aspects of the river--certain times maybe.

"Skillful description. Clear focus on your point."

Jane: I think the contrast works; "However, the river in my hometown did not just flow with the kids' innocence and joy, it flowed with the misery and sorrow of our ancestors." That's where the piece becomes poignant. Before that it [the river] stands alone; it does not do anything. The piece is an attempt to show something of his childhood, a little bit of the village, to show the parents did not live easy lives. But I can't believe the grandma was frozen to death and they waited at home. Do you believe that? "Only Dad would sit on the river bank, mumbling." I will ask the student if that is really true. (Li: Do you suspect they might be false?) No. As a matter of fact. It's a very moving piece: his reflection, the strong emotion for his father's anguish, his father's loss of not having seen what could become real. What is difficult in writing non-fiction is to write it as precisely and as emotionally effective about the truth that the writer perceives.

It is more difficult for me to be sure of honesty in a piece of writing from a Chinese student, whether the language they use indicates sincerity. (Li: This is written in a
quite formal and very literary style, even poetic. Does that undermine its credibility?) I would not be able to find a student in my class who can write this formally and still be able to be very sincere. I am surprised that I am moved, because the formality could get in the way of the richness of the emotion. When it is contrived, you lose the poignancy of it, maybe the story itself, of the grandmother struggling to the river bank. I think it is a universal concept that our ancestors had it tough.

The opening paragraph, I stopped a number of times, "Life in childhood is like scattered pearls, bright and shiny, and the river in my hometown is a thread that strings together those pearls of joy and misery..." There is too much in one sentence. But I like his attempt to create a metaphor and to use the river as a way to pull together these lives. But the pearl is not apt for images of joy and misery. I think the river works fine without the pearls.

One of the things I look for in my students' writing is that they stay away from clichés and try to create a fresh way of looking at things. I had a difficult time to decide whether the student has written that or that's something that came out of the culture. I would point out some things that are good attempts at playing with the language. A sentence like "the willow trees showed green" is not a cliche here. The language is nicely put together and the image is strong. Many of my students can't describe details, can't use the precise details that make something universal. For me, spring is the gold willow, that's the first thing I notice in spring, but they always talk about birds singing. I am not sure if "river chuckles like silver bells" is cliche in your language. (Li: Not with rivers, usually with girls.) So he is playing with it. I like "we sneaked out of our low-
thatched houses", instead of just saying we sneaked out to the river bank. It's those details begin to create a real place, a real home, a real life style and real people.

**Li's comments:** I am a bit surprised that "River" is better accepted by the American teachers than "Old Lady". Jack gives it A-, compared with his B for "Old Lady". Jane, though has her moments of doubts, is moved by the piece despite its formal language and conventional structure—the image of the river appears both at the beginning and the end. The irony is, this piece, as Mr. Zhang admitted, does have elements of fiction after the revision. In the first draft, there were virtually no specifics of the the lives of the older generations, but some vague descriptions as, "For years and generations, people on both sides of the river lived in low and yellow mud cottage. Here the earth was yellow, the cottages were yellow, as were the people's complexions and even their teeth." The most dramatic scenes in the story, the lonely death of the Grandma, the nearly demented father mumbling to himself after the death of his mother, were added (made up?) to underscore the theme, which, according to Mr. Zhang, is the contrast between the present society and the past to show the superiority of the new system. Jane is uncomfortable with some melodrama, but is less certain whether the piece is contrived.

Part of the reason that "River" is better accepted than "Old Lady", I think, is the interpretation of the theme. As Jane points out, the idea that our ancestry had it tough is to her a "universal concept", although I assume what she had in mind was American early immigrants who, escaping political and religious persecution, braved the wilderness and other
adversities, including the resistance of the native people.

The heavy use of proverbs, more than the two other Chinese pieces, fares well with Jack and Jane, too. The student, more out of luck than of good taste, did not write "green lush grass" or "singing birds", but "green willow trees", which is one of the most ancient images of spring and vitality in Chinese poetry. Just like century-old butter is a new, fancy addition to the Chinese diet, so is "green willow trees" a fresh image to the American readers. What is original and creative is relative to the audience.

Mr. Zhang calls both "Old Lady" and "River" lyrical prose, a genre that blends narrative with the writer's personal comments and sentiments on the topic. It is not uncommon in English literature where the writer interjects direct comments on the scene or character under description, or becomes emotional with the story, but none of those elements are shown as directly and as persistently as in Chinese "lyrical prose."

All three Chinese pieces, some American readers noticed, share a common feature: the frequent reference to something in the natural surroundings. In "Exam", it is the description of sunset and wild ducks, in "Old lady" the repeated mentioning of the trees, and in "River" the river and the signs of seasonal changes along the banks. Jack called such references as "symbols" or "atmospherics" ("Exam"), and Jane called it "imagery". They use different languages for a feature, about which the two Chinese teachers consistently use one term "Jìng". "Jìng", as we see, can mean a number of things in English, symbols, atmospherics, natural images, yet none of them carries all the denotations and connotations that this monosyllabic word evokes in the mind of Chinese speakers. The closest definition of the word
is probably the most general: the opposite to the man-made world or objects. In the scheme of yingyang, it is the yang (heaven) as opposed to yin (human). Jack said, "She [author of "Exam"] chooses to begin two paragraphs with atmospherics rather than directly come back to her mind." But if all three pieces choose to do the same thing, it is more than an individual's choice. Rather, as Mr. Wang later points out, it is the claiming of a long and honored tradition in Chinese literature and an ideology of man's position in universe.

The Omnipresent Jing?

Li: Why is it that all three pieces, whether set against a small courtyard or along a city boulevard, whether about a next-door neighbor or the lives of one's ancestry, devote considerable space to the description of something in the natural surrounding?

Mr. Wang: There are two most important artistic features of Chinese classic literature: one is the blending of qing (emotions) and jing (nature), and the other is characterization.

There are only two ways to express one's qing: either directly write about it, or indirectly through the description of nature. And because Chinese are mostly reserved and introverted in temperament, we prefer to "couch qing in jing." As Wang Guowei\textsuperscript{12} generalized nicely, "All words of jing are words of qing, and all words of qing are also words of jing," so all descriptions of natural objects or scenery are for the sake of expressing emotions. This has been so throughout Chinese history of literature. In the Book

\textsuperscript{12} Wang, guo-wei (1877-1927), a contemporary scholar of Chinese drama and poetry. After the bourgeois democratic revolution in 1911, as a staunch loyalist to the last emperor, he drowned himself.
of Odes\textsuperscript{13} you read plenty of poems that successfully blend the two. In one poem, when a soldier left home, it says, "Willow trees softly swaying," which expresses his love for his hometown and his reluctance to leave, yet when he returns only to find that his parents are gone, the poem goes, "sleet falling thick and fast." The descriptions of the change of weather convey the emotional turmoil the soldier underwent when torn from his family in a war. Chinese novels use the same technique. When Lin Cong left for the mountain to join the rebels in Waterside, instead of describing directly how Lin Cong felt, it says, "the snow was swirling and howling," which more effectively shows the landscape of his mind at that moment.

Chinese ink painting is called "mountains-and-waters painting," and Chinese poetry is also often referred to as poems of mountains and waters. Nature provides inspiration as well as means of expression for artists. In the time of Northern and Southern Dynasties, Liu Xie\textsuperscript{14} says, "Ascending the mountain, the mountain is alive with qing; beholding the ocean, the ocean is brimming with qing." This view of nature has been accepted by later generations. Now we still strive for the integration of qing and jing. And I believe such literary tradition will be carried forth to the future.

\textsuperscript{13} The Book of Odes, an anthology traditionally believed to have been compiled by Confucius, consists of 305 poems, the oldest extant examples of Chinese poetry. The poems probably date from around 1000 to 600 B.C.

\textsuperscript{14} Liu xie (around 465-532 A.D.) a monk-scholar, author of Wen Xin Diao Long, the most systematic classic of literary theories in China.
III.7. SUMMARY

Jack, Jane, Wang and Mr. Zhang are four distinct individuals, who hardly tell each other where they are. They each is a complex unity of diverse, sometimes conflicting, identities. Jane is a liberal individualism and freedom in her class. She would knock down any barrier that stands between the students and the school. As a church goer, she is following her own spiritual guidance from an almighty authenticator. Jack is a social and political pluralistic running ramped by the liberal "extremes" he sees. He is a conservative values with liberal ideologies. His aesthetic ideology; it is as mixed as his moderate conservative x of realism and modernism. Mr. Wang with the Chinese student movements that political reform in China, and he welcomes new ideas from the West, but he also holds on to the traditional values of Chinese intelligentsia.

Mr. Zhang comes straight out of the camp of Chinese traditional scholars, well influenced in Chinese literary tradition and Western ideas, but he also opposes most strongly the residue of "imperial examination."

Not surprisingly, there is by no means a clear-cut Chinese reading versus American reading. All the four teachers were moved by the anguish and love expressed in "To
a Friend", and were deeply impressed by the vivid characterization of "Grandpa," as well as the use of, what Jack calls, "the atmospherics" in "Exam" and the way with which "River" is organized. Jack and Mr. Zhang, though they have different standards in many other things, both have a liking for "more clever structure," and Jane and Mr. Wang both hold strongly that a good piece "should move the reader in some way." Each society, after all, is a rugged terrain on which different trends and ideas compete and co-exist, and an individual does not necessarily sign up with the most popular ones.

But their identity is defined to some extent, if not to a large extent, by their nationality, for individuals can choose to resist or comply, but they operate in a particular social environment, and they are invariably subject to the influence and constraints of the cultures to which they belong. The four key teachers are fully aware of societal influence on them and talked about it eloquently in the discussions. Mr. Zhang pointed to the restraints posed on his teaching by entrance exams, and Mr. Wang analyzed how centuries of political oppression has shaped the writing and temperament of writers in China. Jack expounded on the outcome of the Vietnam War and the moral climate in America after the sixties, and Jane had to adjust her teaching strategy and expectations according to the student mores. Besides, they all teach literature produced by native writers, chosen not by the teachers but the literary community in each country. These "great works" are held as models of "good writing" for both the writing teachers and their students.

As a bilingual, however, I see language as a less visible, but more powerful force that influenced their
evaluations.

Goodman claims that we construct worlds with the help of symbol system, by operating on a "given world" that we take for granted (quoted in Bruner, 100). The constructive force of the symbol system is certainly at work as one of the major constraints under which these teachers operate. Their interpretations of the theme of "Exam" is a telling case at hand. Compared with other pieces, "Exam" is a fortunate piece, in that, although the teachers read different "points" into the paper, they are all happy with what they see. Jack and Jane read it as one on "decision-making" while the Chinese teachers believe "conquering self" is the message. Given the language available to them, it is not hard to figure out why. "Conquering self" is a term I coined myself, which I know sounds strange to a native speaker of English. I struggled with other more idiomatic phrases like "take control of oneself", "make up one's own mind", "make peace with oneself", etc., yet still settled for the non-English term, because only "conquer self", a literal translation of the Chinese phrase, would convey the sense of struggle and triumph that the original Chinese (possibly also Indian) connotes. Decision-making, on the other hand, is a phrase in Chinese reserved only for people in responsible positions, especially in higher ranks in the government, and it sounds absolutely out of place when applied to a child facing a moral dilemma. Therefore, Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang, or any other Chinese teachers, would not read decision-making into a piece like that, even if they stretched their imagination.

