

REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Good Writing in Cross-cultural Context

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Good Writing in Cross-cultural Context, *Xiao-Ming Li*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1996.

Xiao-Ming Li's study of "good writing" in China and the United States is not a book about technical writing; it is about the genre of high school students' narrative essays. Nonetheless, it may be relevant to teachers of technical writing who, noticing the increasing cultural diversity in their classrooms, might appreciate Li's insights into the historical, social and cultural contexts from which their students might gain their understandings of what "good writing" is. *Good Writing in Cross-cultural Context* is also just plain good reading.

Li outlines two contradictory positions on good writing: first the position that, although they may not be able to articulate what good writing is, good teachers universally know it when they see it; and second, with its basis in extensive comparative studies, the position that writing, and especially assessment and evaluation of writing, is so variable that there are few criteria on which to justify suggestions for improvement. Li does not attempt to define and defend a position, suggesting that to do so would only tend to halt the discussion. And, in accounting for the differences in values of good writing between her American and Chinese subjects, she makes important suggestions about how writing is embedded in social and cultural contexts, and the role that schooling and instruction play in this embeddedness.

In his foreword, Alan Purves credits Li's study of four teachers' comments on six student essays (two teachers and three student essays from each country) with providing "careful and detailed elaboration" for some of the more broad-scale scholarly inquiries in the field of contrastive rhetoric. Li explores the roots of attitudes to writing in each culture in the chapter titled "One Researcher's Perspective", in which she includes such clever speculations as:

If confronted, it is unlikely that Confucius would be persuaded by the American educational philosophy, which privileges creativity over the acquisition of knowledge, nor would he succumb to the accusation that his brand of education is nothing but “regurgitation” that “perpetuates the status quo”, since there is no indication that Confucius ever shared the optimism Americans have in the future and spontaneous human creativity (p.116).

But regardless of such broader debates, readers might value this book more for its narrative style, its local insights into the lives of the teachers and Li’s account of the ways the teachers talk about the purpose, structure and style of composition. For example, one Chinese teacher commented, “writing is for molding and educating people’s minds”, whereas one American teacher perhaps essentialized a US perspective when he said that “writing is for the exploration and expression of ‘self’”. Also, Chinese teachers tended to favor the formal and ornate language which American teachers describe as “phony”; and American teachers stated preferences for “natural” language and descriptive “showing” rather than prescriptive “telling”, and described the instructional features valued by Chinese teachers as “moral tags.”

Whether or not the four teachers and six student essays are fairly representative is arguable. Both countries are vast and regionally and culturally diverse. Also, both Chinese teachers are male, older and, we suggest, more traditional in their thinking than many of the more recently educated writing teachers in China. Li does discuss her selection processes, though, and acknowledges the inherent arbitrariness, as well as that which would unavoidably inhere in her choices in the translations of the essays into English and into Chinese.

Ethnography has suited Li’s task well, and she carefully delineates her method and its rationale. Drawing from John Van Maanen, she problematizes the methodology of Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words*, describing it as giving the researcher an “interpretive monopoly under the guise of objectivity” (p.4). Li favors instead a “multivocal ethnography” in which “power is shared by the researcher and the researched” (p.5). This multivocality does not, however, seem to include anything of the voices of those other research subjects, i.e. the students themselves.

Li’s study is a promising development in the field of contrastive rhetoric. Although limited to the study of narrative essays, her research does offer significant insights into the far-reaching influence of culturally-based rhetorical traditions. And for those of us who are interested in exploring this influence in other genres, for instance in areas of technical writing, *Good Writing in Cross-cultural Context* could provide a fine model.