

JUN LIU

Writing from Chinese to English: My Cultural Transformation

I was born in a family of four in a little town in southeastern China. I don't know whether this is the family trait or fate, but all four of us, my parents, my sister and I, make a living by teaching, and all of us, except for my mother, are associated with the TESOL profession. My father is a retired teacher who taught high school English in China for more than 35 years. My mother is also retired from teaching, having been a physical education instructor for more than twenty years in the same school as my father used to teach in. My sister has been teaching English in a local teachers' college for more than a decade, and my own first English-teaching experience was in a teachers' college in China. I am now teaching both ESL composition and teacher training courses in a major research institute in the United States.

I grew up in a critical historical period in China—what is called the Great Cultural Revolution. All the intellectuals were supposed to be cultivated through working in the countryside and living with farmers and peasants. Criticism and self-criticism were the regular practice to show good will, and the intensive study and memorization of political slogans and quotations from Mao Zedong, then the Chairman of the Communist Party, were a daily routine. Anything related to Western culture had to be abandoned, and anything coming from abroad had to be confiscated. A sense of security was always absent while sleeping at home as once in a while the Red Guards (those left-wing high school students with their left arms wrapped up with red cloth on which *Hong Wei Bing*, Red Guards, was written) would stop by without notice for revolutionary inspection. Their disturbance, aimed at searching for proofs of ideological and spiritual pollution, was sanctioned by the Communist Party. As my father was an English teacher, he was one of the suspicious targets who were thought to be poisoned by Western thoughts and by being in possession of Western books. I remember helping my father remove from our bookshelves many, many English books he had purchased in second-hand bookstores when he was a student in East China Normal University in Shanghai in the late 40s and early 50s. As we did not have a basement, we strategically hid those books underneath our beds, and covered the books with sheets. I also remember how much fun it was to display on the bookshelves as conspicuously as possible all sorts of works by Marx, Lenin, and Chairman Mao—almost all in red and golden colors. I found the days when I was excused from school due to sickness particularly fascinating as I could be left alone at home with the doors shut and concentrate for hours and hours on going through all the books underneath

our beds, looking for the portraits of long-bearded Westerners like Ben Jonson and John Milton. I began to be acquainted with the names of Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Shakespeare, John Milton, Charles Dickens, and Jack London.

One day when I mentioned some of these English names in a family conversation, my father was genuinely shocked. While warning me of the 'danger' of these books, my father encouraged my sister and me to start reading 'Rip van Winkle' from Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*. It was indeed a challenge, as it was so different from what my sister and I were taught through the radio or in school slogans such as 'Long Live Chairman Mao', 'A long, long life to the Communist Party', and quotations from Mao Zedong translated from Chinese into English. My father was very patient, and used to tell us that, even though the story was difficult for us to read, once we understood it and committed it to memory, our school work would become a piece of cake, a theory very unlike Krashen's Comprehensible Input. But it worked well because we trusted our father and we did understand and enjoy the story of the Catskill Mountains, although we filled the book with notes, Chinese characters, and phonetic symbols. My sister and I were very competitive. She obviously had a better memory and I still don't know why, but I was proud of having more dramatic, if not better, pronunciation as I amused myself in varying my intonation to sound different from my reading of Chinese. When both of us were eventually able to recite the first few pages of the story, we were all amazed, and we began to lay our hands on more books, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. We started practicing retelling chapters, but found it too difficult to write them. At that time, I was fourteen.

I was one of the top students in all the subjects at junior high school, and especially outstanding in Chinese and English. I remember that my Chinese compositions were usually displayed in class as good models simply because I followed the good models from textbooks. In Chinese language classes, we usually wrote four or five compositions per semester, practicing different rhetorical modes, such as narrative, expository, and argumentative essays. Each assignment was given after studying a model essay in a Chinese textbook, and one of the criteria for evaluating our compositions was to see how well we imitated the style of the model essays. As the Chinese language is full of four-character idioms, the proper use of idioms is highly regarded as a symbol of success in writing. This was partially the way that reading and writing were connected—identifying and understanding the idioms in reading and using them appropriately in writing. As I recall, we did not do multiple drafts for our composition writing, as it was too labor-intensive for teachers owing to the fact that there were at least forty or fifty students in a class. In addition, as neither computers nor typewriters were available at that time, I had to give a lot of thought to each essay before I actually wrote it down to save time in copying and recopying, and also to save paper. That formed my habit of sketching and outlining many times

