From Confucianism to Marxism
A century of theme treatment in Chinese writing instruction

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Theme treatment is a long neglected issue in intercultural studies of school writing. Taking a historical approach, this chapter traces theme treatment in Chinese school essay writing during the 20th century. The study shows that Chinese school writing moved from neo-Confucian topics to Socialist issues for the most part of the century, and that the themes always needed to be “correct,” or in alignment with the dominant Chinese ideology. Currently, Chinese students write on diversified themes reflecting a hybrid value system emerging in Chinese society. The study further reveals that theme treatment carried equal, if not more, weight to textual organization in that it often decided the selection of types of writing and dictated the layout of text structure.

When recapitulating the history of contrastive rhetoric, Connor (2003) asserts that contrastive studies in school essay writing, along with studies in other genres, will continue to shed insight in both ESL and EFL writing instruction. Her positive assertion about studies in school essay writing stems from her openness to the criticism of contrastive rhetoric that has emerged in recent years. She cautions the field, “Consistent with postmodern indications, contrastive rhetoric needs to promote further research-situated reflexivity, to be more sensitive to local characteristics and particularity of writing activity, and to become more conscious of the influences of power and ideology in any setting” (p. 236). Therefore, to pursue further inquiries in school essay writing, the staple of contrastive rhetoric, we need to be more reflexive and critical of our assumptions, methods, and analyses. The foremost step we can take is to examine several criticisms of contrastive rhetoric in relation to studies of school essay writing.
Contrastive rhetoric has been criticized for having directed researchers’ primary attention to “different linguistic configurations” (Connor 2003: 218). Because of the traditional interest in linguistic configurations, while the organization of expository essays in different cultures and communities has been examined in numerous studies, other aspects of school essays still await further investigation (Connor 1996). When approached from non-linguistic perspectives, those other aspects may be taken to a front stage. For example, when investigating Chinese and American high school teachers’ perceptions of “good writing” from a cultural perspective, Li (1996) reported that teachers in both countries consider some important aspects of writing other than organization. They resort to such criteria as their preconceived functions of writing, moral propriety of the themes, use of details, and language style when they evaluate student essays. Moreover, Li observes that these criteria are culturally bound and subject to each individual teacher’s life experiences. Nevertheless, until now, none of these aspects has received enough attention in cross-cultural studies of school writing.

It is also asserted by critics that a rather essentialist, static view of language use prevails in traditional contrastive rhetoric (Kubota 1999; Kubota & Lehner 2004; Spack 1997; Zamel 1997). Ever since Kaplan (1966) conducted his cross-cultural studies on English compositions written by students of different language backgrounds, contrastive studies in school writing have been primarily deployed on a first-language parameter, assuming the influence of rhetorical tradition as embodied in the first language on the production of second-language writing. Therefore, these studies have contributed to what Liu (1994) calls “a dominant paradigm in comparative rhetoric,” which works under the assumption that “there exists an easily abstractable and consistently definable set of ‘essential’ characteristics in Chinese or any other rhetorical tradition” (p. 322). Besides the essentialist impulse, traditional contrastive rhetoric downplays possible changes in language use resulting from the conflation and conflicts of rhetorical traditions in an increasingly globalized world (You 2005). Neglecting the historical fluidity of rhetorical traditions and language use, comparative studies on school writing have unfortunately landed on shaky ground.

This chapter attempts to deconstruct the essentialist, static view of language use in contrastive rhetoric by examining an important, but long neglected, aspect of school writing: the treatment of theme in writing instruction. In her study of “good writing” in Mainland Chinese high schools, Li (1996) observes that both Confucian values and Marxist ideology still permeate Chinese writing instruction, and she makes a thought-provoking statement:

Yet it will be interesting to see whether the capitalist market economy, now making rapid inroads in China, will accomplish what Communism failed in the past
The issue that she raises in her intriguing remarks calls for an in-depth study of how themes have shifted in Chinese writing instruction during the last century. An inquiry along this line may well illustrate the complexity and fluidity of rhetorical practices in Chinese writing instruction, thus defying the essentialist, static view of language use in contrastive rhetoric.