But language, especially the connotations of words, is colored by the values imposed by the society, the other side of the coin that semiotic constructivists like Goodman do not mention. The theme of "River", as Jane interpreted, is "a
universal concept" that our ancestors had it tough. Maybe it is, although in American it is part of the frontier mythology, and in China it has strong political implications. Comparing the tough life in the past with the happy life at present has been used as a powerful means of political education in China since 1949, the year when the Communists took over the country, in order to remind people, "When drinking water, don't forget who dug the well." So the deeper meaning of the piece, as pointed out by Mr. Zhang, is to show "The superiority of socialism." But if that motif ever occurred to Jane, that piece would be reduced to propaganda, a devil term in American language. For the same reason, none of the Chinese teachers ever thought of the theme of "Grandpa" as proposing that some phenomenon in life is simply inexplicable, because that would be advocating an agnostic view of reality, which is defined as part of bourgeois ideology in China. The definition of agnosticism in Ci Hai\textsuperscript{16} reads, "... It opens the door to religions. Some schools in modern bourgeois philosophy (such as Mach and pragmatism) advocate it to prevent the oppressed classes from knowing the truth." It is as much propaganda to the Chinese teachers as Party allegiance is to the American teachers. For writing teachers who tend to think positively of student papers, they could only have looked the other way. The following sums up the rhetorical values, as revealed in the four key teachers' comments on the six pieces, that differentiates Jack and Jane as American teachers of writing, and Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang as Chinese teachers of writing:

1. For Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang writing is a vehicle of

\textsuperscript{16} Ci Hai (Ocean of Words), the most comprehensive and authoritative dictionary of Chinese.
Tao, the disseminating of the accepted morality of the society. Jack and Jane, on the other hand, consider morality the last place for teachers to exert their authority. Even Jack, despite his strong moral beliefs, appreciates a piece that deals with "moral grey areas".

2. Jack and Jane, despite other different goals they mentioned, agree that understanding self the primary goal of writing. They want student writing to be reflective and capable of expressing the writer's unique perspective of the world. Good writing, first and foremost, should have its distinct individual voice, which means it explores ideas that have not been explored and uses a language void of harping on the familiar. Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang, regarding their students as apprentices who have not yet established their own business, allow for imitation, because they believe that is how the mastering of any practical skills starts.

3. The expression of Qing (emotion) is considered characteristic of good writing by the Chinese teachers. Although both Jane and Jack both liked the untitled piece that expresses the writer's anguish over the death of her friend, Jane did not accept "to emote" a legitimate function of writing. Jack pointed out that, despite his own favorable reaction to the piece, writing about emotions is generally looked at warily as "sentimental", which is identified with the lower class, who purchase paper-back romance in the supermarket. It is also not just a question whether to emote or not to emote, but what to emote. Mr. Wang repeatedly emphasized the connection between qing and morality, which suggests that only virtuous tears and joy would produce good writing. Jack noted, in contrast, that in America writers feel less restrained to express the vulnerable and negative feelings than "lofty" emotions, for the former is perceived
as "honest" and the latter "phony".

4. The two Chinese teachers have no qualms setting specific requirements for forms: a piece of good writing should have focus (concentrating on one or two most important incidents that best illustrate the theme), a thread (an image that connects all parts), and an opening that introduces the topic and an ending that correlates the opening. The American teachers, on the other hand, set few formal requirements other than focus (having a central theme), and their students are given much liberty in handling the form, including handing in compositions without titles. Traditional forms are valuable assets for the Chinese teachers, and they take it as their responsibility to pass them on to their students, but they are viewed by the American teachers as a possible hindrance to students' creativity.

5. The American teachers believe that narrative writing should not tell, but show with ample details. For the Chinese teachers, on the other hand, thick description can be boring, and it leaves little room for the reader's imagination. A piece that does not reveal its intention in the conclusion is like a dragon without eyes for the Chinese teachers, whereas Jack and Jane found those "moral tag" intruding upon the reader's right to infer and form their own readings. They obviously disagree as to what is "too explicit" and what is "too much."

6. The line between the written and oral is purposely blurred in America--the use of voice instead of style is an obvious outcome. In order to produce the illusion of spoken language in writing by using a "natural" language close to the way people talk, the American teachers consider a formal and overly ornate language "phony". This preference of the
American teachers, as pointed out by Jack, is not a matter of pure aesthetic taste, but something regulated by the market—books written in a formal style do not sell in America. In China, although the gap has been much narrowed after the May Fourth Movement in 1919*, the the difference between the written and the spoken in Chinese is still large. Writing, unlike speech, is viewed as a kind of art, and art should be more beautiful than the real. Although Mr. Wang said that he prefers the plain language to the beautiful, his comments showed, as strongly as Mr. Zhang's, a penchant for lines and images that are "poetic" and "beautiful."

These rhetorical values explain why the key teachers often have different evaluations of the same pieces. What is excellent for the Jack and Jane can be average for Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang (as with the piece of "Grandfather"); what is perfect for Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang, likewise, is questionable for Jack and Jane (as with "Old Lady"). There are no universal criteria; what is beautiful is decided by who the beholder is.

Finally, listening to the two groups of teachers, I was struck by the manners in which the two groups of teacher related themselves to the past. Time seemed to be compressed when Mr Wang and Mr. Zhang talked. Ideas and words uttered thousands of years ago were quoted frequently and directly from memory as if they were said yesterday. The authority of

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15. May Fourth movement, 1919, a nationalist movement triggered by the signing of a humiliating treaty at Paris by the Chinese government with other super powers, which agrees to give up Chinese sovereignty over the territory occupied by Japanese in the First World War. The movement merged with the then Literary Revolution that started in 1919, which had as its chief premise the idea that the archaic classical style of writing should be replaced by a vernacular style called Baihua ("plain language" or "vernacular Lanugage")—see John DeFrancis, 243.
Confucius, Mencius and classic works written centuries ago has not diminished with the lapse of time. Whereas the American teachers seldom cast their eyes back or up. The only figure mentioned with reverence in their talks is Donald Murray, a Pulitzer prize-winner, but otherwise just another university professor living next door to Jane (they literally live in the same town). When asked for the sources of their teaching philosophy, Jack refers to his own writing experience and Jane, her disillusionment with the educational system in America. When the American teachers talked about the past, it was used to illustrate the changes that have happened in the course of time, and the consequences of such changes.

Chinese teachers consider themselves "transmitters" of knowledge, passing on to their students what has been accomplished over the past three thousand years by previous scholars. They not only set clear standards, they also demonstrate for the students when the student performance falls short (Both Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang added titles to the American student papers that are untitled, and they also readily suggested alternative expressions when they found the students' inappropriate). American teachers, on the other hand, view themselves as "facilitators", who stay on the sideline watching the students' performance, cheering for them when they hit the mark and patiently waiting if they don't. They do not set explicit standards, and when student fail to produce "good" texts, they probe and ask questions rather than feeding them with answers and solutions, and they are willing to hold back their opinion when the student disagree. They want their students be creators rather than mere receptors of knowledge, independent thinkers rather than
followers.

That is probably the most fundamental difference between the two cultures: one celebrates tradition, and the other celebrates self. In China teachers and students are chains that connect the past with the present, and the present with the future, into an unbroken and endless line. While in American, self takes the center stage. Each individual not only has the right but also the capability to carve out his or her territory, to start anew. Writing is a journey for individuals searching their own voices and their own places in the world.
CHAPTER V

FORTY-FIVE TEACHERS AND FOUR PIECES

Are the four teachers' comments on the six pieces representative of the average Chinese and American writing teachers in a similar situation? To answer that question, I conducted a survey after my interviews with the four teachers. For better return, I reduced the number of student writings from six pieces to four. "Beat Them 'til They are Black and Blue" (Grandfather), "There was an Old Lady" (Old Lady) "Untitled 1" (To a Friend), and "Me, Before and After the Exam" (Exam), were selected and sent to thirty teachers in each country for their comments. This chapter reports, analyzes and interprets the data of the survey.

The four pieces were chosen for their distinct styles and subject matters. The first two, "Grandfather" and "Old Lady" are character profiles, and the other two, "Exam" and "To a Friend" resolve internal conflicts of the narrator. Also each is written in a style typical of the student writing in each country. The American respondents were asked to assume that they were serving on an advisory board to a student magazine and the Chinese respondents on a committee that judges the outcome of a composition contest. Whatever their capacity, their job was the same: to rank order the four pieces of writing submitted by the students and explain their decisions in terms of strengths and weaknesses of each piece. The audience of the comments would be the other
teachers on the same board or committee rather than the student authors. Twenty-three (76.7%) valid responses from China and twenty-two (73.3%) from America have been returned, which indicates tremendous interest in and support for such a study in both countries.

Different sets of data are sought in the survey. The American respondents are asked to specify their gender and whether or not they had participated in the UNH Summer Writing program or similar training programs using the "process approach," and the Chinese respondents, gender and their locality, whether they teach in the city or in the country.

Incidentally, the data on American teachers who have or have not been in a "Process Approach" training program yields very similar results to that on gender, since only one male teacher (out of nine) attended a program of that nature and most of the female teachers (nine of out thirteen) have been to one. The two categories correlate so well, I make no distinction between the two in the report. Therefore, a female teacher is also one who has attended a "process approach" training program, and a male teacher is one who hasn't, unless it is specified otherwise.

According to the Confidence Limits suggested by Lauer(58), a sample of this size has +/- 15 of variables, so any variation of less than 15% is not taken as having any significant comparative value in the analysis. Opinions expressed by less than three teachers are considered too idiosyncratic to be reported, although I may mention some figures and comments by one or two teachers that, though not significant statistically, are interesting to notice. Statistics only indicate probabilities, and it is more so with a survey of such a limited scope. Forty-five
respondents, however, should represent a wider range of teachers and bring us closer to reality than four teachers, however far from it we still are.

In this chapter, I will first report the teachers' comments on each piece and some important figures, then present the general pictures and try to draw generalizations.
V.1. COMMENTS AND FIGURES

"Grandfather"

Statistical Profile: ranked #1 by 64% of American respondents, but favored more by the teachers who have NOT been to a training program (75%) than those who have (50%). Only 39% of the Chinese teachers place it in the top, and it is obviously favored more by the teachers from the city (57%) than those from the country (11%).

It outranks the rest, according to the American respondents, because of its "excellent narrative style." Twenty American respondents state in their comment, in one way or another, that the most outstanding characteristic of the paper, is that it "shows more, tells less." As one teacher remarks, "[It has] more fully developed descriptions than others (more showing, more physical details)." They like its use of "sensory," "appropriate," "concrete" and "well-chosen" details, and "vivid," "wonderful," "evoking," "strong," as well as some "contrasting" images, such as the lingering smell of the pipe and the switching whip. All these give them "a good feel": "a good feel of the man" and "a feel of the tension as well as the beauty of the memory." For them such writing rings of an individual voice, because "It sounds like the particular experience of an individual," except for one male teacher who reads it with disbelief: "It seems too contrived that all his humanity is awakened by the grandchild."

