**Mandarin Language: Background and Perspectives on Mandarin and English Writing Practices**

The dominance of the Mandarin language today is an indicator of how influential Mandarin speaking and writing practices are, not only in China, but also in Washington State and international contexts. This project will explore demographics relating to use and maintenance of Mandarin in Washington State, but will also introduce an ongoing exploration regarding English writing policies in higher education, and how these priorities are negotiated with respect to “Chinese” and “Western” writing styles. The aim of this project is to gain awareness of the benefits in different cultural approaches to writing, and to study supports used at the instructional level that encourage diverse writing and learning styles, especially with regard to the international student population.

As of 2000, Mandarin speakers in China numbered 840,000,000; 70% of these speakers cited Mandarin as their first language. Because it is so prevalent in school, government, and community practice, it is listed as a Status 1 (National) Language (Ethnologue). The four most common dialects of Mandarin are identified regionally; they are the Northern, Northwestern, Southwestern, and Eastern/Lower Yangtze River varieties. These dialects of Mandarin are considered mutually intelligible (UCLA). Mandarin is part of the Sino-Tibetan language family, a group that also includes Tibetan, Lolo-Burmese, and Karen (spoken in lower Burma) (UCLA). The Chinese language is composed of logographs, pictographs, ideographs, compound ideographs, loan characters, and phonetic compounds; Pinyin is the official Romanized set of characters taught in schools (UCLA). Interesting linguistic distinctions about Mandarin include its tonal requirements (it uses level, high rising, falling, and high falling tones to prescribe different meanings for otherwise identical words), the absence of typical inflectional morphemes (which would indicate, for example, tense, person or number), and its infrequent use of pronouns (UCLA). These distinctions also happen to inform much of the current discourse regarding writing assessment practices in higher education.

The large population of Chinese people in the Pacific Northwest can be attributed originally to the prospects of the California Gold Rush in the 1950s, as well as work opportunities created by the Transcontinental Railroad (Perkins). Mostly men came to the U.S. to work and send remittances to their families. In the Pacific Northwest, around 300 Chinese workers helped build a railroad leading from Kalama to Tacoma (Perkins), which also contributed to Chinese settlement in the northwest. However, reduced employment in the 1880s (though Chinese workers had been experiencing upward mobility) fueled resentment against Chinese workers, and, along with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, created a hostile and closed environment for Chinese immigrants. In November of 1885, a worker’s union staged the mobbing and expulsion of hundreds of Chinese people in Tacoma (Perkins). A similar attempt in Seattle in 1886 was quelled by Governor Watson, who declared martial law and prevented the expulsion (Perkins). The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, though quotas on immigration were still placed. Allyship with China during WWII helped reduce hostility toward Chinese immigrants in the US (Perkins).

As of 2010, Chinese people made up 14% of the Asian American and Pacific Islander population in Washington State: 94,198 people identified as Chinese (CAPAA). There is a wealth of community resources available to Mandarin speakers in Washington; The Northwest Chinese School and the Washington International School are two community schools that offer bilingual immersion classes, arts and enrichment courses, as well as Mandarin courses for different age levels and comprehensive family learning. At the university level, The Chinese Student and Scholar Association at UW consists of over 1,800 students with a mission to “[contribute] to cultural diversity of the UW and the greater Seattle area” (CSSA). Because Mandarin is such a widely used language and boasts many resources for education and cultural enrichment for children and adults, its maintenance prospects are strong. In this case, it may be interesting instead to explore the relationship between Mandarin and English in higher education, especially considering the incredible diversity and large international student population enrolled at the UW. Here are a few perspectives of the rhetoric I hope to explore further in this study.

John Webster, an English Professor, points out differences between Chinese (in general) and English that influence international student writing. One example involves the lack of “he”/ “she” pronouns, a rule that sometimes leaves subjects within sentences ambiguous; however, he argues that in Chinese writing, the reader is simply required to pay more attention to context (Webster). It seems that making the reader an actively aware participant in the dissemination of a paper’s content is beneficial, and that this “error” may actually serve as a very valid technique in English writing. Additional professors call for respect towards different rhetorical strategies as they encapsulate entire cultures and diverse ways of thinking; Carolyn Matalene, an American English professor, spent time teaching English majors in the Shanxi Province. She studied that, in contrast to the Western writing styles that call for the individualistic “Authentic Voice”, Chinese writing styles were more collectivist and indirect, and influenced heavily by set phrases of classical Chinese texts and proverbs that students learned via memorization (Matalene). She concluded that “invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery can… be valued in ways other than our own” (Matalene). Acknowledgment of diverse writing styles should be taking place on campus; I would like to see which departments at the UW may currently be the most or least successful in this area.

It is most important to include the student experience in the study of English acquisition and writing in higher education. A UW student, Xin Xin, published an article in the Chinese American Forum regarding his journey in using English in the classroom; for years, he felt the need to pursue the most technically correct, or “Perfect English” he could (a goal he was glad to have pursued), but also later acknowledged his “Perfect English 2.0” that encapsulated a holistic vision of mastering the spoken and written language that focused on effective communication and organizational strategies (Xin). During an interview with Yunfei Zhao, the Targeted Learning Community coordinator at the OWRC, we discussed differences in writing strategies between Chinese schools and the UW, common concerns he fielded from international students, and his personal take on being bilingual. He felt proud that he could strongly maintain, code-switch, and use the two languages in his academic and personal life, and explained that he was the first non-native English speaker hired at the OWRC five years ago. He also explained that he enjoys encouraging English writing strategies for international students (for example, he usually stresses spending time brainstorming topics), though he simultaneously tries to reduce student concerns about “grammar” to allow for the strategy building to take place. As this project continues, Yunfei will allow me to observe TLC sessions, during which I hope to continue building a more detailed understanding of how the ideologies and perspectives illuminated by language instructors and international students inform creativity and diversity in academic writing at the university level.

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