to compensate for multiple drafting. I also recall that there were no peer review activities because of the nature of competitiveness coupled by the emphasis on independent writing without consultation with others in class. We had to be critical of our own writing through self-criticism, a skill acquired as the result of numerous cultural and political movements in China. When I wrote in Chinese, grammar was never an issue. What distinguishes a good composition from a not-so-good one seems to be the richness of language and vocabulary and organization. I know I was often constrained by model compositions; any difference in style and organization between what you were supposed to write and what you actually wrote was discouraged. The philosophy is clear: the teacher knows how to make you a good writer, and obeying the teacher and following the instruction is what you are supposed to do. Any variation is a violation of proper student behavior and thus the consequence of little learning is blamed on the students themselves.

Although I consider myself a good writer in Chinese, I wish I could be 5 better. I always feel the lack of variety in my writing as a result of the lack of extensive reading. Reading Chairman Mao's works over and over again until I could automatically recite them did not help me a lot in expanding my vocabulary in writing, and the fact that reading ancient poems and essays was not encouraged at school because of the political climate also denied me the solid foundation of ancient Chinese writing abilities. This was debilitating to many people in my generation who grew up during the Cultural Revolution.

Nevertheless, my family environment had a great impact on my abilities in reading both classic Chinese literature and English novels and essays. My father always got up early in the morning and, with a cup of tea, he sometimes read aloud ancient Chinese poems with a special tone he acquired in the early 30s when he was a school kid, or novels like *Gulliver's Travels* and *The Scarlet Letter*, in the tiny courtyard where we could only see the sky if we sat in the center of the yard. I woke up many times amidst his enthusiasm in reading and I remember being challenged to read aloud a paragraph or two of whatever he was reading before I had breakfast. Gradually, I found I had a talent in reading aloud both Chinese poems and English novels, which must be associated with my interest and practice in Peking Opera and stage performance. As I recall, in order to play the major role, Li Yuehe, in one of the model Peking Operas, *The Red Lantern*, I had to try hard to compete in the audition with the other candidates at school. I used to climb up the mountain in my hometown to practice singing early in the morning. In this way, no one could notice me in the midst of the woods and rocks before sunrise, and I could try all sorts of voice variations without feeling inhibited or noticed. I always carried an English book with me, as my father would not allow me to go without it, and I thus practiced reading aloud an English essay or a poem, and this, I believe, had a great impact on my expressiveness in both L1 and L2 writing. I often jotted down from whatever I was reading the expressions and sentences I was amazed at, and particularly those I would never have thought about using in Chinese.

Owing to the lack of the language environment, communication in English through either the spoken or written channel was almost impossible. Practicing writing in English, therefore, was also hard as there was no source of instrumental motivation. So my focus was on accumulating what I would call idiomatic English by reading and note-taking, and thus this was my 'silent period' in English writing.

I was fortunate to escape from settling down in the countryside upon my graduation from high school, as the first-born in a family, my sister in this case, was forced to live among peasants in a suburban area outside my hometown. She was adrift and confused as to what to do in the future as many other young people were at that time. I, meanwhile, went to help her on summer vacations and during weekends. While she was out in the field cutting rice or spreading manure with bare hands and feet, I went fishing and cooked meals with the catch of the day to reward her. We spent many days like that, and sometimes we switched positions when she badly needed a breather. Upon graduation from high school, I was assigned to work in a city hospital and was trained to be a lab technician, taking blood samples of patients and analyzing the blood under a microscope. After six months, I was bored and also aimless. My sister and I did not know what the future would hold for us, and we lost all our interest in learning English. I started playing violin, and became a comedian, indulging myself in making people laugh without laughing myself, and was very active on the stage in my spare time. My sister applied for a substitute teaching position in a local elementary school, trying to escape from the manure-filled farmlands. My parents were busy working, and none of us was optimistic about the future. Going to college and university was something we could not hope for, as only those who were politically outstanding would be recommended by the Communist Party. That was the toughest time in my life. I remember my parents argued many times. While my father insisted on my hard work in English and math, my mother wanted me to develop my interest in becoming an actor. I, too, was confused.

