Writing Instruction in China: Challenges and Efforts

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***Abstract*—This qualitative study examined the current writing instruction in 1-12 level education with the data collected in three Chinese cities. The data from the Interviews of teachers and teacher-educators at different levels and from classroom observations at upper elementary to high schools in three metropolitan cities across China provide insights into 1-12 writing instruction in contemporary China. To further reveal the efforts taken by writing teacher under China's high-stakes testing culture, this paper also presented a case study of an exemplary 10th grade writing teacher, who took tremendous efforts in nurturing true readers and writers in his classroom under the test-obsessive culture in China.**

***Index Terms*—Literacy education, Writing instruction, teacher education.**

I. Introduction

Globalization has facilitated transnational population flows and the rapid spread of new digital technology in this century (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) [1]. Writing is the key medium for communication and public expression via texting, email, online posting, twittering, blogging, etc. Writing in this transnational world can be conducted in a variety of languages by people in their native tongue, or in their second or third language, or perhaps even in mixed languages in local or global contexts (Blommaert, 2010) [2]. With writing becoming the key communication medium across the globe, education researchers seek to understand how children learn to write in their native tongue, especially in their formal education across the world in different education systems with different literary traditions.

In recent years, researchers in writing instruction have ventured their studies globally, but as You (2010) [3] pointed out, "they are predominantly interested in transatlantic intellectual exchanges, ignoring those that have happened or are happening across the Pacific Rim" (3). Furthermore, most studies in composition are conducted at the collegiate level, with a focus on English composition. Our study is geared toward writing instruction during the pre-college years, and has crossed the Pacific Rim to China, a country with a long history of writing instruction.

Over the span of the last 2,000 years, the Chinese have developed a rich literacy tradition, which has privileged composition as one of the important, if not the most important, subjects in its formal education. Chinese is not an orthographic language, and written composition is produced from a battery of over 85,000 different characters composed from 214 distinct radicals (Yao, Lee & Sanders 2009) [4]. Composition has been, and continues to be, highly valued to the degree that, to the Chinese, one's writing ability signifies one's educational level, intelligence, and level of sophistication. Poetic language and linguistic devices are highly valued and emphasized in the teaching of writing. In Chinese history, writing instruction can be traced back to its history of formal education as early as the seventh century, during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) when the rigorous civil service exam system was institutionalized.

This high-stake examination system played an important gate-keeping function, as officials were selected based on scholastic merits rather than patronage, evidence of social and political reform of the old feudal society. Fifteen hundred years later, China has gone through fundamental changes in its political and economic system, from a feudal agrarian entity to a socialist society propelled by a globalized capitalistic economy. Written composition remains a cornerstone of its 1-12 education, a core subject in all high-stake exams, which determine one's opportunities for education and career advancement (Sun & Henrichsen, 2011) [5].

However, because of the national unified literacy curriculum, literacy teachers in China are required to administer classes based on the national mandated textbooks, and by the end of each semester, students have to take the district-wide high-stakes test, which covers most of the content in the textbook. Moreover, since nobody dares to fail the "once-in-a-lifetime" high-stake college entrance exam, some high school literacy teachers in China even start to prepare students for this critical test at the beginning of high school. It appears inevitable that "teaching to test" writing instruction is prevailing among students' learning experiences in China, especially in high schools. Test-centered writing instructional climate detaches students' writing from their personal lives and makes it challenging for students to develop positive attitudes, interest, and intrinsic motivation for writing.

Even though China has a rich history of composition instruction, and composition is still highly-valued in one's education and later in one' career, teaching writing under the high-stake testing culture in 1-12 schools is challenging for most of the Chinese literacy teachers. As educational and literacy researchers, we wondered what are the specific challenges 1-12 Chinese literacy teachers encounter in writing instruction, and we also wondered if there are any exemplary Chinese literacy teachers who can manage to engage students in writing that is meaningful to the students through their instruction while not neglecting test-preparation, If so, what and how would they teach writing?

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In this article, we will report our study conducted from 2014-2017 on the current writing instruction in 1-12 level education with the data collected in three Chinese cities. The data from the Interviews of teachers and teacher-educators at different levels and from classroom observations at upper elementary to high schools in three metropolitan cities across China provide insights into 1-12 writing instruction in contemporary China. Then, we will present a case study of an exemplary 10th grade writing teacher, who takes tremendous efforts in nurturing true readers and writers in his classroom under the test-obsessive culture in China.