A few teachers mention the theme of the paper as having "depth" or being "perceptive" or "sensitive"; one of them remarks, "This is a good beginning to character examination
and a look into a vital human relationship as well as the lack of one." A number of teachers praise its "fluid" sentence structure and "vivid, effective choice of words", as well its overall organization as "focused", "controlled and coherent", or having "movement and shape". The title and the opening also impressed a number of respondents.

Yet half of the teachers (eleven) feel dissatisfied with the development of the relationship between the mother and grandfather. One respondent expresses that discontent with "Too many questions left unanswered," and another, "Deeper awareness and make-believe stories incomplete, underdeveloped, points toward something important, then doesn't go there." Yet some of them at the same time acknowledge the evocative power of such ambiguity. As one teacher remarks, "The relationship between the grandfather and his daughter [is] not explored sufficiently, but there is real power and possibility in what is unsaid."

The Chinese respondents share many of the observations of their American colleagues, but their comments are directed more at the portrayal of the grandfather, which they praise as "sharp," "strong," "well-developed" and "hard to understand but hard to forget." They are particularly impressed with the "vivid" and "minute" description of the grandfather's physical appearance at the beginning. Most of them view the successful characterization a result of the writer's ability to select and arrange the material in such a way to create an unexpected effect. A great number of respondents (twelve) take pains analyzing its plot and organization. One teacher's observation is quite typical of their analysis: "The author weaves together the conflicting anecdotes of the grandfather, convincingly portraying an extremely ordinary, unsophisticated farmer with a strong
personality. As a father to his children, he is extremely rigid and severe (close to cruel); yet as a grandfather to his grandchild, he is extremely kind and loving." Another teacher finds the same quality with the paper, "Cold and severe, but also caring and loving, he was strained by the burden of raising six daughters but enchanted by his only granddaughter. With the display of the contrasting facets of the grandfather, the story is profound and soul-stirring." Some teachers like the "suspense" of the story, one comparing the somehow mysterious father-daughter relationship to the creation of blank spaces in Chinese painting, which "leaves ample room for the reader's imagination."

Quite a number of Chinese readers, however, find the "blank space" perplexing rather than evocative. One teacher, who ranks the piece #4, asks, "Why is it that the grandfather was unable to love his own daughters? Was it because of hardship, poverty, or some other reason? What is the implication of the title 'Beat Them 'til They are Black and Blue'? The paper expresses only the writer's impressions of a family situation without realizing the puzzlement in which it leaves the reader. The writer is not thinking of the reader, writing only for self-expression." Three other teachers, all from the country, who also rank the piece last, fault it as "unfocused," "straying from the subject." An equal number of teachers from the country who rank the paper #2 and #3 point to the "lack of clarity" as the major problem of the paper. One of them, who likes the mystery of the story, ends his comments with the remark, "The piece eventually loses [its first place] for its subject matter; it portrays an unfathomable strange old man, which does not have the same significance as 'There is an Old Lady'." His comments are not shared by some teachers from the city,
though, who think the piece expresses the worthy theme of "love," and the title, "a philosophy of life for determination and fight."

To sum up, all the teachers agree that the writer has done an extraordinary job for a character profile. The piece wins the hearts of the American respondents for the writer's ability "to show and not to tell" and its perceptive examination of human relationships. Because of these features, it has the highest confidence vote among the usually skeptical American readers. The Chinese teachers like its effective description as well as its "thoughtful and clever conception" of the story. Although a substantial number of respondents in both countries want fuller development of the relationship between the grandfather and mother, this problem does not affect more than half of the American teachers' high evaluation of the piece; whereas Chinese teachers, on the whole, take it as a more serious structural flaw, and most of them do not consider this the best of the four pieces. In addition, a significant number of Chinese teachers from the rural areas think the piece does not say anything "really meaningful." The responses from both countries are quite similar to those of the four key teachers.

"There is an Old Lady"

Statistical Profile: ranked #2 by 55% of the American respondents with no significant difference those who have attended a "process approach" training program and those who have not; ranked #1 by 52% of the Chinese teachers in general, but by 89% of the teachers from the country.

Just as most American respondents feel most pleased with
"Grandfather" for its narrative style, most Chinese respondents, overwhelmingly the teachers from the country, find "Old Lady" coming closest to their ideal texts for both its style and content. One teacher puts it plainly, "'There is Such an Old Lady' is the best of the four, which means, compared with the rest, it best suits my taste. It conforms to the standard. The style is fresh and lively, the organization thoughtful and skillful; it has a sharp theme that entertains lofty ideas. Based on these merits, it deserves the highest position."

Most teacher (fifteen) agree with his evaluation of its style and structure, particularly features like, "the beginning and the end echo each other", "the story unfolds like taking off layer after layer of a bamboo shoot", "use contrast, personification, metaphors, suspense and other direct and indirect means of expression." The symbolic meanings of the trees and flowers are accorded their special attention. One teacher remarks, "The anecdote of the old lady planting trees, as if dropped in casually, adds a critical comment and development to the character." Some teachers like the conclusion of the paper, saying that "it brings the theme to a new height," or, "the brief comments reveal the central theme of the paper." No one finds fault with the added trait of "sincerity" in the last line.

Yet a significant number of teachers (five) find the structure "too conventional" and "too jaded." One of them elaborates, "The drawback of the piece is its affectation. The writer's deep impression is somehow affected. The so-called 'disposition' of the old lady, her 'thin' and 'straight' back, as well as that 'fat man' and the writer's revisit of the lane after ten years, all these are quite delicious when first read but tasted stale when chewed over."
The teacher who makes this remark ranks the paper third.

Sixteen other Chinese respondents commended the theme of the piece, as one of them comments, "The young writer portrays a kind, modest and sincere lady, which enables the reader to experience the broad mind of this veteran revolutionary and her rich and deep emotions. It is an ode to lofty humanity and a call for sincerity. The contrast between the old lady and the 'fat man' clearly reveals the intent and affinities of the writer. ... The outstanding characteristic of the piece is its in-depth reflection of reality. It also handles narration and description skillfully. Therefore, of the four pieces, this is the best."

The subject matter and the significance of the paper, however, are not major concerns for most American respondents; only a few commented on that aspect of the paper, one describing it as "a fine show of praise for a worthy person to be celebrated," and another, "It says something significant: that action rather than looks are what make heros." Two teachers want the writer to explore her own mind deeper, and one of them asks directly, "What did you learn about yourself?"

A good number of American readers' interest is captured by the conversation between the old lady and the child, as one of them comments, "There is some small charm in the naive and unsophisticated view and interpretation of the narrator." Still another comments, "The conversational style works well. The narrator has an individual voice," which is a rare compliment for Chinese writing.

Another feature that arouses great interest among them is the use of "the details in the setting" (some call them "images"), read as having symbolic or metaphorical
implications. With relish, one teacher interprets the symbolic meaning of every detail that he sees as having an implied reference. He not only sees the obvious connection between the parasol trees and the old lady, but also the violet flowers that overgrew her wall and spread into the lane as suggesting the influence of the old lady, the seeds as the gift of legacy, and the demolition of the house as "her memory surviving with the trees. It is as if this lady can be removed, but her influence will live on."

A number of respondents comment positively on its overall organization or some aspects of it. One of them observes, "well shaped piece; it has a clear structure and evolves to a clear resolution," another, "It has a finished feel to it. It is focused, balanced in terms of scene, fairly well developed and completed, although the ending is not as strong as it might be."

Seven teachers agree with his last line, as one of them puts it, "I wish the author had allowed the image of the trees to 'show' the reader what the current final line 'tells' the reader." Five of them consider the use of "sincerity" in the last line as a logical flaw, "Why end with sincerity when we don't see this trait developed throughout?" Jack and Jane had the same reaction when they were reading. Some teachers also find the beginning and the title ineffective.

Although some teachers are satisfied with the description of the old lady and the selection of details, a significant number of teachers (six) think that it tells too much. One respondent comments, "The fact that the woman represents strength, inspiration and sincerity, those traits need to be shown through what the old woman does and says; instead we
are told straight out." Another respondent has the same reaction, "It suffers from the thinness of the description of the encounters on which the ending is based." One teacher considers it a matter of pace, "It tries to cover too much ground—moves too fast; at its best when it slows down, describes."

"That fat man" evokes the same negative reaction from some of the respondents as it did from Jane. One teacher responds, "This [the fat man] is to contrast, but it seems contrived." Another respondent does not like him either, "The fat man and his brag are a bit too obvious a contrast; the point can come clear without him."

In short, "Old Lady" endears most Chinese respondents, particularly those from the country, for its didactic portrayal of an admirable revolutionary, its well-conceived structure and the use of various rhetorical devices and organizational techniques, except for a few teachers who consider it "too conventional." It is not the favorite piece of most American respondents because it could have "told" less, especially the ending, which is too straightforward and superfluous for them. But it is much better received than "Exam" and "To a Friend". Quite a number of them like its use of symbolic images and "the finished feel" of the story, though. The result confirms Mr Wang and Mr. Zhang's exceptionally high grading of the piece, but the response from the American teachers is more positive than that of Jack and Jane.

"Exam"

Statistical Profile: ranked #3 by the majority of the American respondents (59%), with no significant difference between those who have been to a training program and those
who have not. Response from the Chinese teachers is much more scattered: 26% of them rank it the second, 30% rank it the third, and 34% rank it the fourth.

Compared with "Old Lady", a much smaller number of Chinese teachers (eight) are impressed by the theme of the paper, which is interpreted as "conquering self" by most, and "love for nature" by two. At the same time, a significant number of teachers (five, four of them teachers from the country) question the import of the paper. As one of them comments, "That the writer gave up a composition contest in order to take part in an ornithology test is inappropriate. Firstly, the writer ignores the concern of the teacher, the sound advice of her classmate, which shows her insensitivity to others' feelings; secondly, she refuses to work for the honor of the collective; and finally to make a decision that indulges a personal hobby is a show of selfishness."

An overwhelming number of teachers (twenty) are impressed by the descriptions of nature, of the internal world of the narrator or the blending of the two. One teacher observes, "The composition describes and reveals with delicacy and vividness the conflicting and complex psychology of 'I' before and after the exam. It is especially worth mentioning that to depict that process, the writer employs not just internal monologues, but projects her feelings onto the natural scenery, transforming jing yu (the words of nature) to qing yu (the words of emotions)."

Yet quite a number of teachers (six) find much to be desired with its description of nature. Some point to the repetition, and some think the natural scene alone does not provide convincing reasons for the final decision. Two teachers think the elements of description, comments and the expression of emotions in the piece are not woven into an
organic whole.

Eight teachers like the piece, because it is "natural," "real" and "moving," as one teacher of them comments, "Its most outstanding characteristic is that it reflects the real psychological state of a high school student through depicting the complex mental change of 'I' from hesitation and conflict before the exam to joy and relief after the exam. ... The process is written naturally, fluidly, accurately, emotionally and excitingly. This is the main reason why the piece can move the reader." He ranks the piece #2. Another teacher has a similar response, "The writer shows carefully the care and the hope of the teacher for him, and just because of that, the decision was a very difficult one. It intensifies the internal conflicts experienced by the writer and leads to the process, after which the writer finally overcame the hesitation and made the right decision. It is real and believable."