In 1977, with the downfall of the 'Gang of Four', the college entrance examination system was restored. It was the first time in a decade that fair competition for university enrollment was in effect. Both my sister and I tried and, though we were very rusty in our knowledge about many subjects examined, both of us made it. I was enrolled in a provincial Teachers' College, and majored in English. The ratio of college enrollment was one out of a hundred as we had accumulated ten years' of high school graduates. This was also the first time I left my parents. After the diagnostic tests upon enrollment, I was placed in an intermediate-level class—which was quite a blow to me. I thought I could have done better, but I accepted the fact. Extremely competitive, I was determined to make it to the top as I always did.

Learning a tune should be done through daily practice, just like learning to box, as an old Chinese saying goes. So should the learning of writing. I felt so awkward in writing my first English composition at college, 'My favorite

teacher'. In this essay, I featured my elementary class master, Yi Shen, who, believing that one day I could become a mathematician or engineer, always argued with my music teacher for taking too much of my time in practicing Beijing Opera. I started with an introduction and a thesis stating that she had the greatest impact on my early school life. Then I provided three examples to show why Yi Shen was my favorite teacher. The essay ends with a classic tone that she was one of those teachers who would always be in my memory. It was an OK paper, but I later realized that if I had been asked to write this paper in Chinese, I would have written in exactly the same way. So, what's the rhetorical difference between Chinese and English? I was puzzled. I felt very uncomfortable in the initial stages of English writing, not because of a lack of ideas to write about, but because of a lack of knowledge of what constituted a good paper in English. Unfortunately, we did not have English composition courses *per se* while I was at college, partly due to the lack of faculty, and partly due to the fact that many faculty members in that department believed that literature courses and grammar lessons were more important. Composition should be secondary. Therefore, I had no formal training in English composition while at college.

I had neither opportunities nor motivation to write in English upon ¹⁰ graduation with a BA in English language and literature. Fortunately, I was recommended to remain at the English Department to join the faculty to teach methodology courses and supervise student teachers. In fact, my acting skills through years of Peking Opera and experience in stage performance as a result of the Cultural Revolution helped me a lot with humor and poise in class, and I was later told that my demonstration class in a junior school got me the job. One of the challenges I set for myself as methods instructor was to deliver the content in English. Although I was quite fluent in English at that time, to explain second language acquisition theories and teaching strategies in English was artificial to me as I sounded like I was repeating what I read from the books. I wished my L2 writing were strong enough to synthesize what I had read in the same way as I could in my L1. But I have to confess, I was teaching Chinese students English Methodology in English in China, and therefore, I could never get past a sense of artificiality and comedy in facing a large group of homogeneous students who shared an L1 and culture with me. I regurgitated in English what was known to the students: teaching principles set up by the Chinese Ministry of Education.

I started practicing English writing once in a while, but I was not motivated enough to keep it up. First, there was no instrumental motivation for me as language teaching journals in China only accepted articles written in Chinese, and secondly, there was no sharing of my writings, as I felt uncomfortable asking my colleagues to read my papers since I was afraid of losing face. Revealing my mistakes to those I worked with in China was indeed an embarrassment. The lack of the need as well as a sense of self-protection through avoidance had a negative impact on my L2 writing.