Methodical inquiries into theme treatment across different cultures and communities can also help us develop a complex understanding of the literary and rhetorical traditions of ESL and EFL students. First, I would like to define theme in this study as a topic, or a dominant idea or motif, which unifies a piece of school writing. It can be the title, the main argument, or the thesis of an essay. Next, a historical study of theme treatment needs to seek answers to several important questions:

1. What are the purposes for teaching writing at a certain historical moment?
2. Which themes or topics are promoted in the mainstream school education?
3. What is suggested about how to explore and develop a theme?
4. What is the relationship between the theme and the textual organization of an essay?
5. What kind of epistemology and ideology is perpetuated through the treatment of themes?

These questions will function as heuristics for exploring the different aspects of theme treatment within a particular educational context. By answering these questions, we may map out the trajectory of theme treatment in Chinese writing instruction over the last century. Studies conducted in the same spirit in other cultures and communities will allow us to compare different trajectories and finally achieve a deep appreciation of the extremely rich literary and rhetorical heritage that ESL and EFL students have brought with them.

In the rest of this chapter, I will trace the treatment of zhuti (theme) in some influential Chinese writing textbooks and collections of student essays published during the 20th century. Through cross-referencing with educational decrees, school announcements, and writing tasks in the highly centralized college entrance examinations, I will show that the emphases of themes have shifted constantly in Mainland Chinese writing instruction over the last century, and that the treatment of theme always precedes and overlooks textual organization in the student’s composing process. Finally, I will argue that the treatment of theme, oftentimes representing and perpetuating the cultural and epistemological values
of the dominant class, deserves more attention in cross-cultural studies of school writing.

Neo-Confucian themes in the late Qing Dynasty (1664–1911)

Writing instruction in the late Qing schools was solely geared towards preparing students for civil service examinations. The aim was clearly stated in the announcements or catalogues of many academies. For example, the catalogue of Tengchow College (one of the early modern Chinese colleges) stated that “emphasis is laid upon the writing of these [eight-legged] essays, because they are required in the government examinations for degrees, and because public opinion demands proficiency in them as essential to respectable scholarship” (1891:4). Therefore, essay examinations dictated how writing was taught in the academy, including the treatment of theme.

Categorized according to the types of writing tasks, there were three major themes in the essay examinations: elucidating Confucian values, exposing the relevance of past events to the present, and deliberating upon social issues of national significance. In the late Qing Dynasty, the most important type of writing task required in provincial and metropolitan civil service examinations was the renowned bagu (eight-legged) essay. A sentence or a short passage would be quoted from each of the Four Books and the Five Classics, Confucian canons written two thousand years before. For each quote, examinees would write an essay to elucidate the quotation, maneuvering through six to eight rhetorical moves in several hundred Chinese characters. The logical structure of bagu essays, as observed by Guy (1994), resembles the deductive reasoning style in the American collegiate debate format, but it values quite a different kind of proof when making an argument. Rather than relying upon empirical evidence, Guy notes, examinees resorted to their “perception.” Or to be more accurate, they had to explicate the quotations strictly following the annotations of a neo-Confucian scholar, Zhu Xi (1130–1200), rather than their own opinions.

The second type of writing task was an essay called lun (commentary), in which examinees would be asked to comment on a certain historical figure or event. This type of essay normally begins with a statement followed by an elaboration of the topic; next, the historical significance of the person or the event in question is thoroughly discussed; and finally the essay concludes by suggesting some relevance of the topic to the present.

The third type of writing task, which was undervalued in the grading process, was a set of five policy essays called ce (policy-elaboration). Given concrete problems of national importance, such as famine relief, water conservation, frontier
security, military provision, local order, economic development, and public education, examinees would elaborate on the problems and discuss how to handle them properly. But as many of these issues were politically sensitive, oftentimes examiners would write the politically correct answers into the questions. Therefore, the question “often was so lengthy and comprehensive that little was left for a student to do except to paraphrase, converting the question into his answer” (Chang 1994:295).