Yet three teachers, out of the total of twenty-three and all male and from the city, who rank the piece at the bottom of the whole set, question the credence of the piece. One of them remarks, "It should be pointed out that the events narrated and emotions expressed in the piece are not necessarily true. If the teacher did not know there was conflict in schedule between two exams, the student should have reported it to the teacher, especially after the teacher had spent several lunch breaks to tutor her, yet the student did not even give her any hint." The ground on which this Chinese teacher questions the credence of the piece is clearly logic rather than style.

There is neither severe criticism of its organization and style, nor any showing of great excitement. The comments on
the piece are generally brief compared with other pieces. Only five teachers mention features other than the blending of nature and emotions, such as it being "complete," having "clear layers of development" and the use of "flashbacks."

The comments by the American respondents on this piece are more elaborate, although the response is more negative than positive.

There is a little more enthusiasm about the subject matter of this piece than about "Old Lady", yet the Chinese interpretation of the theme, "conquering self," again escaped the minds of the American readers, who read it as either "maturing through making difficult decisions" or "the love and commitment to nature." No one questioned the writer's decision to give up the composition exam; there is only approval and praise. As one teachers puts it, "It could become a strong piece, because it has a potentially powerful theme--the deeper meaning of attachment to nature than of personal triumph."

A great number of American respondents, more female than male (nine versus four) are, as their Chinese colleagues, enchanted by the connection between the description of nature and that of the mind of the narrator. One of them comments, "Really good--metaphor to the free-flying ducks is skillfully transferred to the student and exam." Another teacher has a similar reaction, "Much of the writing here is strong, especially the last page and a half. It is vivid and I can see the speaker's transition in attitude through the natural images. The ducks and birds flying into the sun are powerful, moving pictures."

One teacher sums up her appreciation of the two Chinese pieces, "The two Chinese students' pieces are delicate in feeling and thought and imagery--the courage and interest in
creating metaphor and using dialogue is delightful—the writing has depth and credence."

But such compliments are not typical of the general responses this piece elicits, especially among male teachers. Irritated and confused, one male teacher responds, "The piece is extremely irritating in its omissions. I find half the events of the story confusing: why is the student placed in this position in the first place? What is the implication of the mother's advice about conquering oneself? (The problem seems to be external rather than internal to the writer.) Why does an ornithology test symbolize a life of commitment to the preservation of habitats and species? Why are the description of the birds so general?" He is not the only teacher who has a problem with the logic of the story; three other teachers make similar comments. One teacher writes, "I have trouble with the logic of the story.... It is hard to understand why 'conquering the self' amounts to failing to follow through on the commitment to the contest for which the teacher had helped the speaker to prepare. This is a division between content and form. The writing is quite strong. The logic issue undermines the vivid prose."

For a good number of teachers, however, the piece is fatally undermined by its curt style. One respondent remarks, "A descriptive passage [is] never allowed to develop as sense-appeal passages--always forced into something with a conclusion." Another teacher has the same observation, "Some precise and vivid details combined with cliche and overblown statements." Still others, "tells, don't show--the reader wants to be actively involved rather than spoon-fed."

For some teachers, more male teachers than female (four versus one), though, the question of style calls in question the credence of the piece. One of them (male) remarks, "The
various components in the story are pretty well established. ... But the presentation of all these components is heavy-handed, and I end up not 'believing' the story emotionally, however much I may approve intellectually of its outcome. In a word, the story doesn't engage me very much; like its title, it is too straightforward and maybe obvious." Another teacher (male) responds more strongly, "I don't believe the character's dilemma for one minute, can't believe that Miss Lee wasn't consulted, her mother had only a quotation for her, etc. All of the characters are flat, they have no flesh and blood or minds. This is a very unsophisticated piece of writing that seems to take some second-rate eighteenth-or nineteenth-century prose as model."

In a word, what is perceived as the melodrama and sentimentality is the major reason why this piece received such negative response from most American readers. One describes it as "pathetic, sentimental," another calls it "overdramatic," and another feels that it has "that studied, artificial feel to it," and that "this is a story told as if by rote."

The conclusion evokes a negative reaction just as strongly. One teacher suggests, "I think the writer would have done better to show us the birds, the sunset--without telling us it was important and beautiful--we know that already. ...Cutting out the cliches and unnecessary explanations would make this piece sharper, more intense." The title and the introduction are considered by a number of teachers as "weak" too.

To conclude, "Exam" lags distantly far behind "Old Lady" when judged by American readers, which is a mild surprise, for Jack and Jane responded much more favorably to it.
There seems to be a rare affinity between the male teachers in America and the male teachers from Chinese urban areas, both ranking the piece lower than other groups. They are tougher readers and, in this case, both question more harshly the credence of the piece, although the Chinese teachers base their criticism solely on its logic, and the American teachers' criticism is based on logic as well as, if not more so, on style, which is perceived as copying the prose style of the eighteenth or nineteenth century, which is embarrassingly "sentimental" and "overdramatic." On the whole, American teachers like the use of imagery and the "complexity" of the two Chinese pieces, yet their evaluation plummets when they find too much direct telling and melodrama. Few American teacher are impressed by the title, the introduction and conclusion of either piece.

"To a Friend"

Statistical Profile: Ranked the last by 68% of the American respondents with slightly more favorable evaluation from the teachers who have been to training programs than those who have not. The only three American teachers who rank it in the higher ranks of #1 and #2 are female, two of whom have been to a "process approach" training program. Response from the Chinese teachers is again more scattered, but most of them rank it in the lower ranks of #3 (35%) and #4 (48%). In contrast, the only four teachers, who put it in the higher position of #2, are male.

There are two things that most American respondents pick out as praise-worthy: The strong emotion and the introductory sentences. One teacher expresses the gut-level reaction of most teachers, "On a personal level, this piece is moving, because the pain is so palpable." And a few teachers (two)
believe the piece has its own function, as one of them remarks, "It undoubtedly proved therapeutic to the author."

But it is because of those features, the same teachers find it too private, too crude and even too "phony". One teachers remarks, "This unshaped, unsophisticated cry of grief belongs to a diary." Another respondent describes his reaction as, "...while I want to feel strongly about what happened, and I think I ought to feel strongly about what happened, I just don't." Four female teachers find the piece "filled with cliches," something Jane worked so hard with the student to avoid. A number of teachers think the piece suffers from the lack of emotional control. One male teacher comments, "Uncontrolled, almost peevish. Essentially a gush," and another, "I suspect that the events of the story are true and too emotionally raw for the author to spend time filling in the physical detail." Some female teachers have the same reaction, and one of them remarks, "raw emotions, unedited, unrevised," and another, "sincerity becomes sentimentality."

The lack of details and specifics sharply brings down the estimation of the piece by a good number of teachers (ten). One male teacher remarks, "Too much statement of emotion and idea, too little specific detail and restraint, I always have trouble with such writing." Some female respondents observe, "Too vague, needs more specific details to illustrate feeling," and "no sensory detail--or very little."

Five teachers question the credence of the piece for the lack of specifics. One of them remarks, "I suspect she never had the experience." Another shows a similar reaction, "Pretty bland, vague and uninteresting, too many empty rhetorical questions, finally because we don't learn much about either person or their relationship, we are unmoved....
I feel nothing for the speaker and don't believe that s/he was confused, angry, etc." One female teacher does not go that far, but comments, "No clear picture, doesn't show, could have been written by anyone."

A significant number of Chinese respondents share the criticisms of their American colleagues that the piece is lacking in craft and good details. Four teachers, three of them from the city, think the piece does not have enough substance by only pouring out emotions. Three others think the piece not well organized and clearly expressed, yet few would judge it as "phony". On the contrary, there is an outpouring of appreciation for what they perceive as "honesty" and "strong and sincere emotions". Nineteen Chinese respondents express the same strong emotional reaction as the following two respondents, both of whom are male. One of them comments, "The composition expresses the author's sorrow for the inconsequential death of her friend. It is written straight from heart, sincere and intense, painfully moving. She addresses her friend directly as if she were alive and blames her for abandoning their friendship. There are also affectionate memories along with regrets and self-reproach for her own delayed understanding. Finally she offers her hearty prayers for her friend. It reveals her agony and other emotions in one wave after another, lapping at the heart of the reader. These are done very effectively." Another male teacher, also deeply touched by the emotional force of the piece, comments, "It expresses forcibly the author's sincere, faithful love and unadulterated affection for her friend (or lover). It is hard to hold back tears when reading. ... 'Writing is valued for its honesty.' A high school student who can produce such
an honest piece is exceptional." Its unusual use of second person and its effective use of rhetorical questions also won approval from a number of Chinese teachers.

Nine Chinese teachers, however, have a problem with the thematic import of the piece. The same teacher, who considers the writer "exceptional", questions, "Should a high school student be allowed to write a piece like this? Does it have any positive and immediate significance? I think these questions are worth pondering." Another teacher who regards the piece as having "high artistic power" remarks, "In the piece the author indulges only in personal emotions, so it has little significance for the society. The tone of the entire piece is too subdued and depressing." Another teacher, after comparing all four pieces, comes to the conclusion, "If I am to apply the same standard to this piece as I do to my Chinese students, I have to place it the last. It is not enough to just say 'Life would have gotten better'. For a Chinese youth, one should dig deep to find the social causes for such a tragedy. But maybe such a standard is unreasonable for an American student."

But five teachers, all from the city, have an entirely different reading. Three of them think the piece ends with a positive note, and two others suggest that the piece has certain depth, for it exposes indirectly some social problems.

To conclude, the result of the survey of "To a Friend" is most unexpected, far different from the overall positive responses I heard from the four key teachers. Although Jack and Mr. Zhang pointed out some of its stylistic weaknesses, no key teacher was critical of its credence and ideology. But there is still consistency with the two results: most Chinese male teachers respond to the piece as Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang
did: instead of calling it "phony" or "sentimental", they are deeply moved. Both Jack and Jane embrace the philosophical underpinnings of the "process approach" (although they practice it in their own styles), and this piece is received more favorably by teachers who have been to a "process approach" training program. One American teacher's comments best explain the negative response of most American teachers, "Strength of feeling alone does not establish an appropriate and sustainable relationship between the writer and reader."