Quite frankly, by the time I came to the United States as a Ph.D. student in foreign and second language education at a major research institution in 1991, I was not competent in L2 writing. Although I had no trouble expressing myself in English, I was not familiar with the standards of academic writing. I remember the first assignment I had in an education course I took—an essay introducing myself as a language learner. I spent hours and hours composing the essay, and yet, with great disappointment, the paper turned out to be a Chinese composition in English, although the instructor did not comment on this. It did not read how I had hoped though I used lots of idiomatic expressions. I was so frustrated with this experience, which was aggravated when I was placed in an advanced ESL composition course the first week I started my Ph.D. program. I was quite embarrassed and even felt humiliated to be placed in the same class with those whom I could have taught. It was excusable for the majority of the students whose majors are not English to take ESL composition courses at various levels, but the fact that my ten years of English teaching did not make me a good L2 writer made me feel sad and disappointed. However, I went through this course and was given ample opportunities to practice academic writing. I benefited from multiple drafts, tutorials and peer reviews, which we never did in China. Although, because of my professional sensitivity, I sometimes disagreed with the instructor in his handling of the class, I did see the need to take ESL writing courses even for advanced learners like me. Exposing my weaknesses in writing, and being helped, are learning in themselves.

When I write in Chinese, I tend to concentrate on the organization and the presentation of the ideas I want to convey logically and idiomatically in the paper. However, when I began to write in English, I intentionally tried to focus on syntax and structure, and thus lost a lot of the spontaneity and creativity a good paper needs. It took me a while to forget about grammar in my L2 writing when I started writing my personal journals, several times a week, and tried to express myself without worrying about grammar. I also tried to practice writing in different genres, from narratives to critiques, and from argumentation to research proposals, which enabled me to become more sensitive in reading and more careful in writing.

As I reflect on my L2 writing experience, I tend to associate it with the use of computers. I find it fascinating how composing on a computer affected my way of thinking and way of writing. Using a computer was a totally new experience for me when I came to the United States, and I remember one day spending hours and hours in a lab typing a three-page essay and yet losing everything before I could print it out. What fascinated me most was writing on a computer screen, which not only made me feel at ease in controlling and revising what had been written through 'cut and paste', but also satisfied my ego as everything written was 'beautiful' in font and 'professional' in format, thus adding aesthetic appeal to the composing process. I was often amazed at how much more I could write and how fast I could compose on the computer

screen as compared to handwriting on Chinese square sheets with each character taking a square.

One of my goals in ESL writing is to publish. Publishing in English is much more challenging than publishing in Chinese. I remember when I was a second-year Ph.D. student, I wrote a review about a methodology book in TESOL which was written by a well-known scholar in the field. Encouraged by a professor, I was very enthusiastic and submitted it to one of the leading journals in the field. Unfortunately, it was immediately rejected simply because I was a student. I was told that only peers who are faculty members could have the status to write book reviews for that journal. However, this discouraging experience did not prevent me from submitting it to another journal. To my surprise, this time it was accepted. This inspiring experience of my first English publication marked the beginning of my professional career in the US, and I also gained the confidence in L2 writing which I had obtained long before in my L1 writing.

It was the third year into my Ph.D. program, and after I had completed my Ph.D. general examinations, when I decided to apply for a TA (teaching associate) position in the ESL Composition Program. Thanks to the program director's global vision and open-mindedness, I was immediately hired. Going through the hiring process did provoke moments of anxiety, but I felt empowered to be in a position where I could encourage those ESL students who had not yet experienced how important and rewarding it was to be competent L2 writers. For the first time in my life I felt that I was accepted as a member of the target community. Needless to say, in order to live up to the expectations, I started teaching ESL composition with great enthusiasm and effort, believing that I could uniquely contribute to the program by sharing my pains and gains as an ESL writer with my ESL students. In the ESL composition classroom, I encountered both suspicion and admiration from my students. The suspicion usually came from those who walked into my classes with presumptions that their English teachers in the US should be native English speakers, which is quite understandable. When the reluctance and indifference shown on the students' faces in the first few classes were greeted with smiles and understanding, when their names carrying more than ten syllables were pronounced distinctly, when anecdotes of my experience in learning English and my own struggles in writing were shared with them, and when their first assignment was returned with my constructive comments, suggestions and encouragement, their suspicion about me was soon replaced with comfort, trust, and admiration.