II. Method

A. Data Collection

For the first part of the study, our data were collected from 2014-2017. Three of our researchers observed writing instruction in Chinese language arts classrooms, interviewed classroom teachers and teacher-educators, and collected student writing samples in three different cities in China during our summer and winter breaks. We conducted our research based on the following procedure:

- Observe writing instruction once or twice a week in elementary and secondary classrooms for 8-12 weeks;
- Write observation notes of how writing was taught;
- Collect or copy any guidelines and requirements given by the teacher;
- Interview the teachers before and after the observation with the guided questions;
- Collect students' writing samples with the teachers' comments and grades;
- Interview a few students asking their thoughts about writing and writing lessons if possible.

We then extracted common themes from our individually collected data. In order to make sure our findings could reflect the commonalities of writing instruction across China, we each sent our research data to teachers and researchers in seven different cities to verify.

Altogether, we collected data in this manner in three major cities across China (Nanjing, Shanghai, Shengyang) from 21 classroom observations (each for one period; 45-50 minutes), interviews of 25 teachers and teacher-educators as well as 8 students (1-2 hours for each) and collected writing samples of 53 students (25 at the primary level and 28 at the secondary level). All data collected in this part present what kind of writing instruction is ingrained and what challenges still exist in the teaching of writing in 1-12 schools in China, which provides a specific educational context for the following case study.

For the second part of our study, one of our researchers spent 6 months in a 10th grade Chinese language arts class during 2016-2017. She observed an exemplary teacher's writing instruction, interviewed him and his students, and collected students' writing samples as well. Data collected in this part depict how the participant teacher taught writing that was meaningful to his students between the cracks of monthly tests students are required to take throughout the year. All the data were collected in Chinese, and we translated all quotes and writing samples used in this article.

B. Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis to organize and synthesize our data. Thematic analyses require involvement and interpretation from the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) [6]. Moving beyond counting explicit words or phrases, we focused on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas and themes within the data. Codes were then typically developed to represent the identified themes which were applied or linked to raw data as summary markers for later analysis.

Each of us analyzed the data we individually collected. Then, we brought our summaries of those data together to discuss and identify common themes throughout our individual summarized findings, such as the objectives of writing instruction at the different levels, and common classroom practice, and the beliefs, challenges, and wishes expressed by the majority of teachers. It is interesting to note the centralized writing curriculum, and commonly adopted teaching practice across China, which reflects the long Chinese history of standardizing centripetal tendencies in its literary traditions (Bakhtin, 1981) [7].

To establish credibility in the present study, we applied methods of triangulation of data sources, research methods, and theoretical schemes (Lather 1986) [8]. We triangulated data sources by collecting data through a variety of means including interviews, classroom observations and artifact collection at different levels in schools in different regions during the 16-month course. In addition, we triangulated methods by observing writing instructions and also interviewing the instructors about their beliefs related to writing and writing practice. Finally, we triangulated theoretical schemes by analyzing data using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) [9], which required that we established categories based on the data rather than placing data into pre-determined theoretical categories.

To confirm and member-check our data analysis and findings, we sent the transcripts from the interviews and observations to the teachers and teacher-educators that were involved with the research. We received confirmatory feedbacks from nearly all of the people who reviewed our summaries, except for some slight regional differences. For example, in some cities, teachers transitioned with the students from grade to grade until they graduated from middle or high school, and in others, teachers maintained the same grade level to teach year after year. Some schools had students write once a week (one period), and some every other week (double periods).

III. Research Findings

A. Writing Instruction: A Key Subject in Chinese 1-12 Education

All the informants expressed that writing is one of the most important subjects in Chinese 1-12 education. Because it utilizes the most complex language system, which necessitates years of learning via rote memorization and daily practice, students need to learn how to write throughout each year of their 1-12 schooling. Most of the teachers stated that

reading is the foundation for writing but writing demonstrates one's internalized transaction of readings (Rosenblatt, 1994) [10], subject-content knowledge, command of language, application of literary genres and tradition, and creative and analytic thinking ability. In ancient China, essay writing was the only means of selecting officials for high-ranking positions in civil service and for general upward social mobility. In contemporary China, writing, as one of the key subjects in high-stake exams, composes a large portion of the exam. As one of high school teachers from Shengyang, an industrial city in northeast China, expressed:

The writing portion alone consists of 40 percent of total amount for the Chinese language arts section of the national college entrance examination, and for high school entrance exams, writing is 40 to 50 percent of the test. This does not include short answer questions that also assess students' writing skills from a different perspective. In addition to high school and college entrance exams, essay writing is also used as the gatekeeper to select college graduates for certain highly lucrative career positions, such as governmental and college faculty positions, because writing ability is considered to demonstrate one's overall education accomplishment and intellectual ability. (Interview, 12.23.2014)

Chinese 1-12 education is very centralized and schools in different regions and cities across China have to follow the single national curricula and even used the same textbooks. The writing curricula from elementary to high schools illustrate the sequence and scope of the writing instruction: from nurturing students' love and interest in writing at the lower grades, to gradually and systematically helping students develop "their sensitivity toward their world, language ability, thinking and writing competence" (a teacher in Shanghai, interview, 5.20, 2015). By the upper elementary level, students are required to write narrative and essays upon demand within a given time, which begins the preparation for high stakes exams. The secondary school teachers we interviewed expressed that students at the middle school level are required to write more essays such as informational, persuasive, and argumentative ones than during the primary years to meet the essay writing requirement for the high school entrance exam. The writing instruction in high schools focus mostly on test preparation, because the college entrance exam "*determines one's future and fate*." As a high teacher from Nanjing, a city in southeast China, expressed:

By high school, we don't actually teach writing any more. Under the pressure of college entrance exam, we start to prepare our students for this fate-determined exam in the first year of high school (10th grade) throughout the high school years. We have students practice writing for prompts week by week, just as if they are taking the exam. We teach them how to decode the prompt, quickly come up with the ideas and organize their thoughts for the topic. Writing has nothing to do with the students' real life experience, or true expression of their feelings and views, but just for how to score high. With this kind of test-oriented writing instruction, the students tend to produce writing with empty words and phony expressions, sounding very artificial. (Interview, 5.17.15)

All the high school writing teachers we interviewed echoed the same frustration and felt that they were hand-cuffed to do what they had to do in their teaching of writing, "*It is too hard to fight against the dominant culture and the long history of the country*." Another teacher said very emotionally: "*We teach our children to love writing in their early years and destroy this love when they get to the high school years.*" This sounds quite familiar to the ears of us American educators now, even though we do not have quite as long a history of civil service examination system in this country.

B. Common Practice in 1-12 Writing Instruction across China

From all the interview and observation data, we found a very uniformed approach in writing instruction, regardless of grade level, or whether it is taught for test-preparation. This common teaching practice reflects the traditional beliefs in Chinese literary history of how writing should be taught. Regarding the traditional way of teaching writing, a teacher from Shanghai stated below:

Traditional way of teaching writing consisted of three stages: first, to read and recite, which is to accumulate knowledge; second, to imitate and copy, which is to follow the best models and gain writing and language skills; third, to create, which is to develop one's own style. It is believed that one should read widely: after one has read volumes of good literature, writing will become natural to him (interview 6.5 2016).

Familiarity with classic literary tradition is the first step in learning to writing, so at the introductory levels, teachers would select well-written reading materials on common sense, moral issues, language rhythm, gradually to classics in philosophy, history and literature for students to read, study, and recite. Students were expected to fully master the reading materials before they began the writing.

Teaching approach is very teacher-centered at all levels in 1-12 education in China, as several teachers expressed: "*Our writing instruction take place before and after students' writing: we spend much time talking about writing to guide them how to write on a given prompt, and then spend a lot of time correcting and assessing their work*" (Interview, 7.5.15). Even though in the writing curriculum, it states that students should be able to revise their work and conduct peer reviews, very few teachers talked about having students revise their work nor ever required this activity in their teaching. And peer review rarely happened, because they "*had no time for this*," as expressed by several teachers.

C. Challenges and Obstacles in Teaching of Writing in China

Even though all the teachers appeared confident and knowledgeable in the interviews about their writing instruction, they expressed much frustration and challenges in their teaching of writing. One of the challenges many teachers expressed was the students' lack of interest and motivation. The key reason for this, according to the teachers, was that children's study loads were already too burdensome. Furthermore, many were accustomed to spend time doing worksheets that require them to give definite answers rather

than spending time on reading and writing which requires them to stretch their thinking and imagination without one unified clear answer and response.