For Chinese teachers, on the other hand, strong emotion can be as engaging as "thick description", and the objection from some of them was not the expression of emotions, rather, the absence of an uplifting and socially significant message. It is interesting to note that there is a delicate yet unusual alliance between Chinese men and American woman in this case, for slightly more Chinese male respondents and American female respondents feel at home with what is called emotional "gush" than the other gender group in their countries.
V.2. SUMMARY

Looking at the results of the survey (Appendix I, II), it is tempting to say that teachers' evaluation of student papers is entirely idiosyncratic, because every piece received at least three different rankings from the respondents in both countries. But there are two discernible statistical patterns that are different between the response from American teacher and that from the Chinese teachers as a whole. First, there is more uniformity of judgment among the American respondents than the Chinese respondents. Although the percentage varies, the majority of the American teachers rank the four pieces in the same order (from the most favorable to the least): "Grandfather" (64%), "Old Lady" (54%), "Exam" (59%) and "To a Friend" (68%). The Chinese respondents are much more dispersed in their evaluation. Except for "Old Lady", which is ranked first by the majority of the Chinese respondents (52%), the ranking of the rest spreads widely. This maybe because China, as pointed out by Mr. Wang, is going through radical social changes since it opened its door to the world ten years ago, which may have resulted in divergence of ideas, or some confusion and disorientation. People who are more exposed to the outside world are likely to hold quite different values from those in the more closed areas, and free-thinking individuals are likely to stray from traditional orthodoxy and the party line. Secondly, while Chinese male teachers rank the four pieces in a quite different order (from the most favorable to the least): "Old Lady", "Grandfather", "To a Friend", and
"Exam", Chinese female respondents rank the four pieces in the same order as the American respondents. And American female teachers generally respond more favorably to Chinese pieces. It maybe because women teachers tend to evaluate student writing intuitively, while men teachers tend to "stick to the rules", and "rules" are quite different in the two cultures.

The result shows surprising similarities among teachers from both countries, but also substantial differences. After all, the majority of the teachers, no matter what country they are from, rank "Grandpa" and "Old Lady" as superior pieces to "Exam" and "To a Friend". But the fact that "Old Lady" is viewed much more favorably than "Grandpa" by most Chinese respondents, and that "To a Friend" strikes a strong responsive chord in the heart of the Chinese male teachers, but is rejected as "sentimental" by most American teachers, mark the substantial difference in the rhetorical values held by the two groups of teachers.

The table on page 187 lists side by side the most frequently applied criteria in the respondents' comment of the four pieces. In making the table, I break the teachers' comments to three categories: content, organization and the catch-all category, style. By organization I mean the selection and arrangement of material. It is further divided into comments on the overall organization and on the specific methods of arrangements. Style is a very elusive term, which is used to refer to the choice of words, sentence structure, or the overall effects (Corbett, 333-352), so here it is used conveniently to cover the rest: the employment of rhetorical tropes and the readers' general impressions. Classification is an abstraction of reality--no teacher wrote his comments according to these categories, so very often I find myself
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American Respondents</th>
<th>Chinese Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(perceptive, reflective)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>(meaningful, profound)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>(45)</td>
<td>(clear development, tight, focused)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(fully developed, controlled, good shape, focused)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(narrative perspective, contrast)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(contrast, flashback, suspense, others)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lead/Introduction</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| (clear resolution,  
  *superfluous) | 20 | (echo the opening, reveal or advance the theme) | 14 |
| **Style**              | (111)                | (91)                |
| Show not tell          |                      | Descriptive         |
| (specific, use detail) | 59                   | 12                  |
| Believable             | 24                   | Qing                |
| Tropes (symbol, images)| 15                   | Natural             |
| Logical                | 13                   | *Ambiguous          |
| Effective              | 12                   | Jing                |
| *Cliche                | 10                   | Plain               |

* Negative attributes.
** Numbers in parenthesis are totals for the whole category, and words in parenthesis are actual terms used by the teachers.

Table 1. Criterion cited in the comments
breaking a line of comments, even a short phrase, into several categories. "Symbolic detail," for example, is classified both as "Tropes" and "Show and not tell." "Contrasting image" is checked under both "Specific organization" and "Trope". What is not covered by any of the three categories is the correctness at and under the syntactic level: grammar, spelling, punctuation, and the like. This is because the teachers are responding to translated texts, and those features are lost in translation. Besides, correctness, whatever that means in each language, is probably the only universal criterion of all good writing, a point I believe most people would agree without further arguments.

Although I managed to set up categories that are applicable to the comments made by teachers both in America and China, that's where a consistent classification stops. Chinese teachers, for example, as their comments reveal, think good content should be "meaningful" and "profound", yet American teachers, when commending the content of a paper, often use attributes like "perceptive", or, occasionally, "reflective." Therefore I put the typical attributes used in their comments in the brackets under each category.

Their criteria often overlap: attributes like "descriptive," "focused," "contrasting" and "developed" appear in the comments of the respondents from both countries, but sometimes their reference is different. What is "ambiguous" for the Chinese readers is "suggestive" and "understated" for the American readers. On the other hand, what is "revealing" for some teachers is "superfluous" and "too explicit" for others. What is "natural" and what is "believable" have different denotations for different
teachers.

The question of priority, the order in which the rhetorical values are ordered, are just as revealing as the rhetorical values themselves. Assuming that the more frequently a criterion is applied, the more important that criterion is, I include the number of times that each listed criterion is mentioned in the comments, regardless of whether it is used to praise or to criticize, as a way to indicate the priority order of the criteria. To draw a profile that represents most respondents, I choose to include only the top ten features (in terms of frequency) of each country, and, when space is available, the corresponding frequency of that criterion mentioned by the other party for comparison. The drawback of such an approach, of course, is an incomplete profile, missing quite a few details, but a brief sketch should be closer to reality than a detailed portrait drawn with willful strokes.

Teachers' comment is a direct response to a particular piece of student writing, so only the standards that are relevant to the piece are evoked. Therefore, what is presented here are criteria for good writing as revealed in the forty-five teachers' comments on the four selected pieces. It is not a complete list of all the standards teachers in the two countries apply to their student writings.

The "sketch" displays several maxims for good writing that are unique to each country. The number one maxim for the Chinese teachers, according to the frequency with which the criteria is applied, is content. Chinese teachers usually start their comments with a statement of their understanding of the subject matter, such as, "It portrays an admirable character," or, "It describes the psychological
process." Then they proceed to discuss its social ramification, that is, what social impact it can have. Good writing, for them, should have an explicit didactic or socially significant message. This principle is upheld much more rigorously by the Chinese teachers from the countryside than those from the city. Like Mr. Wang, city teachers generally take a more tolerant attitude towards the topic students choose to write. For the American respondents, on the other hand, what is written is not nearly as important as how it is written. The frequency of their comments on the content of the four pieces is about one fourth of their Chinese counterparts'. Although sometimes they offer their interpretations of the meaning of a paper, rarely do they deliberate on its social significance and grade it accordingly.

The second most important feature of a good piece of writing for most Chinese respondents is organization. Most of their comments elaborate on the organizational arrangements of the writing, such as its use of contrast, flashback, suspense, and the like. The American respondents, on the other hand, spend little energy on analyzing the ways in which a paper is organized. They talk about organization in a much more general, and often vague terms, whether it is fully developed, focused, or simply, whether it has a good shape. The introduction of the four pieces is one component of writing that conspicuously receives no comments at all from the Chinese readers, but receives ample attention from the American readers. It is obviously critical for the American teachers that good writing should be able to capture the reader right away, but for Chinese teachers, it is only a warm-up exercise before the real game starts. The conclusion is the part of the writing that both parties give plenty of
heed to, yet judged with quite different standards. Conclusions of the two Chinese pieces are considered "superfluous" by the Americans, whereas they are indispensable for the Chinese, because they "reveal and advance the theme."

Style is the most important factor that affects most American teachers' assessment. The number one stylistic maxim is unequivocally, "to show, not to tell". Being able to use specific, concrete and sensory details is far more important than just telling a story that has an uplifting or socially important message. For quite a number of American teachers, this is the sole criterion with which they rank the four pieces. They insist on "to show, not to tell" not only because they think details produce more engaging pieces, but, more important, such writing leaves room for the reader's imagination and intelligence. A piece like "Exam", which tells straightforward, is offensive for some American readers, who feel being "spoon-fed", or "heavy-handedly" cornered to accept the writer's conclusion.

The second most important criterion for the American respondents is whether or not a piece is believable. Strictly speaking, believability is not a question of style, and it does not belong to any category; it is only the reader's personal impression of a piece, which could be a result of anything: diction, plot, organization, style, or a combination of all or some. Just as most Chinese teachers start their comments with a brief statement of the content, most American teachers start their comments with a line that generalizes their personal impression, whether the piece is "believable" "moving", or simply, "Great!". Such statements are so subjective it is hard to define what they really mean.
But it is evident from their comments that what is believable to the American respondents is closely related to their number one maxim: to show, not to tell. The lack of details, as one teacher comments, means, "it can be written by anyone." A piece like "Grandfather," which is more descriptive and has more sensory details, is almost unanimously praised as "believable", while pieces written in a more abstract and emotional language, such as "Exam" and "To a Friend", are heavily questioned for their credence. For the Chinese teachers, on the other hand, their judgment of a piece's credibility is based on the plausibility of the story or character, whether or not such a story could happen in real life. As long as a story does not infringe on common-sense, it is believable. "Unnatural" is another epithet used almost synonymously with "phony" in American teachers' comments. Although the Chinese respondents never criticized their student writing as "purple" or "overblown", the table shows that they also praise writing that they consider "natural" and "plain". "Natural", however, has different references in their vocabulary. American teacher often find Chinese student writing "unnatural" because it is too dramatic and crafted, which gives it "a studied and artificial feel to it." When the Chinese teacher talk about "natural", they are referring mostly to the diction of the writing, whether an appropriate expression is chosen. Their comments, especially those by the city teachers, indicate a strong reaction against the use of ornate language. What Mr. Wang called "beauty text" is loosing ground in China. Chinese teachers are moving down the scale from the formal to the actual street talk that Jack proposed. So what is believable is not a question of being factual, but one of teachers' stylistic choice, which changes not only from
culture to culture, but from time to time.

Finally, whether the writing has qing (emotions) or not is another unique Chinese criterion; a piece devoid of emotions is like a person depleted of blood. For the American readers, on the other hand, a good piece should have the effect of "moving" the reader, yet that effect has to be achieved by specific descriptions of a character or an event rather than by exposing the readers directly to the feelings of the writer for that character or event. A piece that bares the author's emotions to the reader is considered "sentimental" and "unrestrained." Writing about emotions, such as "To a Friend", is criticized as "tells almost totally", a violation of American number one maxim. Ironically "To a Friend" is the most sincere piece for Chinese teachers, yet "phony" and "full of cliche" for most American teachers. Although teachers as Jane and Jack, who accept "process approach" allow for more expression of emotion, the general attitude is still one of aversion.

Finally, having looked at all the differences, it is important to see the commonality between the two cultures. As the table shows, there are a good number of criteria that teachers from both countries share. They all like in-depth thinking and accurate descriptions resulting from careful observation of life. They also agree that good writing should be coherent, unified, and engaging, although much can be said about what each and every one of those criterion means in each culture.
CHAPTER VI

ONE RESEARCHER'S PERSPECTIVE

The last three chapters have reported the comments of the writing teachers in China and America on the student writings selected from both countries. The four key teachers were not just "subjects" of the research, who provided data for the research, but ethnographers whose interpretation of their own comments and of others' provided perspectives from each country. I included both the student texts and various responses from the teachers in the two countries, so that each reader can form his or her own reading of the student texts, as well as the teachers' responses.

