A stunning parochialism and arrogance prevail in composition studies against the backdrop of globalized English writing instruction. Despite the fact that English writing is widely taught in non-English dominant countries and English composition research is becoming an international endeavor, the field of composition studies has never bothered to upgrade its scope of concerns to an international level. Although the number of international students has increased in American universities during the last decade, composition studies has paid rather scanty attention to them, ignoring the historical, cultural, and rhetorical heritage that these students have brought with them. As for the field of second language writing, which has traditionally taken ESL students as its primary subject of research, it has only recently articulated its international vision and responsibilities.

Responding to the lack of international awareness in composition studies, my dissertation is dedicated to a deeply felt mission of transforming English writing research into a genuine international project. This project should involve researchers and teachers from different locales of the world, pay enough attention to the local needs and educational traditions, and share research products on a truly international scale. With a historiography combining both traditional analytical narrative and postmodern presentation of polyphonic voices, my study engages in a historical examination of English writing instruction in Chinese colleges since 1862. I firmly believe that such an inquiry will provide a historical foundation for composition specialists to engage in any meaningful analysis of the local needs, goals and possibilities for different locales across the world.

Over one and a half century, writing in English for Chinese students means to write in the “devil’s” tongue. During the last two centuries, Westerners were called “foreign devils” in China, capturing precisely the Chinese sentiments toward foreigners from beyond the Middle Kingdom—an intertwining of curiosity, anxiety, and hatred. For Chinese students who learned how to write in English during the last century, they invariably bore the burden of having to think and write in the “foreign devil’s” mindset while breathing in the Chinese cultural milieu. As a historical narrative, my dissertation attempts to map out the interactions at both rhetorical and pedagogical levels when English writing instruction took place in Chinese colleges over the last century.

Chinese students started learning the “devil’s” tongue when their sense of being Middle Kingdom citizens began to lose its central gravity. After China lost two opium wars to the Western powers in 1840 and 1860, the government started to allow foreign languages and Western subjects to enter Chinese schools. For the first time, Chinese students learned English writing and were exposed to the Western rhetorical tradition, particularly scientific rhetoric as manifested in science and technology textbooks. At that time, these students were studying in a monolithic educational system that emphasized reading Confucian classics and writing “eight-legged” essays in order to pass the civil service examinations. Thus, it was when Chinese sovereignty and dignity was threatened by Western powers that Chinese and Western rhetorical traditions made their first major historical contact.

Systematic English writing instruction in Chinese colleges can be traced to the turn of the 20th century. In foreign mission colleges, equal emphasis was placed on English literature and composition;
while in some state universities, translation was also emphasized, revealing a nationalistic project, that is, to expose more Chinese people to Western learning through translated works so as to build a strong nation.

Although English writing instruction received varying degrees of emphasis in state and private schools, in the 1910s their pedagogies were all unified under current-traditional rhetoric, resulting from the conflation of Western and Chinese rhetorical traditions. First, both state and private schools used composition textbooks imported from the United States, which were permeated by current-traditional rhetoric. Second, by that time theories about current-traditional rhetoric had already begun to appear in Japan and China, and were being gradually adopted in Chinese composition instruction. In primary and middle schools, the four modes of written discourse, i.e., description, narration, exposition, and argumentation began to structure Chinese writing instruction in the late 1910s, and were theorized by some Chinese composition scholars within the Chinese literary and rhetorical tradition. Therefore, when college students started learning how to compose in English, they had already written the four types of composition in their mother tongue in high schools and been accustomed to some Western rhetorical styles.

During the first three decades of the People’s Republic (1949-1976), English teaching went through a series of upheavals corresponding with both international situations and domestic political movements. The Russian model of intensive reading with an emphasis on both ideological and grammatical analysis left clear marks in both Chinese and foreign language education in the country. The most devastating moment for English teaching was the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976), in which learning English was equated to pursuing capitalism and English teaching was reduced to a rudimentary level. English writing instruction was available only in a few foreign language institutes.

English writing instruction regained its importance after China reopened itself to the outside world in 1978. English was once again required in both secondary schools and colleges as a vital means for introducing Western technology and investment in the country. However, constrained by the lack of trained teachers, English writing was not widely taught in colleges. Starting from the late 1980s, English writing instruction in colleges witnessed some improvement, and at the same time exhibited a remarkable resemblance to how Chinese composition was taught in high schools. First, both were institutionalized through published curriculum standards and standardized examinations. Second, the predominant type of writing practiced in the classroom was expository argumentation essays because they were the most commonly tested in both English and Chinese examinations. Many of the essay topics entailed deliberations on the moral and ethical aspects of life. Third, because this type of writing was so much favored in the examinations, learning how to write in both languages, English in particular, fell into the acquisition of rigid rules for constructing paragraphs and forming discourses. Thus, interestingly, English writing instruction, as considered by many people in China, adopted a modern version of the eight-legged essay type of pedagogy and encouraged college students to write English in truly hybridized styles.

My dissertation concludes this historical narrative by calling attention to the uniqueness of the history of English writing instruction in China, a history of Chinese students thinking and writing in the “devil’s” tongue while the nation strove for modernization. Finally, I suggest that similar historical inquires at other locales are needed for second language writing research when it works to address writing issues of both a national and an international nature.