Children in China from their very early year of schooling, often not only attend school from 7:00 am to 5:00 pm five days a week but also pack their out-school life with numerous academic programs in addition to other activities such as dance, chess, art, English, and music. From the first grade on, children have to spend 4-5 hours every day for homework, and more during the weekend. With the one-child-per-family policy, Chinese parents focus all their attention, hope and finance on their one child. They believe that "*the more, the better for their children to learn*," as if they engage in a national race and are afraid of leaving their children behind.

Chinese parents prepare their children for college entrance exam as soon as they start school, and some even start this in the children's pre-school years (4-5 years old). Even though elementary school teachers do not have to prepare their young students for high-stakes tests, they feel tremendous burden to teach in a culture and a society that are obsessed with test success. One teacher-educator stated: "*Parents are obsessed with how to prepare their children for tests, children are enslaved with the test-preparation, and teachers are all contrived by tests, no matter if the tests will be taken immediately or in distance*" (Interview, 5.19.14).

The other challenge in writing instruction is the overwhelming grading burden, a major part of writing instruction in China. Chinese schools tend to have large class-sizes, with 45-60 students in a class. As grading is a major component of writing instruction, teachers spend many hours grading students' work each week. When we asked teachers about how much they thought their grading helped their students improve their writing, most responded: "*Not much, and the poor students keep writing poorly week by week*" (Interview, 6, 9.15). We are not surprised by this response, seeing few comments on the students' work we collected, and knowing students rarely had any chance to revise their work. In reviewing the data, most teachers agreed with this response. All the Chinese teachers agreed that grading was the hardest part in their instruction of writing.

Many teachers said that they learned how to teach writing by observing their fellow teachers and attending some "public teaching workshop" given in the district or region. Interestingly, despite the teachers who teach in the cities thousand miles apart across the country, or who have 20 years separating their ages, they all taught writing with a similar approach: give lectures before writing and give public evaluation of students' work after writing. In the past two decades, China has gone through profound changes in its social and economic structure, and now provides 9 years of compulsory education for all school aged children with more than 50% of high school graduates advancing on to college. It is surprising to hear that the approach to writing instruction has remained the same.

Even though challenges and obstacles in teaching writing are enormous in China, there are still some exemplary teachers who are trying to "teach against the grain" (Cochran-Smith, 1991) [11], and "teach in the cracks" (Bomer, 2005) [12]. They try their best to stay true to themselves, to trust their professional knowledge and literacy teaching beliefs, thus pushing back against the pressure from high-stakes testing, even when they need to be prepared at every moment to defend their teaching decisions (Bomer, 2005). Some other exemplary teachers have found ways to work against the constraints from high-stakes testing and create a dynamic classroom environment where they express their passion and love of literacy and nurture students to be life-long readers and writers (Elish-Piper, et. al, 2013) [13].

In the following, we present a case study on an exemplary 10th grade Chinese language arts teacher, who ventured to create a space in his language arts classroom for his students to do meaningful reading and writing under the tremendous testing pressure in China. This case study depicts how this exemplary teacher worked hard to nurture his high school students to gain a joy and passion for reading and writing. A specific literacy project he implemented during the spring semester in 2017 will be presented as an example of this teacher's practice.

D. Teaching in the Cracks: A Case Study of an Exemplary 10th Grade Writing Teacher

Mr. C, the participant teacher in this case study, has taught Chinese language arts class for more than 30 years. Like all teachers in China, Mr. C has very limited teaching autonomy to deviate from traditional teaching approach. He teaches 10th grade, the first year of high school in China, yet the testing fever has already affected his students. Throughout the year, students are required to take a test every month, plus the mid-term and final exams. They are literally immersed in test-preps and countless tests, one after another. Teachers are also breathless since they need to follow the mandated teaching pace required by school. Chinese language arts class is only scheduled 40 minutes per day, and usually covers 2 articles in the textbook per week.

For students, test-driven teaching drains their time and interest in real-world, related reading and writing. The test content per se has very limited connection with what students care about in their lives or the current social issues around the world. Students, especially high school students, are drowning in the test papers, and their curiosities toward the world beyond their textbooks are silenced or suppressed.

Mr. C often feels frustrated with the current teaching and learning situation in China's high school, and he refuses to accept his role only as a test-trainer. He believes literacy mirrors real life events, and reading and writing should be relevant to students' living experience.