Invariably, three major themes encapsulate neo-Confucian ideology and epistemology. Although Confucian classics were produced more than two thousand years ago, the Confucian school of thinking had been enshrined by the Chinese ruling class since the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) and enriched by later scholars. Confucius holds that social stability and prosperity can be achieved only through fulfillment of the moral contract between the ruler and the ruled at three hierarchical levels, including the emperor and his officials, the husband and his wife, and the father and his son. He celebrates such principles for moral behaviors as benevolence (ren), righteousness (yi), loyalty to social traditions (li), wisdom (zhi), and trust (xin). To fulfill the moral contract, to achieve the celebrated virtues, one needs to constantly examine his or her inner self. Only through self-examination will one achieve the wisdom of Tao, or the way the whole universe works. The three major themes in civil service examinations encourage both seeking the Confucian wisdom through self-examination and deliberating on social issues according to the wisdom of Tao.

With varying purposes, the three major themes warranted different organizational patterns. For bagu essays, logical reasoning follows a deductive scheme, with both writer and rater’s primary focus on the skillful use of six or eight rhetorical moves. The purpose was solely to elucidate quotations from Confucian canons, rather than to dispute any arguments emerging from the modern world. In lun essays, the objective was to discuss, or to expose, the significance of a historical event in relation to the present. As for ce essays, the organizational pattern oftentimes started with a discussion of the particular issue and ended with some suggestions for action. Speaking on behalf of the sages (dai sheng xian li yan), the writer assumed an authoritative ethos addressing an inferior audience. The writer functioned to educate, enlighten and elucidate rather than argue with the audience.

At the end of the 19th century, a series of educational reforms were waged by the Qing regime to rescue itself from political crises. In 1898, after repeated petitions from government officials and enlightened intellectuals, the government started to add more practical subjects to civil service examinations, including domestic politics, foreign affairs, business management, military science, natural sciences, and engineering. In 1901, a new educational system modeled on the West was established throughout the nation. The new system expanded school
curricula beyond the *Four Books* and *Five Classics* by including mathematics and physical education in the lower primary school, and foreign languages, physics, chemistry, and biology in both the higher primary school and the middle school. In 1905, the civil service examination system was entirely abandoned.

**Diversified themes in Republican China (1912–1949)**

However, the educational reforms did not save the Qing regime. Inspired by capitalist development in the industrial countries, the emerging bourgeois radicals in China were determined to terminate the feudal social formation and to establish a republican state. After battles on the political, cultural, and military fronts, the Republic of China was founded in 1912. In Republican China, education no longer intended to serve the feudal political and social structure. Instead of producing social elites and government officials, education was defined as providing basic education to its citizens for the new nation-state. More specifically, for both the primary and middle schools, the new educational order set the goals as “to cultivate [in the students] the moral basis for citizenship, and provide the knowledge and skills necessary in life” (Chen 1962: 224).

As Confucian classics were no longer the exclusive reading materials in schools, themes dealing with other subject matter gradually flourished in the Chinese writing class. Expressed as a nostalgic sentiment towards the waning influences of Chinese classics, old themes (such as elucidating Confucian values), discussing past events, and deliberating upon social issues, were still frequently assigned to the students by writing teachers. These themes filled up some popular collections of student essays, such as Cai (1913), a collection that went through 24 printings between 1913 and 1928. However, exposure to natural science subjects gradually instilled in both the teachers and students an empiricist attitude towards life and nature, which became the new themes in the writing classroom (You 2005). For example, themes students dealt with in expository and argumentative essays expanded to include patriotism, ways of life, life goals, equipment for scientific experiments, science, art, theater, and academic research (Jiang 1940/1989).

This epistemological shift can also be observed in entrance examinations administered by different colleges. For example, the writing tasks for students intending to enter National Peking University were all expository argumentation before 1921, but the themes moved from clearly Confucian values to more pragmatic issues. The topic for the 1917 exam was “On the unity of good writing and appropriate behavior,” a quote from the Confucian classics; however, topics for the next three years exhibited a clear departure – “On common sense as
the foundation of academic research” (1918), “Knowledge ought to be derived from empirical studies” (1919), and “On the benefits and drawbacks of civil service examinations” (1920). Into the late 1920s and the 1930s, writing tasks for students applying to this university started to include narrative and descriptive types of writing, valuing the individual's unique life experience and voice, such as “Describe the most memorable event in your life (It must be a true experience, whether it is the happiest, the saddest, or the most interesting event.)” (1935) and “Describe an unforgettable moment in your childhood” (1942). As the number of themes and types of writing both increased, the Confucian value system was pushed aside by democratic and scientific values.