It is true that I am not a native speaker of English, and never will be. But the quality of teaching a language is not determined by whether you are a native speaker or a non-native speaker, assuming sociolinguistic competence is achieved. I believe that the language I speak and the way I teach could make a difference in the students' perception of me as a Chinese teaching English in the US. I remind myself constantly that I am teaching English in an English environment. The only way I can make up for my lack of nativeness is by being

aware of my non-nativeness, which will keep me aiming high. To me, a journey of self-cultivation and refinement usually ends when one no longer feels such needs. The success of a non-native speaker ESL professional lies more in his/her modesty than in dignity. My students liked me because I did not hesitate in assuring them that I needed to consult my native-speaker colleagues about a word, a phrase, or a sentence in question. My students liked me because I would give them opportunities to share their dilemmas in class, their difficulties and their actual procedures in completing a certain writing task as compared with mine in doing the same task. My students liked me because they felt comfortable in commenting on summaries and papers including mine. In my ESL composition classes, I encourage peer review, peer editing and collaborative writing, in which I am usually a part. I do peer reviews with my students as one of them, doing the same task and participating in discussion without dominating it. To me, empowering our students through empathy is the beauty of being a non-native speaker teacher sailing with our students to the shore instead of summoning them from the shore. Although my experience indicates that peer review as well as open class discussion might not appeal to many ESL students who come from cultures that do not encourage these activities, I feel that keeping these activities in ESL classrooms will not only help student writers, but also create supportive communities through which ESL students could build their new identities to cope with the target culture. To me, teaching L2 writing to ESL students without helping them establish their L2 social identities is a disappointing endeavor. Reading students' papers constantly reminds me of my own struggles in searching for an L2 identity through writing. Being able to discuss and share with my students the dilemma and conflicts in the process of writing academic papers also convinces me that the key to improving one's L2 writing lies in the willingness to observe L2 writing conventions, the persistence in writing what has not been practiced before, reliance on multiple feedback, and the confidence built up in the course of publication.

In teaching L2 writing as a way to facilitate ESL students' cultural transformation and establishing their L2 identity, I encountered many dilemmas. Would my prescribing to my students what to write restrict their thoughts and expressions? Would my upholding academic standards do a great disservice by inhibiting them in reflecting on their own cultures and ideologies? Would my required dense assignments of reading and writing for the course burden them to such an extent that they become resistant in learning? Would the use of my earlier writings as samples to reveal my writing experience reduce their opportunities of reading a greater variety of articles? Would my emphasis on their discourse in writing discourage them from concentrating on eliminating grammatical errors? As I kept on thinking about these questions, I became clearer about my own source of motivation in learning L2 writing and in establishing myself as a good L2 writer. It is the establishment of my own L2 identity that makes me a good L2 writer. Likewise, it is the constant practice in L2 writing that helps me establish my L2 identity. Therefore, the L2 writing

experience and the L2 social identity co-exist and they reinforce each other. Admittedly, my Chinese way of thinking has a great impact on how I compose in English, but I realize that in order to maintain my L2 literacy and L2 social identity, I have to understand the fundamental thinking processes of the target culture, and the way that my L1 culture can be accepted. I gradually become accustomed to American discourse and rhetoric through constant reading and writing, and the efforts I have made in adapting my writing style to fit the general preference of the American audience has been rewarded by a few publications. But that does not mean that I have lost my Chinese writing style. I still see the legitimacy and beauty of Chinese writing even though I do not practice it in US academia.

I believe that writing is a skill: the more you practice it, the better your writing is. I have been in the United States for almost seven years: five years as a Ph.D. student and two as a TESOL professional. I have published more than ten papers and reviews in English and given more than a dozen presentations at professional conferences. I have enjoyed my L2 writing experience as much as, if not more than, my L1 writing experience. Writing for me has become a pleasurable activity as I see it as a channel to communicate with other TESOL professionals about my research findings. I feel so lucky that my colleagues are very supportive and collaborative, and constantly discussing professional issues with them has sharpened my vision in academic writing. I feel I have so much to write about, and I also feel the more I write, the better I can write. Whenever my students ask me how they can improve their L2 writing skills, I would say, keep on writing in English every day, and your writing will take care of itself.

I won't say that I am an excellent writer in English, because you can tell that I write in English with a shadow of Chinese, but I know I have the confidence in communicating what I wish to express. If everyone conforms to one style in academic writing, then where is the richness of writing?