I am in great pain to see that the test is the only thing students care about today. They don't read anymore but only textbooks; they don't write anymore but only write for tests. We need to do something, doesn't have to be big things, but just begin to change this attitude in our own classes. (Interview, 3.12.2017)

His beliefs lead to his prerogative in creating spaces for meaningful reading and writing for students under the fierce testing pressure in school. Mr. C recognizes that "*teachers must act in an imperfect world*" (Huebner, 1987, p.26) [14], so he grabs every chance to teach reading and writing in the cracks between exams and test-preps. When he taught 12th

grade, he felt students were totally isolated from the society, their everyday life revolved around test-preps. They didn't read or write anything other than test-based materials, buried in worksheets, they never cared about what was going on in society.

To awake them as responsible citizens instead of study machines, Mr. C brought newspapers for the class. Students were asked to take turns to give talks every day at beginning of his class. Topics were based on particular social issues reported in the newspaper that intrigued them. Before the speech, students had to draft their speech, meet Mr. C to go over their work, and then revise their writings before they delivered their talks to the class. After each talk, the whole class would spend a few minutes discussing the social issue reported by the speaker. At the end of the school year, Mr. C collected all further revised work from the students and send it to a local press and got it published as a book of youth's views on social issues. Year by year of doing this with the class he taught, his students not only developed into passionate socially conscious readers and writers, but also managed to do well with their college entrance exams. This consistent success in teaching has earned Mr. C a reputation as an exemplary teacher at the local and national level.

That was only a snapshot of what kind of reading and writing teacher he has been over his thirty years of teaching. Mr. C constantly tries different ways to integrate real-life reading and writing for students in class. No matter how busy his teaching schedule is, he would squeeze at least 5 minutes every day for students to share the books they recently read on their own among themselves. The valuable 5 minutes book-talk in class nurture students' love for reading and introduce them to new books. Mr. C also asks students to keep a writer's notebook. The notebook could be a place to record the books read, and a place to scribble down their observations in life. In Mr. C's words, the writer's notebook creates a place for students to become curious observers and passionate readers and writers.

However, as a high school teacher, working with strictly curriculum requirements and under the high-stakes testing culture, Mr. C always laments that in-class teaching time is too limited for meaningful reading and writing instruction. He needs to extend his teaching beyond class hours to cultivate readers and writers. Therefore, he formed a Friday-evening reading club for the whole 10th grade students for the past four years, where Mr. C leads students to read books of various genres and topics. The local newspaper covered the story of Mr. C's Friday-evening reading club, and he has been known as "the man who fights the windmill," a metaphor describing his efforts and struggles in teaching reading and writing beyond test preparation.

Mr. C always searches for opportunities to create spaces for students to do meaningful reading and writing. During the Spring semester in 2017 when this study was conducted, he managed to fit an integrated literacy project in his teaching, lasting for three weeks between monthly tests. Two days a week, students read articles written in different formats on a controversial social issue popularized in social media and had group discussions and conducted group reports. Then they were guided by Mr. C to draft, revise their reports, and finalize their work to persuasive essays. In the following, the details of this literacy project will be presented.

E. The Integrated Literacy Project

To put students in a real-life literacy context, and to "hook" them into true writing, Mr. C chose one heated social debate as the entry to the integrated literacy project. This debate was about a Nobel Laureated Scientist, Dr. Zhenning Yang. In the beginning of 2017, Dr. Yang at age of 94 decided to renounce his US citizenship and return to China. A wave of debates spread across the nation via social media. Some people saw him as a pure opportunist, who would gain much but contribute little to China at this old age of his life, yet some furiously defended him as patriot for China. Mr. C grabbed this opportunity to create a socially relevant space in his classroom, as he was curious about what his students thought of the opposite views about Yang's return and the chaos this aroused in the social media platform. He stated:

I immediately got excited when I read multiple articles in the newspapers and on the social media; somehow, I just feel there are some writing potentials on this issue (for my students). But more than that, I want them to analyze these opinions; they need to find out how trustworthy the information is behind those views. That is an essential skill for a mature reader and a responsible citizen. (Interview, 4.10.2017)

In other words, Mr. C wanted to train students to examine the reliability of the information the students read, through which he believed would help students unleash their critical thinking capacity. He also wanted to connect classroom learning with what was happening in the society, let his students learn to search for reliable resources and engage students to participate in social events. He believed that adolescents wanted to actively participate in the society they lived in, and they would be motivated to become responsible citizens in the future if they were well-prepared and trained during the school years.