The treatment of theme was hardly touched upon in theoretical treatises in writing instruction published before 1949. Instead, closely related to theme treatment in those works are discussions on the purposes of writing and the desirable attitude towards writing. The most influential theoretical works on composition in Republican China were published in the early 1920s, such as Chen (1922/1978), Liang (1923/1989), and Ye (1924). Different from the neo-Confucian perception of writing instruction as a vehicle of the Way, the three composition theorists agreed that writing was a means for expressing self and reality truthfully. Ye offered a detailed discussion on both the purpose and the right attitude towards writing. He remarked, “Human beings are social animals. Due to both their inborn nature and practical reasons, they hope to share with the others their observations, experiences, hopes, and emotions. The wider their words spread, the better” (p. 1). He urged writers to speak honestly when they write: “... Striving for honesty in writing means the following: In terms of material selection, we should use true, profound rather than unverifiable, trivial substance. Regarding the attitude towards writing, we should speak sincerely and seriously rather than using slippery, frivolous, and despicable language” (p. 12). Writing about one's experiences in his or her true voice thus defies the time-honored neo-Confucian values of writing – i.e., writing is to advocate the Way, or the essence of maintaining social hierarchy, in the voice of the Confucian sages.

Responding to an increasingly diversified range of themes dealt with in the Chinese writing class, a great interest in text structure emerged among writing scholars and teachers. Books on written composition published in Republican China devoted much of their attention to discussions of how to lay out a text. Influenced by composition textbooks published in the United States, Chen (1922/1978), Liang (1923/1989), and Ye (1924) unanimously structured their works in alignment with the four modes of discourse: narration, description, exposition, and argumentation. All three authors selected examples from both classical and modern Chinese works to illustrate their discussions of the structures of the four modes (You 2005). Focusing on expository and argumentative essays, for example, Jiang (1940/1989)
illustrates various ways to structure a text. Regarding how to start an expository argumentation essay (*yilun wen*), he suggests four approaches that were commonly seen in Chinese writing. The writer can start the essay by stating the theme/argument first (a deductive scheme thereafter), mapping out the different dimensions of an issue and choosing to focus on one dimension first, introducing background information about the subject matter before revealing the writer’s argument, or using an analogy or evidence. Regarding the closing of an argumentative essay, Jiang suggests that the writer can restate the argument, call for action, or refute the opponent’s views. Diversified themes called for different ways of reasoning, which thus trampled the dominance of the relatively few text structures popular in the civil service examinations of the late Qing.

**Socialist themes in Maoist China (1949–1976)**

With the establishment of the Communist regime in 1949, Marxist teaching came to shape rhetorical practices in writing classrooms in Mainland China. Writing instruction was assigned a new, overarching function: “to cultivate in the students revolutionary thoughts and morality through the study of Chinese language” (Dong 1951: 5). What could a writing teacher do to achieve the goal of cultivating revolutionary thoughts and morality in students?

The impact of Marxism is most noticeable in the aspect of invention, or “to see the available means of persuasion in each case” in the teaching of writing (Aristotle 1991: 36). A set of Marxist heuristics for rhetorical invention was suggested in writing textbooks published in the new regime. A peek into Zhu (1951), an influential composition textbook for college students, will unveil some key heuristics. Similar to the structure of other composition textbooks published before, this book was organized under six chapters – theme, structure, presentation, diction, sentence, and punctuation. In the chapter of “theme,” the author laid out the “scientific,” or Marxist, way of observing and analyzing the subject matter in question. First, Zhu instructs students that as writers they should be responsible to their readers. He says, “We should choose correct, constructive, and educational themes rather than themes that are untruthful, negative, or meaningless. We should offer the readers nutrients rather than poison or drugs” (p. 2). Next, he promotes Marxist dialectics as the guiding heuristics in developing thoughts: to avoid overgeneralization, to acknowledge both unity and conflicts of the subject matter, to have a developmental perspective, and to differentiate between the appearance and the essence of the subject matter. In the chapters of “structure” and “presentation,” he emphasizes that the selection, organization, and presentation of materials in writing all need to center on the chosen theme.
Throughout the entire book, student writings were used as examples to illustrate various rhetorical principles. On the chapter of “theme,” Zhu stresses that the writer should take “the right stand” and cultivate correct opinions. He quotes a full-length student essay to illustrate “the right stand,” or the celebrated position of the masses. The essay describes a widow during the land reform movement soon after the People's Republic was established in 1949. Zhu comments at the end of the essay:

The student described the figure vividly and used the peasant's language quite skillfully. However, in terms of the selection of theme, this essay is problematic. A suppressed woman typical in the old society, Mrs. Zhu Wang is perseverant, industrious, and kind. She struggled in her miserable life with little resistance, submitting everything in her life to fate. Such a figure and such a story exactly cater to the taste of petty bourgeoisies. Therefore, the author expressed his sympathy, unconsciously celebrating her loyalty to her deceased husband and her filial obedience to her parents. (p. 5)

Rather than “catering to the taste of the petty bourgeoisies,” who clung to the traditional Confucian values of fate, loyalty, and filial obedience, Zhu suggests, the author should have taken the position of the masses, focusing on the great achievements of the land reform movement in which, under the leadership of the Communist Party, peasants were liberated from the exploitation of the landlords.

Zhu's emphasis on constructing correct, constructive, and educational themes in writing clearly echoes one of Chairman Mao Zedong's earlier speeches, “Against the Eight-legged Style Writing within the Party,” delivered in 1942. In this speech, Mao warned Party members against writing without a clear theme, without an honest and scientific attitude, without audience awareness, or without using the people's language.

During the Cultural Revolution (1967–1976), the treatment of theme was further constricted to revolutionary topics. Into the late 1960s, fearful of the influence of the Soviet Union's “revisionist” interpretation of Communism and of “peaceful evolution” from the capitalist West, Mao argued that material enrichment was not enough for China to enter a Communist society, and that only a cultural revolution would unify and strengthen Communist goals within the people's consciousness. Hence a revolution in the cultural domain was initiated. Regarding the treatment of theme in Chinese writing instruction, Marxist heuristics were reduced to only following the Party's propaganda machine closely. Addressing the issue of selecting themes, Xiezuo Mantan (On Writing), a book published for youth (Compiling Team 1975), advises,

First of all, we should select themes solely according to the needs of the current struggles. When we write essays, in order to serve the current political struggles,
we must lend support to the different focuses of the Party’s propaganda work as they vary in different periods. Like what Lenin has advocated, we must select themes that are politically important, catching the majority’s attention, or addressing the most urgent issues.

(p. 13)

This guideline is advised because, according to Mao, writing is not only an effective weapon for unifying and educating the masses, but also a weapon for attacking and destroying enemies. To discover an excellent theme, the book further instructs, a writer must study Marx, Lenin, and Mao’s works closely and learn how to employ the Marxist position, worldview, and methods to observe matters and analyze life experiences. Only through observing life in close alignment with the focus of the Party’s political work would a significant theme be refined. Political themes with an emphasis on class struggles further polarized the Confucian value system, which advocates social stability and harmony.

With the theme correctly chosen, text structure will be deployed accordingly. Addressing the writing of great criticism essays (da pipan wenzhang), a genre popular during the Cultural Revolution, the book declares that the quality of a great criticism essay relies primarily on whether the author can first perceive the main issue (yaohai) that reflects the counteractive nature of the object of the criticism. The next step is to deploy the materials (evidence) centering on the perceived issue (theme/argument). The book states,

After the main issue of the object of criticism being determined, we must explain it well through analysis. We need to enlighten and convince the readers by informing them why the object is wrong and counteractive, and why it is the main issue. When we write a great criticism essay, we need not only a clear-cut opinion but also sufficient supporting materials, and have them organically unified. The process of using supporting materials to illustrate an opinion is also a process of analysis. To undertake a good analysis, the major thrust is to employ the sharp weapons of dialectic materialism and historical materialism to conduct [social] class analysis.