In the last chapter, I offer my perspective on the different criteria of good writing as revealed in the research. As I stated in the introduction, the goal of this project is not just looking at the criteria of good writing of another culture, which I believe is a sound goal in itself, but, by confronting another reality, reflecting on our own criteria of good writing. Therefore, rather than bringing the subject under study to a conclusion, I intend to raise questions about those criteria, some of which have been practiced for so long in this country that no one knows where they came from, and have been often misconceived as "universal" that few ever bothered to define or justify them.

How I look at these criteria is as much decided by who I am, especially the kind of education I have had, as it is

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anyone else. So before the discussion of any particular set of criteria, I will first describe briefly my life and my own experience in learning and teaching writing.

I was born the second year after the "New China" was founded under the Chinese Communist Party. In China, my generation is often referred to "a generation that was born under the red flag and grew up under the red flag." But we were not the most blessed generation as we thought we would be. In 1966, my education was interrupted when the so-called Cultural Revolution closed all schools in China. Although, because of my family background, I was not politically qualified to join the Red Guards, I enthusiastically participated in the "revolutionary actions" to remove everything residual of the feudalistic tradition: street signs, old temples, and almost all books. When all were destroyed, including the desks and chairs in the classroom, we started anew: we left the city where we grew up to receive reeducation from the peasants in the country. After five years' hard work on a state farm all my revolutionary zeal was gone, and my only wish was to go back to school. The opportunity came, for I was one of the lucky ones who was selected by the local peasants to go to college, though I had never finished high school. Ten years after the start of the cultural revolution, my life took a turn. I left my family again, this time heading for America, thanks to the new Party leader, Deng Xiao-ping, who believed that an open door policy would bring modernization to China and longevity to the Communist Party. China's reform was having its honeymoon then: the economy was growing at an unprecedented speed, and the people were full of hope for the future. I looked
forward to the completion of my study and the return to teaching English in China. Yet Tian An Men Square incident in June, 1989 forever changed my destiny. No one can explain the exact causes for what happened on Tian An Men square; all we know is thousands of courageous young people who grew up after the cultural revolution took to the street and, for the first time in Chinese history, demanded political power from the old men. For a month, I watched them every day on television with admiration and forboding fear of what might happen to them. When that fatal night came, when I watched in safe distance the Chinese army open fire at the people it claims to protect, I was struck by despair and anger. Something snapped that night; I knew I would never subject myself to a government that will not give its people the basic rights to think, to speak, and to be simply alive. My plan to return to China has since been a topic we never discussed again in the family. I decided to continue my teaching career in America.

I owe my ability to write, not as good as a professional writer but good enough to produce A papers, to my Chinese and American education. Although I never went to senior high school in China, and writing was not taught in college, my Chinese writing teachers made enough impact in my teen years that I always liked writing. I still remember the "appreciation classes", in which the teacher read aloud to the class a number of good pieces from the last assignment and analyzed the accomplishments of these papers. It was a practice that almost all my Chinese teachers used, and, as I learned from my recent visit to China, it is still widely used in most writing classrooms in China. It was not individualized teaching--with a class size of forty to fifty,
teachers and students never imagined such luxury as individualized teaching. But somehow that method made me feel special in an overcrowded classroom (many of my classmates, incidentally, felt the same way). I remember the pride and joy when my writing was read to the class, and the inspiration when others' were read. Every time I handed in my writing, which was invariably written to an assigned topic and finished in one hour and a half, I looked forward to that "appreciation class". The most exciting moment, though, came at the end of that class when the teacher walked down the aisle and handed back to each student the paper with a grade and her written comments. The class fell quiet, all reading silently. I never expected perfect grades because I was told that even the works of the best writers could be improved. Although I often had the same comments, "Your language is fluent, and the structure is complete, but ...", I valued the red scribbled lines on my paper, for the teacher was talking directly to me about my writing, and alone. I read it over and over again until my excitement abated (I never understand some research findings that students do not pay attention to the teachers' comments once a grade is delivered). In reading class, we were expected to understand not just the content, but also the structure and language. The teacher tirelessly analyzed the structure and language of each model essay. The favorite story of one teacher was how a poet spent days contemplating whether he should use "push" or "knock" the door under the moonlight to create the right atmosphere, and that is why "push-knock" means in Chinese to weigh one's words, or to deliberate. I became aware at an early stage that writing involves not just the expression of
ideas and emotions, but also how to pick the right words to express them and conjure up the right structure.

Graduate education in America has given me a new awareness about writing. Although I was considered a good writer by my Chinese teachers, I found myself struggling aimlessly in the first two years after I came to America. My writing was sometimes "too vague" and "lacking specifics", but other times "redundant", "too straight forward." I was at loss how to be "specific" yet not "redundant", how to avoid being "straight forward" and "vague" at the same time. I realized that the American professors have different criteria for good writing, but there was no place to learn what exactly they are.

I decided to take a class on writing to find out the "secret formula". My professor was Donald Murray, who considers himself a writer rather than a teacher of writing. He never lectured; he simply wrote with us. As he wrote and rewrote, cutting and adding, moving the paragraphs around, we worked on our own projects. Besides writing, we listened to each other's work, including Don's, while nibbling cookies made by his wife Minnie Mae. We suggested changes and clarification to each other's writing, and to Don's, but more often we just listened quietly. When the class ended, I sent my paper on metaphors in Chinese and English to a newspaper, and it was accepted immediately. For the first time in my life, I published an article in English. Murray never told me any "secret formula", but he showed me a writer at work, who works with discipline, passion and an inquiring mind. At the end of that year, when I completed my master's degree in linguistics, I applied for the PhD program in Composition Studies and Literature at the University of New Hampshire,
and was accepted.

The hardest thing in teaching writing, I found, was not to lecture or to organize discussions, but to comment on student papers. Every time I wrote comments on a student paper, I was filled with misgivings: am I fair? am I saying the right thing? how should I deal with the paper that "effectively" writes about having fun on a beach and breaking up with the third boy friend? what should I say to a piece that describes every detail of building a log cabin in the mountain, from stealing boards from the basement of a friend's family basement to the beer party held in the cabin to celebrate its completion? should I say "cut it out" or "interesting details"? what do I say to a piece that has few realistic details, but creates a surreal scene at the top of the mountain: listening to the howling of the snow mixed with rock and roll blasting from his tape recorder, while gliding effortlessly towards the moon? how do I handle a piece that angrily denounces an alcoholic father, who abused the writer's mother, and is going to destroy her future because he could not keep his job and provide for her education? how about a piece that keeps calling men "pigs" and "jerks", the way the writer talks in real life? should I praise the writer for having her own voice or cross them out as inappropriate? what is appropriate anyway? who sets the standards? I needed help badly and looked for books that would answer these questions, yet the search was not fruitful. Coles and Vopat's What Makes Writing Good, a collection of student papers as samples of excellent writing selected and commented by the best teachers in the field, was the closest I got. Yet the subtitle of the book, A
**Multiperspectival**, warned me not to look for consistency in the selection.

Research that does address the question of teachers' commentary often reveals a very chaotic picture: Students' perception of what a good paper is different from professors' (Schwartz, Newkirk), new faculty's is different from the old (Siegel), and even the experienced faculty disagree with one another (Griffin, Zamel).

There is, however, not a lack of research on the pedagogy and methodology of evaluating student writing. There are plenty of studies and books on how to respond to student writing. Nancy Sommers' research connecting teachers' commentary with student revision offers good insight into the revision process. Cooper and Odell published a book which reviews various approaches to holistic evaluation and other ways to measure growth in writing. Edward White's book, *Teaching and Assessing Writing* contains good discussions on the relation between evaluation and teaching and ways to score student papers. There are plenty of publications on peer evaluation, student self-evaluation and teacher-student conferences. What is absent from these discussions is the teachers' criteria of good writing on which our commentary and scoring are based. "The judgement of writing quality," deplored Hirsch, "is left either to impressionism or to a mechanical counting system" (157). It is as if we keep producing better arrows and arches, but we do not bothered to find out what the targets are, still less why they are chosen as targets.

This lack of attention to one of the fundamental issues in the teaching of writing implies a deep ingrained assumption that the criteria of good writing is objective,
"good writing is good writing is good writing." The variegated responses and rankings from the respondents in the study, however, point to a different reality: beauty is in the eye of the beholder, to use an old saying.

Although there is no consensus as to what good writing is among American teachers, there are certain maxims that they share. The difference between the result of the survey and the two American key teachers, for example, is a matter of judgement rather than a disagreement on the criteria. Although they did not follow the maxims as rigorously as some of the respondents in the survey, Jack and Jane repeatedly referred to the same criteria, such as, "show, not tell", "be natural" and "believable", and paid little heed to the features to which the Chinese respondents attached great importance: a didactic message, traditional forms and the expression of emotions.

But why should the student only show with specifics and not tell his opinion or intention straightforwardly? What do we mean when we instruct the student to write naturally? Why should the student writer refrain from so called "emotional gush"? What do these criteria say to the function of writing? The ways in which Chinese teachers responded to student writing certainly do not provide answers to these questions. Yet their views provide a conversation partner for a Platonic discourse on these issues. The word dialectic was used originally by Plato in the same meaning as dialogue, the only process through which truth is elicited (Plato, 10). Here I will briefly examine some criteria that have been referred to frequently by the American respondents in the survey, using the Chinese theories of writing as referential
points. Although these criteria are articulated in teachers' comments on personal narratives, we can find some of the principles applied in other forms of writing. So the discussion can be relevant to the perception of good writing as a whole.

The Specifics, the Specifics...

If there is one principle of style followed with religious exactitude by most American teachers, it is "use definite, specific, concrete language." Hirsch reviewed five popular handbooks: Strunk, Gowers, McCrimmon, Crews, and Lucas, and he found that the instruction that appears most consistently in all five handbooks is "use definite, specific, concrete language" (146-147)¹.

No one seems to know where this paramount precept of writing narrative came from, but we can see this principle at work when reading realistic novels thick with circumstantial, matter-of-fact, and seemingly unselective details. Realism, as defined by Nochlin, aims to "give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life" (13). The mimetic theory of art has been criticized since the time of Plato, who opposes "true reality" to "mere appearance". Hegel echoes Plato's notion of reality when he says, "True reality lies beyond immediate sensation and the object we see everyday. ...Only what exists in itself is real" (quoted by Nochlin, 13-14). Realism, although it still prevails in all spheres, is discarded by modern artists and critics in favor

¹ The second most popular maxim is "avoid padding." Interestingly enough, although Chinese student writing was criticized frequently for straight telling and the lack of specifics, it was not criticized as padded.
of the theory of art as subjective expression.

Chinese teachers, as explained by Mr. Zhang, prefer a more selective and suggestive description of reality. A single movement of Shuisheng's wife, the almost imperceptible shaking of her fingers, is enough to show what kind of emotional turmoil she was undergoing. Chinese has a long tradition of abstract art (not in the Western sense, though). Its ink painting always leaves large blank spaces for the viewer to fill up with his imagination, and its traditional operas use exaggerated make-up and symbolic props. A desk, for instance, can be a mountain, a city wall, a castle, or sometimes, just a desk. Even The Dream of Red Chamber, which is acclaimed to be the first realistic novel in Chinese literature, is interrupted from time to time by authorial comments to remind the reader that what is real is mere illusion. Thick description may be more engaging to the Western readers, it is overelaborate and tedious to most Chinese readers.