In this integrated literacy project, Mr. C aimed to facilitate students to read and write for an authentic and meaningful purpose. He collected reading materials for class discussion from newspapers and social media. Articles ranging from 2000 to 5000 words in different genres about this issue, including argumentative writings, interviews with Dr. Yang, and Yang's biographical narratives were selected for the group discussions. These articles presented different voices in China's society at the debate, therefore providing students with multiple angles and perspectives to investigate this issue.

F. Reading and Discussion

Students were guided to read and conduct group discussion by Mr. C in the beginning of the project. With more than 50 students in one class, Mr. C divided the class into groups with 7-8 students in each and posted the following 3 questions to engage students in group discussions:

1) Why is his (Yang) returning controversial? State opinions from all the readings.

2) Select 4 articles, state authors' opinions, writing purposes and its target audiences.

3) What are your opinions?

These three questions also served as writing prompts, students were asked to write short-answered responses at home before they joined the group discussion in class. During group discussion, students were required to record their peers' utterances.

The richness of information and opinions from the readings successfully compelled students to heated discussions. They were eager to show their group members what they had found in the readings, and why they agreed or disagreed with the authors. The selected articles not only provided different information, viewpoints, discourse and vocabulary, but also provoked students to question why the author held such opinions, and what he/she tried to communicate to the audiences. Through the first reading, students had gained knowledge regarding this debate, and through subsequent discussion they began to form their own thoughts toward Dr. Yang's return to China.

Most of the students appreciated Yang's contribution to the science field after reading his biographic narratives and several of his interviews. For example, at the next day's class presentations, one group leader said most of her group members respected Dr. Yang's choice, and thought highly of Yang's contributions in science.

In the presentations, students also provided further explanations why Dr. Yang was subjected to such disputes:

Part of the reasons Yang himself is controversial is because as a celebrity, he is highly exposed to the public, and we try to fit him into our imagined hero model. If he doesn't fit, then we judge him, which is not right. (1st round group discussion report 2, 3.15)

But concerns toward Yang's return were also stated during group presentations, as one student said:

For our nation's interests, Yang's return is definitely beneficial, there is no need to fuss about it. However, his return is more symbolic than his actual contribution to physics back in China. (1st round group discussion report 2, 3.15)

Besides sharing opinions on Yang's return with the whole class, what was more interesting in class presentation was that some students began to reflect on their own reading and discussion processes and reported to the whole class for further discussions. To push students further discuss the real social problems behind this wave of debates, Mr. C posted another two questions for further discussion:

1) What do you think of the controversies caused by Yang's return to China, and why is his return such a social clamor?

2) Faced with today's information explosion, and the intricate coverings and stories posted by media, how can we tell what is truth and think analytically? You can answer this question base on your own reading experiences in the past.

Students needed to write on the two prompts before they join the second-round group discussions, only this time their responses were not confined to the readings, and they began to connect their own life experiences in their discussion. As one student reflected her previous understanding of Dr. Yang:

I heard about his stories or the so called "scandals" several times before this project, mostly from my families and relatives at the dinner table, but I never really read intensively about him, and I never got to know who he is, what his accomplishments are, and I never thought deeply about why he has been slandered in our society. I just followed the ill-comments people throw at him without questioning (second round group discussion 1, 3.17).

Some other students shared similar experiences, they also talked about possible ways to avoid being manipulated by the media. At the end of second round of group presentations, students were full of ideas and opinions. Reading, group discussion and presentations facilitated students to gain knowledge of this highly polarizing person and all kinds of controversies he caused, students also adopted a critical lens towards judgments thrown by China's social media to an individual. Students were asked to summarize and synthesize ideas from the texts and build their responses upon evidences drawn from the texts. These quick writing activities (Shepard,et.al, 1996) [15] kept students' hands warm, and untangled the information provided by different authors. It was obvious students were getting more and more passionate to talk about this issue in and out of class, therefore their writing vibes were activated.

G. Writing Workshop

The last phase of the project was writing. They began their drafts at home. Since students were well-prepared at the reading and discussion phase, it only took them a weekend to draft. For each draft, Mr. C provided positive comments as well as suggestions for writing improvement. He sent back students' drafts along with his comments and gave mini-lessons on how to develop opinions and reasons in writing. He used selected articles as mentor texts, pointed out how the authors used facts and evidences to support their positions, and what structures they adopted to make the argument more cohesive and powerful. He also showed the differences between "facts" and "opinions" since some students confused them in their writing.