(p. 90)

Advocating a deductive scheme, the book moves on to suggest some expository techniques. For example, the writer should use facts in his or her analysis to make a powerful argument; the writer can compare the counteractive opinions of the object of criticism with the principles of Marxism and Maoism; or the writer can analyze the class nature and political aim of the object of criticism. Therefore, in writing a great criticism essay, the determination of a theme embarks on and controls the deployment of the supporting materials – the argumentation structure.
Depoliticized themes in Post-Mao China (1977–present)

The treatment of theme witnessed a depoliticizing process after the Cultural Revolution. Cultural determinism and class struggle were replaced by a more pragmatic agenda for social development after Mao’s death in 1976. The Communist Party adopted economic reform and opened up policy, hoping to boost a new wave of economic construction for national modernization. As class struggle fell out of the center of social life, topics in the writing class gradually became depoliticized and increasingly diversified.

Although the themes themselves were increasingly depoliticized, Marxist heuristics, in selecting themes, continued to shape writing instruction after the Cultural Revolution. For example, in Lu, Shi & Fan (1982), a textbook written for students in teachers’ colleges, the treatment of theme was still political. In the section “Building up Themes and Selecting Materials,” the authors postulate that themes need to be “correct,” “clear-cut,” and “focused.” They define a correct theme as follows:

What we meant by a correct theme is that the chosen theme must abide by the Four Cardinal Principles,¹ and is in agreement with the Party’s political lines, guiding principles, and policies. For essays that are written to serve the Four Modernizations,² their themes are surely correct. There are some other essays, such as travel notes, essays describing the landscapes of our motherland, and essays introducing handicraft articles as well as scientific knowledge. Although they do not serve the Four Modernizations directly, they offer the reader knowledge, aesthetic appeals, and positive influence. Therefore the themes of those essays are equally correct.

They move on to suggest Marxist heuristics in refining the theme. First, the writer needs to make sure that the theme reflects the defining features of the present era. He or she should break away from personal boundaries and examine the significance of the subject matter from a global perspective – i.e., to examine it within its historical and political context. Second and third, the writer needs to study the individual features of the subject matter carefully and identify its essence.

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1. The Four Cardinal Principles were political rhetoric completely inherited from the Maoist period, referring to the socialist road, the people’s democratic dictatorship, the leadership by the Party, and Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong’s thought.

2. The Four Modernizations were a political slogan articulated by the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai in the mid-1970s, referring to the modernizations of industry, agriculture, defense, and science and technology.
The shift to depoliticized themes with theme treatment remaining political can be noted in college entrance examinations in the early 1980s. For example, in both the 1980 and 1981 Chinese language tests, students were asked to write an essay exposing their thoughts after reading a passage. They were, as stated in the prompts of both tests, required to express “correct opinions and a clear-cut theme.” Using poplars as an example, the reading passage for the 1981 test conveys the idea that trees are much easier to destroy than to plant. In a well-quoted student essay, the writer responded to the passage by writing politically correct contents into a nonpolitical topic:

> When Lin Biao and the Gang of Four were in power, our economic construction suffered from serious destructions and came to the verge of collapsing. After we crushed the Gang of Four, particularly after the Third Plenary Session of the Party’s Eleventh Central Committee, the focus of our Party shifted to economic construction. . . . Our country is still poor, lagging behind other countries. The “tree” has been just planted; it is still tender and weak, and easy to be destroyed. But if each of us protects it consciously and waters it painstakingly, the “tree” will definitely grow taller and taller. (Compiling Team 2003:711)

By comparing the country’s economic construction to planting young trees, the author rendered unambiguous support to the Communist Party. Thus, the student was awarded a high score for consciously abiding by the Party’s political line and policies.

In the 1990s, while the treatment of theme continued, to some degree, to utilize Marxist heuristics, the themes were further depoliticized, reflecting a mixed value system emerging in the country. The Marxist treatment of theme and the diversified themes can be captured in the collections of excellent student essays published in China. In Sun et al. (1998), a collection of high school students’ expository argumentation essays, the authors make it clear that the argument, or the theme of an expository argumentation essay, needs to be correct, distinctive, novel, and profound. “A correct theme,” for the authors, means, “the argument should accurately and scientifically reflect the nature of the objective matters” (p. 3). To develop correct theme, the authors suggest,