Ohmann, as one of the few noticeable exceptions in our field, takes on the task of examining the implications of this best-known injunction in his article "Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language". He finds that such advice "conveys a fairly well-defined ideological picture", which Ohmann characterizes as "ahistoricism" (focusing on a truncated present moment), "empiricism" (favoring sensory news from the surface of things), "fragmentation" (seeing an object in isolation, disconnected from the rest of the world), "solopisism" (the writer's own perception being privileged), and "denial of conflict" ( picturing a world in which all readers read the same meaning into the details.
presented). In addition, Ohmann notes that such style, "pushes the student writer always toward the language that most nearly reproduces the immediate experience and away from the language that might be used to understand it, transform it, and relate it to everything else" (387-388).

"Show, not tell" is the same principle said in different words; it limits student writing to the immediate sensory particulars. Many teachers defend it as a democratic principle of not imposing one writer's intention on the reader. "Show, not tell" actually says to the writer: you show your experience and leave the right to interpret to me. The egocentric "me" thinking builds thick walls around us that separate people from one another. How can we expand our perspectives if we do not allow others to tell? In writing Native Son, Richard Wright chooses an omniscient narrator, instead of the first person narrator, the choice of most writers in his time, because he wants the white reader to look at Bigger Thomas' short and tragic life from a black perspective. Left to the readers, Wright feared, Bigger Thomas would be read as nothing but a cold-blooded and reckless killer, just as black young men had always been portrayed by the mass media. Some banker's daughters may shed a few drops of sympathetic tears as they did with his first book Uncle Tom's Children, but most readers will close the book with reinforced fear and contempt for blacks. "Show, not tell" is not a fair game; it privileges the existing and the dominant, and silences the voices of the new and the different.

That each individual is a lonely explorer, rediscovering the world on himself, is part of American popular mythology that starts from teenagers, who wave to their parents
impatiently, "Don't tell me what to do!" Such mythology produces independence and also separateness and narrow-mindedness. If we allow no telling, we will only hear ourselves and be locked up in our own narrow world. Successful exploration has to be a cooperative effort, even a generational effort. My critique of this popular injunction does not mean that all writing should end with a glaring "dragon's eye" or an irrelevant "moral tag", but we should look carefully at the complex and dynamic relationship between telling and showing. If writing is for communication and reading for broadening our vision, perhaps we should not only allow, but encourage the student to "make the connection between the particular and the general, the individual and the typical, and the accidental and the necessary" (Lukacs, 49).

"Write Naturally"

"Natural" and "phony" are among the most used dichotomous epithets for good or bad writing in American teachers' comments. The notion that good writing is natural writing is manifest in places other than teachers' comments. A sample test distributed at the 1979 College Conference on Composition and Communication starts with the instruction to the students taking the test, "Your are expected to express your thoughts carefully, naturally, and effectively...."

Ironically such instructions are often contradicted by how student papers are actually evaluated. "To a Friend" is by all measures, a natural piece, in that it is a direct outpouring of the writer's sentiments without much embellishment, yet it is ranked the lowest in the survey
except among Chinese men teachers. It was criticized as "raw, uncrafted, unedited" and even "unnatural". It makes one wonder what "natural" really means, for obviously it does not mean that students can write anyway they want to; they have to meet certain demands in order to be natural.

Being "natural" seems to mean two things from the talks of Jack and Jane: avoid writing in a formal language and use an "organic" structure. But to write in a other than formal language does not mean one can write the way he or she talks. As Jack points out, the preferred language is between four and five on a continuum from one to ten in term of formality. It is a language that sounds like a speech, but more polished and perfected than actual speech. To achieve such a delicate balance between the formal and the colloquial does not come naturally; it requires as much learning as writing in a formal language.

The belief that there is an organic structure, a structure that grows out the content, like the colors of the flowers born out of nature without the contamination of human hands, echoes Romantic view of writing as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", or the dream of the Realism "to escape from the bonds of convention into a magic world of pure verisimilitude" (Nochlin 14).

In Chinese tradition writing is viewed as art, the perfection of which takes much deliberation and training. Such a view of literature can be traced back to the etymology of the word for literature, wen, which had the original meaning of "pattern" and "embellishment" (Liu, 99). Writing is an activity often compared to the experience of weaving or embroidery. Su Ma Shiang-ju (179-117 B.C), for one, is reported to have said, "To join together different colored
silk strands to form patterns, to array brocades and
embroideries as the substance, to interweave each warp with a
woof,... these are the outward traces of wen" (quoted and
translated by Liu, 101). As there are ways to weave silk
more beautifully than others, there are better ways to put
together a piece of writing that one can master through
training. Chinese writing teachers pass on those "patterns",
such as the four components of writing: introduction,
development, transition, and closure, to the students in the
same way that master spinners teach their apprentices. Smart
apprentices may some day invent new patterns of their own,
but they start from imitation.

It is commonly believed that Confucius once said, "If
words do not have wen [patterns/embellishments], they will
not go far." Whether Confucius actually said that or not is
hard to prove, but since it is attributed to the Sage, the
notion that forms and embellishments are necessary elements
of literature is well established. Even Mao Ze-tong,
Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, who insisted that in
judging literature one should "put the political criteria
first and the artistic criteria second", advocated, "Works of
art which lack artistic quality have no force, however
progressive they are politically" (90). The attention to the
craft could go to extremes, as happened in Song Dynasty,
when poets were so preoccupied with the perfection of forms
that literature became merely ornaments that were empty of
substance. Although most Chinese scholars reject the
ornamental "Song style", they never went so far as to think
that writing can seamlessly reproduce reality, or that the
form takes care of itself if we concentrates on content.
Chinese view of structure may be too rigid, but it has the virtue of clarity. The instruction of "writing naturally", on the other hand, which appears to give the student total freedom, is vague and misleading. It belies the fact that writing, as all public discourse, follows certain conventions and requires discipline and training.

The belief that students should write naturally often comes from the misconception that writing is like talking. Since all healthy children can talk, all students should be able to write if only we could pull them out of the inhibiting shadows of rules and forms. In her article "Writing as a Mode of Learning", Janet Emig argues that, while talking is a valuable form of pre-writing, "there are hazards, conceptually and pedagogically, in creating too complete an analogy between talking and writing, in blurring the very real differences between the two." She then names eleven differences between the two, and the first two read (71): 1. Writing is learned behavior; talking is natural, even irrepressible behavior. 2. Writing then is an artificial process; talking is not.

Vygostky, quotes Emig in the same article, describes writing as "deliberate structuring of the web of meaning" (74), which sounds a familiar echo to the old Chinese analogy between writing and weaving.

Nochlin reveals a common feature of all writing rather than just works of realistic writers when she comments, "...Realism was no more a mere mirror of reality than any other style and its relation qua style to phenomenal date - the donnee - is as complex and difficult as that of Romanticism, the Baroque or Mannerism" (14). Nochlin knows, so do all writers who spend hours sweating over the pages,

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that "total spontaneity" or "a magic world of pure verisimilitude" are illusions created by masterful weavers, who may be creative with new patterns, but their patterns are as carefully designed and executed as any. We owe it to the student to define clearly what "natural" means before we throw comments like "phony" on their writing.

"Sentimental Gush"

An American teacher who taught writing in China for a year had this to say about his Chinese students' English writing, "Chinese prose, ... is full of old-fashioned Victorian sugaring—long verbal signs, clutched body parts, and grand exhalations of feeling. The Chinese are, after all, like the Italians, an operatic culture" (Holm, 60)

American teachers often relate Chinese student writing to the writing of the Victorian era, full of pious and excessive sentiments, a style snubbed after the romantic period. Modernism "emphasized erotic desire, not love; anarchic rupture and innovation rather than the conventional appeals of sentimental language" (Suzanne, 1). Eagleton describes T. S. Eliot's scorn for Romantic poetry as, "Poetry had fallen foul of the Romantics, become a mawkish, womanly affair full of gush and fine feeling. Language had gone soft and lost its virility: it needed to be stiffened up again, made hard and stone-like, reconnected with physical world" (41).

Such a scornful attitude towards sentiments, either by benevolence or viciousness of history, never prevailed among Chinese men of letters (I mean men of letters). Chinese literature, though not operatic, is poetic in its true sense.
(Chinese operas are much influenced by poetry). Until the last two hundred years, poetry was the only recognized form of literature. Novels ("small talks" in Chinese), along with operas and folklores, were looked down upon as a pastime for audience who were not educated enough to appreciate the highest form of art. Prose served only practical purposes. The purpose of poetry is crystallized in the statement, "Poetry is the words of the heart" (shi yan zhi), which has been held as the motto of literary creation ever since it appeared in a legendary story\(^2\). "Heart" in Chinese tradition is the place both to feel and to think. Feng You-lan, best known for his seminal works on History of Chinese Philosophy, proposes, "...the Confucianist and Taoist traditions in Chinese history are in some degree equivalent to the classical and romantic traditions in the West" (232). There is some truth in his analogy. Although an ideal man of Confucianism should transcend the material world and stay unruffled by the gains and losses of his fame and fortune, a sage is not devoid of emotions. The difference between an ordinary man and a sage, as Wang Pi, a Confucious scholar, sums up, is that a sage "has emotions but is not ensnared by them" (Feng, 238). Lie Xie\(^2\), stipulates the principles of literature, i.e. of poetry:

\[\text{...The basic way of literature consists of three principles: the first is called "formal pattern", which refers to the five colors; the second is called "auditory pattern", which refers to the five notes; the third is called "emotional pattern", which refers to the five temperaments. The five colors, when interwoven, form embroidered patterns; the five notes, when arranged, form music such as the Shao}\]

\(^2\)This statement is attributed to the legendary sage Emperor Shun (traditional dates 2255-2208 B.C.) (Liu, 69).
and the Xia; the five temperaments, when expressed, form literary compositions: this is the inevitable working of divine principles. (Translated by Liu, 102).

Emotions, as stated, have always been integral strands in the fabric of Chinese poetry, and in all forms of literary creations in China. It is regarded not as unmanly, but even as noble, to shed righteous tears for the weak and to show anger at injustice. This notion of literature has never been seriously challenged, even after social realism was introduced in China through Russian literature in the fifties. Mao believed the right style of literature should be "a combination of revolutionary romanticism and revolutionary realism". Modernism, at the same time, is held as the prototype of the artistic and moral decadency of bourgeois literature.

By contrast, the sentimental is what Roland Barthes calls an "unwarranted discourse" (Quoted by Suzanne, 1) in the West. Although the power of emotional appeal was specified by Aristotle and recognized by all later rhetoricians, in the West there is always "an uneasy feeling that there is something undignified about being stirred to action through the emotions" (Corbett, 86). Corbett points out two consequences of such uneasiness about emotions: first, "it is perilous to announce to an audience that we are going to play on the emotions"; second, "we must get at the emotions indirectly" (87-88). For the second principle, he illustrates, if we seek to arouse the anger of an audience, we must describe a person or a situation of a sort that will make the audience angry. Obviously this audience feels nothing undignified to be manipulated by indirect emotional
appeals.