After the mini lesson, students read teacher's comments on their writings, and shared their drafts with a partner. They read each other's writing, discussed their work and explained the examples they used to back up opinions. They responded to each other work and offered suggestions for improvement. Based on the comments and suggestions given by both teacher and their partners, students worked on their second drafts as homework.

Because of the limited class time, and the upcoming monthly test, lunch break was the only time left for Mr. C to have individual conference with students. For the following Monday to Friday, Mr. C talked to at least 10 students at noon. During the 10 minutes conference with each student, he read aloud students' second draft, highlighted the excellent part of students' writing, and told them why the paragraph was well-focused on their argument. He knew the significance of building on the positives in students' writings rather than just correcting them. But he also pondered on word choice:

repeatedly reading aloud one word or sentence several times, letting students recognize why the word or sentence sounded awkward, and thinking aloud with students to find alternative ones. He demonstrated how to add more evidence or to trim redundant and confusing part in the writings. He kept asking questions during the conference and engaged in conversations with students. In the conference, Mr. C tried to put students in an active stance (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001) [16], inviting them to take the lead in the conference. He listened to students and regarded them as writers. His read aloud of students' writing gave them a chance to hear it in a new way, after which they could decide how to improve their word choice or sentences. The one-on-one conference, though time-consuming, benefited the students greatly as one expressed:

I feel like he (Mr. C) pushes me to think it through in the conference. He asks me a lot of questions about my definition of concepts, the reasons of my chosen evidences from the readings, the connection of paragraphs... I have to say I didn't realize my writing had so much room for improvement until our conference. (Student interview 1, 4.13)

After second drafts of their individual work, the students worked as a group to make a poster group presentation. They were excited and took 3 days working on their posters after the monthly test. Some posters were printed in a newspaper format, and some were hand-drawn with beautiful decorations, with different sessions that include explanations of the controversies caused by Yang's return, descriptions of the group discussions, and students' own opinions toward the controversies. Everyone in the groups contributed a piece to the group poster, and some students used cartoon drawings to express their feelings and opinions. Mr. C was totally amazed by students' work, and kept saying "*they are so great, even beyond my expectations*" (Interview with C 1, 4.15). He hung up all posters on his office wall and invited his colleagues and students' parents to visit.

H. Efforts to Make

Through this integrated literacy project Mr. C engaged his students in reading, talking and writing about social issues. He made the learning relevant to their lives and world and built their passion for reading, writing and working in groups. This project brought a joy that his students couldn't have during their test-preparation learning.

Anyhow Mr. C didn't neglect the school mandated curriculum. He still had textbook-based lessons to deliver and prepares students for their monthly test. But somehow, he managed to squeeze two days a week to fit the project in his weekly teaching. He took the risk that students might lose some points in the test since he didn't drill students repeatedly every day for exams, but he had much higher expectations for his students than getting an impressive high score, and that was the message he keeps sending to his students and students' parents since the beginning of the semester. That was why all his students and their parents were very supportive of the project, and everyone in Mr. C's class believed they could achieve more than just high scores on tests.

As a writing teacher, Mr. C also tried to handover the responsibility of teaching writing to his students. He was no longer a dominant authority in class, making all the choices. Rather he was a listener, a reader, an audience, and a facilitator to students. He celebrated students' presentations and writings with them, built on the strengths of their writings, shared his own thoughts in class and during conferences. His demonstration of how to revise and edit drafts helped students with their writing process. In turn, students amazed him in so many ways during the project, as they adjusted well to the new learning experience in Mr. C.'s class.

Although both the teacher and the students had gained much joy throughout the process of this meaningful project, Mr. C still worried about the approaching monthly test. The students' doing well on tests would prove his meaningful teaching would not interfere with the "normal" teaching and students' school achievement. Parents' expectation for high test scores was not the only cause of Mr. C's anxiety. As an exemplary language arts teacher, Mr. C was also responsible that his students did well with tests in his school to meet the expectations of his principal and the local district.