> As a high school student, the writer must achieve self-improvement through extensive reading and wide contact with society. While enriching his or her life experience, the writer should improve the ability to tell truth, virtue, and beauty apart from falsity, evil, and ugliness. It is the only means through which the writer

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3. Both Lin Biao and the Gang of Four were political leftists in the Chinese Communist Party.
will be able to bring out correct and clear-cut opinions that reflect the spirit of the times, the leading features of the society, as well as the will of the majority. (p. 3)

While themes still need to be correct, the definition of “a correct theme” was apparently recontextualized in an increasingly capitalist society. No longer required to follow the Party line, themes thus became more liberal and diversified. The selected student essays in this book reflect “the spirit of the time” and “the will of the majority.” Of the 234 essays included in the book, the titles cover a wide range of topics in contemporary Chinese society, including individualized education, consumerism, spiritual pollution caused by advertisements, profit-driven hospitals, the key to personal success, and issues of environmental protection.

In the essays, traditional moral codes, including both Confucian and Marxist values, are reevaluated in the context of a market economy. Some traditional values continue to be celebrated, such as filial obedience to parents, the priority of the collective, and industry and perseverance in work. More strikingly, many traditional values are reexamined in the new sociohistorical context and thereafter assigned new meanings. For example, *yi yi gu xing* (cling obstinately to one’s course) is traditionally criticized as someone being individualistic and stubborn. However, a student writer argues, “Surely we oppose clinging obstinately to one’s course when this person strives only for personal interest or when that person knows that he or she is on a wrong track. But when someone is engaged in a just course, seeking truth, virtue, and beauty . . . the spirit of clinging obstinately to one’s course should be appreciated” (p. 78). Another student writer denounced a long-esteemed Confucian saying, *zhao wen dao, xi si ke yi* (When one hears the Way in the morning, that person should feel content if he or she dies in the evening). Resorting to dialectic materialism, the writer contends that “hearing the Way” embodies the process of learning (which only constitutes the preparation stage for social practice), and that the most important part of one’s life is not to acquire knowledge, but rather to make use of that knowledge for the benefit of human beings. Therefore, the meaning of life does not only rest on “hearing the Way.” In these diversified themes, traditional values, including both Confucianism and Marxism, are recontextualized, representing a conscientious thrust among Chinese teachers and students to negotiate a moral equilibrium between tradition and the ongoing market economy.

**Conclusion**

In this historical survey of Chinese writing instruction over the last century, a trajectory of theme treatment has surfaced. The emphases of the themes silently
promoted the varying ideologies of the dominant social groups, reflecting the power of school education, one of the ideological state apparatuses (Althusser 1971). In the late Qing, themes for school essay writing were constricted by the Confucian classics and reinforced by civil service examinations. In Republican China, both themes and text structures for school essays were liberated from the confinement of the Confucian classics by the extended school curricula. After the Communist Party gained power in 1949, themes became highly tinted by socialist ideology and gradually depoliticized after the Cultural Revolution. Current themes treated in the expository argumentation essays in Mainland Chinese schools indicate an emerging, hybridized value system that embodies elements of Confucianism, Marxism, and market economy. Underneath this historical evolution of theme treatment flowed Western currents in philosophy (such as Marxism and democracy), science, education, and rhetorical theories, which entered China during the last two centuries. The trajectory of theme treatment in Chinese writing instruction over the last century reveals the complexity and fluidity of rhetorical practices in China.

This study also illustrates how a historical approach may contribute new knowledge to contrastive studies of school essay writing. In agreement with Li’s (1996) observation of “good writing” in Mainland China, this study has revealed that the treatment of theme carries equal, if not more, weight to textual organization in assessing Chinese school writing. Whether the dominant ideology was Confucianism or Marxism, the themes always needed to be “correct,” or in alignment with the dominant ideology. Furthermore, this study finds that the treatment of theme oftentimes decides the selection of types of writing and dictates the layout of text structure, which has been rarely touched upon in comparative studies of school writing. Therefore, to gain a more nuanced understanding of the extremely rich literary and rhetorical traditions of ESL and EFL students, I suggest that more historical inquiries be conducted in our exploration of school essay writing.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ulla Connor, Ed Nagelhout, Yichun Liu, Paul Kei Matsuda, and Gigi Taylor for their constructive comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this essay.
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