But the fact that the sentimental heroes and heroines in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stirred the nation into war against slavery, that the Harlequin romances are sold in millions in this country, indicates that the apparent distance from sentiments maybe just genteel class' squeamishness not a value shared by ordinary readers.

In recent years, women critics have pioneered the rehabilitation of sentimental novels, and women researchers have advanced the cognitive function of emotions. Blenky and her colleagues, for example, suggest that women are "passionate knowers", who take learning "not simply an objective procedure but a way of weaving their passions and intellectual life into some recognizable whole" (141). They find "points of connection between what they are trying to understand and their own experience" (141). But are not all serious pursuits motivated by some kind of emotional force, even if it is not always as strong as passion? As Corbett points out in the same book mentioned above:

There is nothing necessarily reprehensible about being moved to action through our emotions; in fact, it is perfectly normal. Since it is our will ultimately that moves us to action and since the emotions have a powerful influence on the will, many of our actions are prompted by the stimulus of our emotions. When it is not pure emotion that prompts our will, it is a combination of reason and emotion. (86)

The country is tired of emotional barrenness, and "Iron Johns" are beating drums to reconnect with the part of themselves too long suppressed by the culture. The comments of some teachers, noticeably women teachers and teachers who call themselves "process teachers", reflect the trend. Maybe
heart and mind should not be separated after all, and we should reconsider criteria of writing that censure the heart and sanctify the mind.

The Goal of Writing

Ultimately, the merits and shortfalls of a piece of writing are contingent upon what goal writing is perceived to fulfill. The study reveals a marked difference between the Chinese teachers and American teachers on the goal of writing, which affected directly their evaluation of student writing.

There is a scientific attitude toward writing manifest in American teachers' comments. The themes of student writing are discussed in terms of "observation", "examination" or "discovery", as if the student writers were engaged in scientific endeavors. The teachers share the scientists' respect for facts as the basis for truth. The number one maxim of writing "to show, not to tell", for instance, stresses the factual, the observable, and the empirical, confining writing strictly to the business of fact-finding and fact-telling. As science tries hard to keep subjectivity at bay, writing teachers abhor unrestrained sentiments, overdrama, and other signs of unscrupulous subjectivity in the student writing. The notion of truth has changed with the epistemological climate, too. As positivism has been called into question in the era of modern science, teachers hail writing that portrays a world in which truth is uncertain. "Logic" is as important to writing as it is to scientific analysis. A good number of teachers pointed out the logical flaw in one of the concluding sentences in "Old
Lady", "She taught me sincerity", and not incidentally, not a single Chinese teacher noticed that. More important, American teachers try to read student papers with objectivity as scientists would study new data. They interpret the meaning of student writing, but refrain from making any value judgement. As Jane said, "It is not my place to tell the student what to write, what not to.... It is my place to let the students express themselves as effectively as they can, regardless of my opinion of the topic." Despite her strong political beliefs in real life, Jane sounds like a technocrat here.

In contrast, writing is didactic for Chinese teachers, so they are less concerned with the factuality or the logic of the writing, than what they call the ideological "profundity". "There is an Old Lady" is judged by most Chinese teachers a superior piece to "Grandpa", because "Old Lady" addresses the serious problem of moral laxation in China, and "Grandpa" sends no clear moral message. "Qing" is important, because appealing to emotions is a powerful means of persuasion. It does not even matter if the writing uses cliches; after all, moral and ideological standards are set by the society rather than individual writers. Since the didactic lesson is the ultimate purpose of writing, the message should be driven home and explicitly stated at the end, if nowhere else, so that the reader will not miss it.

If the American view toward writing has been heavily influenced by the scientific revolution in the nineteenth century, as it penetrated all spheres of American life, the Chinese view of writing has been shaped by Confucianism which has influenced Chinese minds for centuries.

Through the centuries Confucious' status in Chinese
education has fallen from the teacher of the state to a great teacher, but his philosophy of education still exerts powerful influence on the minds of ordinary Chinese teachers. Confucius world is a world of morality. In the Analects, whose authorship is still undecided but commonly believed to represent Confucius thinking, he specifies the aim of education as training "rounded men" who would be useful to state and society, and says that the goal is accomplished by passing on the ancient cultural heritage. That is why, as recorded in the same book, Confucius said he was "a transmitter and not an originator" (Feng, 40). The mission of literature and art was changed after Communists came to power. Mao explicates in his talk at the "Yanan Forum on Literature and Art", which has been taken as laying down the guideline for creative arts, "Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine" (86).

Submitting art to the service of moral and political demands is too blatant an infringement on individual freedom of expression to the Western minds. Jane Tompkins points out:

In modernist thinking, literature is by definition a form of discourse that has no designs on the world. it does not change things, but merely to represent them, and it does so in a specifically literary language whose claim to value lies in its uniqueness" (125).

This sensitivity, however, is not shared by most American writers and readers a century ago.

Tompkins notes that works like Uncle Tom's Cabin, are
"heuristic and didactic rather than mimetic," yet they enjoyed phenomenal popularity and had irreversible impact on American social and political scenes. Works like Stowe's are perceived by modern critics as stylistically defective for "an absence of finely delineated characters, a lack of verisimilitude in the story line, an excessive reliance on plot and a certain sensationalism in the events portrayed" (xii). It is interesting to note that Chinese student writing, though in no way comparable to the literary accomplishment of a writer like Stowe, are often criticized in the same language.

Tompkins' study calls into question the modernist literary values and suggests a more inclusive approach to literature that will take into consideration the initial intentions of the writers.

Likewise, we need to reexamine our criteria for good writing in relation to the goals of writing. In my interview with the two key teachers, the goals of writing were referred to as "self-discovery", "communication", "persuasion", or a process that starts from the first one but aims at the other two. But are these compatible goals? Can writing that aims at "catharsis" or "self-expression" be measured in the same way as writing that aims to persuade? Are the criteria by which student writing is measured, a potpourri of realism, romanticism and modernism, consistent with the above proclaimed goals? Are our criteria of good writing also biased, for example, against writing that chooses to be "heuristic and didactic rather than mimetic"? How can we build an evaluation system that is inclusive but also not ineffably relative?
In recent years there has been a growing interest in the assessment of student writing. The publication of Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, and Research and Encountering Student Texts by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1989, and more recently the publication of The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary by Heinemann are strong indications of this surging interest. Unlike previous discussions of evaluation, which all too often centered around how to divide our attention between content and form, meaning and grammar, this time the focus is shifted away from the student texts *per se* to the interaction between the evaluated and the evaluator. The process of evaluating student papers is viewed, rather than a lonely teacher crusading against error-ridden texts, but increasingly as a social, interactive process between the student and the teacher. This new awareness has resulted in a heightened self-consciousness on the part of the teacher as a reader and examiner who brings in personal, historical, intellectual, empirical, and paradigmatic perspectives into their meaning-making of student texts. The lens of scrutiny is being turned to the teacher/reader/evaluator not as an idiosyncratic individual, but as a collective and communal agent.

Too often writing teachers are described as common readers, and their comments on student writing, as "dramatizing the presence of a reader" (Sommers, 148). Purves' study shows, however, that teacher-reader is more than Virginia "Common Reader", who reads "out of pleasure and interest, with no practical end in mind" (260). Teacher-readers, Purves points out, are "gatekeepers" of writing
conventions, and surrogates of communal readers and diagnostician-therapists who examine, analyze and "prescribe" instruction. Teachers are paid to perform a public service. No matter what we would like to think of ourselves, our comments and grades set the standards, and students take our comments on their writing as guidance rather than assistance. Our response to student papers, whether delivered in probing questions or affirmative statements, in friendly talks or alarming red-ink, carries the authority bestowed by the profession. There is responsibility that comes with power.

If we are common readers of Stowe, Hawthorne or Hemingway, it does not matter if we like them or not, but we are not "common readers" at student papers, and when we are passing judgements on student papers (in normal circumstances, a student does not have a patient's opportunity to seek the diagnosis from a second doctor), it is our responsibility to utilize a set of coherent criteria based on careful examination and deliberation.

Bullock reflects on the communal nature of the writing teacher's response in his article, "Autonomy and Community in the Evaluation of Writing":

When I teach, I embody a complex web of roles, expectations, and constraints that make my autonomy in the classroom an illusion; when I coach, I coach according to accepted rules, and coach my students toward culturally defined and prescribed ends; when I judge, I bring to my judgment a wealth of criteria, definitions, biases, and tastes that spring out not only from my own considerable powers as an individual but also from my upbringing, my training, and my social, political, economic, and cultural surroundings. (190)

This project confirms Bullock's reflection. Jack, Jane,
Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang are as different as any individuals, but they are also products of the culture in which they grow up. What is good writing had been decided before they came to the scene of education and is still being changed by forces beyond the control of each of them as an individual. Individuals are not cut into the same cardboard characters in the powerful hand of culture, but, invariably, they are shaped in one way or another. This is as true as the fact that, despite all their differences, both Jack and Jane felt more comfortable being addressed by their first names, while Mr. Zhang and Mr. Wang would be embarrassed if I called them by their first names.

Teachers' criteria for "good writing" is a cultivated sensitivity, an acquired taste. It is acquired through our life experience, our political and religious beliefs, the families in which we grew up, the books we have liked and disliked, our own success and failure in writing, and the like. Literature and literary theories is one of the many factors that influence the judgement of the teachers. Writing teachers, all of whom I interviewed, are also teachers of literature. They are avid readers of literature and pros on literary theories. Works of literature not only provide models for students, but influence directly teachers reading of student papers. But so far little has been done to look into the relationship between what happens on the literary scene and what goes on in the writing classroom. What particular literary movement, for instance, dominates teachers' perception of good writing? How do teachers compromise, or discriminate, realism with modernism in their
teaching, when Dickens is taught side by side with Hemingway, both as great works? How does the teacher communicate to the student his preferred style in the teaching of literature? I hope this study can start a public discourse that joins literary theories with the actual reading of student papers.

I also hope the study serves to stretch a bit the educators' imagination, so that they understand the transition that students from other lands have to go through in order to reach writing competence in English. Writing in English involves more than knowing the syntax and semantics; student writers have to meet a set of compositional criteria often very different from what they are used to. Although my study focuses only on how some American teachers and Chinese teachers comment on student writings, maybe some teachers' curiosity is so piqued that they will spend time to find out the educational background and literary experience of their own students, whether they are from New York ghetto or Cambodian refugee camps, and help them to make the difficult transition.

Fan Shen, the Chinese graduate student I mentioned in the introduction, ends his article with an anecdote of an American businessman, who, ignorant of Chinese dislike for cheese, gave his Chinese hostess cheddar cheeses as gifts. I hope American readers can now imagine how cheddar cheese tastes to the Chinese after they have tasted Chinese student writing and Chinese teachers' comments. You don't have to like "birds nests", an expensive Chinese cuisine, just as most Chinese probably will never like cheddar cheese, but we at least should know that "birds nests" and cheddar cheese
can taste "yuk" for people who grew up with different cuisine.
APPENDIX A

AMERICAN TEACHERS

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APPENDIX B

CHINESE TEACHERS

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222
APPENDIX C

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE
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