Even for an experienced teacher like Mr. C, teaching within the cracks of the prescriptive curriculum and the high-stake testing environment takes great efforts. Those efforts are concrete teaching plans and actions, as well as working through the inner struggles as a teacher who must care about the monthly test. In the interviews, Mr. C admitted there were moments he struggled between sticking to the project plan and compromising for the coming monthly test. While other 10th grade classes were going over slides for test preps, memorizing classical poems, and doing reading comprehension worksheets, Mr. C's students were engaging in reading, group discussing and writing. Class time was never enough for those activities, when, the students were so excited to share new information they researched, and to voice their hearts out. Reluctant to cut off students' active conversations, Mr. C postponed his test-prep plan, but he couched with his anxiety class after class. Despite his inner struggles, he stayed to his original plan and pushed students through the integrated literacy project. It has been a constant struggle to balance the meaningful learning and test-preparation, but Mr. Cao never stopped trying, and constantly searched for ways to provide students with meaningful learning experience while meeting the testing expectations. Mr. C's effort is just an example of how many Chinese language arts teachers are trying to wedge a crack on the test chain to provide students with meaningful reading and writing experiences.

IV. Conclusion

Writing is highly valued in the Chinese literary tradition, as You stated (2010) [3]: "*The Chinese literati traditionally preferred writing to speaking because writing captures and promotes the 'Way'*" (p.10), which "*not only offers the answer to how the natural world operates but also the key to the moral-spiritual order and the prosperity of human society*" (Ibid). With this 2000-year tradition, writing instruction has always been at the forefront of the Chinese 1-12 education. In China, it is understood that developing competence in writing takes years. Therefore throughout 1-12 education, learning to write was and continues to be a major

focus.

In China, a highly centralized culture and society, teaching writing is quite uniformed across geography and time. There has always been a common core with the national standards and curricula of writing instruction in the history of the Chinese 1-12 education. Even though the Chinese contemporary education is not to produce elite scholars but raise the national literacy level for a society with its globalized economy, the teaching of writing in most 1-12 Chinese classrooms seems still mired in its ancient footprints bogged by old traditions. A high school teacher expressed: "*We have three thousand years of writing history and our ancestors have written so many books and generated excellent approaches to writing. They are our valuable inheritance. Teachers have the responsibilities to teach students the successful writing experiences of our forefathers*". Unfortunately, this old teaching model does not fit with students' learning style of today's world, fast-paced with too much going on and too much to do.

All the challenges and obstacles our informant teachers expressed in the interviews prompted us to explore the possibility to nurture student writers under the pervasive high-stakes testing culture in China. Our case study shows how one exemplary Chinese language arts teacher is making efforts to meet the challenges in writing instructions and cultivate students as responsible readers and writers, despite the severe testing pressure and limited teaching autonomy in Chinese high school.

Like most high school literacy teachers in China, Mr. C confronted the predicaments in teaching writing, however, he held high expectations for his students, and did not underestimate their writing potentials. His trust in his students is "*a basic trust --- a belief that this person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy*" (Rogers, 1998，p.29) [17], and that trust ensured him that his students wanted to learn, to grow, and to create. Based on this trust, he developed the integrated literacy project for students and believed with careful scaffolding, students could be engaged in qualified and fruitful discussions even they had never been trained that way in their previous learning. The integrated literacy project is an example of Mr. C's efforts in creating meaningful reading and writing environment for students. Mr. C is constantly "*living the uncertainty of discovery*" (Ibid, p.33) as he takes risks and acts on his literacy teaching beliefs.

Mr. C is one of many exemplary writing teachers in China who are trying to make learning relevant to students' living experience and create meaningful writing spaces for students. While bounded by accountability rules they search for new ways to teach writing which interest students and try out different ideas to integrate novelty and innovations in their literacy instructions. These exemplary teachers influence the lives of their students in long-lasting and significant ways, and thus making writing blossom in the rest of students' lives. For literacy and education researchers, it is significant to find out the "choice of action" (Dewey 1966) [18] those exemplary teachers make as they gain the courage to "teach in the cracks" through their teaching career. It is also significant for educators to draw experiences from these exemplary teachers and improve the teacher education programs by strengthening the pedagogical aspects, especially today under the high pressure on accountability and unified standards for public education among many countries across the world.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Dr. Rongrong Dong conducted and wrote the case study, she also did data analysis with the team; Dr. Danling Fu collected data in several cities and coordinated the whole study; Dr. Xiaodi Zhou analyzed the data with the team and proposed the methodology of the paper; Buyi Wang collected data in several cities and wrote part of the paper. All authors had approved the final version.

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