

## **The Impact of Cultural Factors on Chinese and American College Students' Rhetorical Choices in Argumentative Discourse: A Contrastive Study**

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In order to gain a better understanding of Chinese rhetoric and to explore how various American and Chinese cultural factors influence the ways students from these two cultures write their argumentative essays, the author conducted the present study. Applying a research method of qualitative content analysis on the participants' rhetorical choices in essay organization, the author compared 50 English argumentative essays written by Chinese college ESL/EFL student participants with 50 English argumentative essays written by U.S. college participants. To further interpret the outcomes, the author also conducted in-person interviews and focus groups with the participants from both groups. The major findings of cultural influences on participants' argumentative essay revealed the following: On the one hand, the American values of individualism and freedom of speech led to U.S. student participants making their personal stances on a topic extremely explicit at the very beginning of their essays. On the other hand, the influence of the Chinese cultural values of collectivism, the Confucian "Doctrine of Means," and Daoism's non-contention strategy made some of the Chinese participants take an indirect strategy by presenting their theses at the end of their essays and avoiding absolute arguments. In addition, different emphases on writing from the Chinese literary tradition and Western rhetorical traditions also influenced how the student participants from both cultures organized their argumentative writing.

Kaplan is considered by many to be the "founder" of the approach termed "Contrastive Rhetoric," "which centers on the notion that writers' different cultural and linguistic backgrounds influence the structure or arrangement of their second language text" (Connor, 1996, p. 5). In his pioneering 1966 essay, "Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education," Kaplan suggested that the forms of ESL (English as Second Language) student essays reflect the "thought patterns" of the writers' cultures. He claimed that "Oriental" (referring to Koreans and Chinese in Kaplan's article) thought patterns resemble a spiral, whereas "English" thought resembles a straight line. Since then, there has been a much-repeated argument that purports that traditional Chinese text structures such as the "eight-legged" essay and "Qi, Cheng, Zhuan, He" continue to influence the written English of Chinese students (You, 2005). This argument also suggests that the influence of traditional Chinese cultural value of social harmony in Confucianism lead Chinese students to avoid free expression of personal views and feelings and instead leads them to "suggest" or "be indirect" in their argumentative writing (Connor, 1996).

However, some recent research on Chinese rhetoric has questioned this essential view of Chinese rhetorical practice (You, 2005) and has pointed out flaws in its methodology and its limited understanding of the impacts of Chinese social and cultural factors on Chinese

students' English writing. For example, Liu (1996) examined a popular Chinese rhetoric book published in the sixteenth century and found evidence of "Western" rhetorical values such as originality, newness of expression, and directness of discourse. You (2005) claims that Mainland Chinese students have long been taught to write Chinese composition in "Anglo-American" rhetorical style instead of the eight-legged essay style. In fact, from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s, Western rhetorical tradition had been conflated with modern Chinese rhetoric. Lu (1998) also points out, "While harmony is believed to be the primary cultural value of ancient and contemporary China, it is, likewise, regarded as the overriding concern of Chinese rhetoric" (p. 29). Thus, Lu argues that the place of harmony might be misunderstood by some contrastive rhetoricians because Chinese cultural values are in fact represented by different schools of thoughts at various times throughout Chinese history. Additionally, in today's multicultural educational settings, as Saverino (1993) notes, any possible reductive notions about the rhetorics of different languages and cultures need to be reexamined so as to avoid simplistic expectations and interpretations of multilingual students and their writing and to avoid an ethnocentric, assimilationist pedagogical stance.

Therefore, more extensive research on contrastive rhetoric in Chinese rhetorical studies with more varied methods and deeper considerations of the influence of major Chinese social and cultural factors (including not just Confucianism but also Daoism and Chinese literary tradition) is very important for a more complete understanding of the Chinese rhetoric/writing in general, and argumentation, in particular. In addition, doing so is also significant for promoting smoother intercultural communication between Western and Eastern cultures because it will help avoid stereotyping and increase mutual understanding. A reconsideration of the assumptions of contrastive rhetoric in Chinese argumentation and of the cultural factors that impacted Chinese students' English writing seems in order. Indeed, these same needs also seem to exist for native speakers of other languages and cultures. Although the present study focuses on comparing Chinese rhetoric with Western rhetoric and on intercultural communication from the Chinese perspective, many of the implications might well be the same for other cultural and language communities that use English for specific purposes. The present study intends to address these needs.

### Literature Review

The study of Chinese rhetoric for ESL purposes was first initiated by Kaplan in his influential 1996 article, "Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education." Since then, many contrastive rhetoric and intercultural communication researchers have joined the ongoing discussion about comparisons between the organizational patterns of Chinese rhetoric and the organizational patterns of English rhetoric. So far, several distinct perspectives on the organizational patterns of Chinese rhetoric have emerged.

One perspective on the organizational patterns of Chinese rhetoric, represented by Kaplan and Matelene, holds the view that Chinese writing is indirect. Kaplan (1966) claimed that Chinese, as well as other Oriental (Korean) writing is indirect. He points out that "Paragraph development may be said to be 'turning and turning in a widening gyre.' The circles or gyres turn around the subject and show it from a variety of tangential views, but the subject is never looked at directly" (p. 10). Moreover, Kaplan observes that "things are developed in terms of what they are not, rather than in terms of what they are" (p. 10). Such a

style of writing, he comments, would strike modern English readers as being awkward and unnecessarily indirect, because a paragraph in English typically begins with a claim/thesis supported directly by examples that are related to the claim/thesis. Matalene (1985) affirms Kaplan's indirectness assumption on Chinese rhetoric. She argues that modern Chinese rhetoric is a continuation of ancient Chinese rhetoric (represented by the eight-legged essay) based on her analysis on a small sample of English essays written by her Chinese ESL students in Shanxi University in China in 1985. She then concludes that to be indirect and to expect the audience to infer meaning rather than to have it spelled out is a defining characteristic of Chinese argumentation/rhetoric.

However, one problem that has faced the early contrastive rhetoric is that the methods used by its founders have often been called into question (Benda, 2006). Kaplan, for example, has been criticized for over-generalizing about Oriental writing and thought based on only two Asian ESL students' English compositions, and for concluding that the eight-legged essay still represents contemporary Chinese writing based on his analyzing a sample of only four essays by Chinese ESL students. As Connor (1996) points out, Kaplan's method was not only a gross form of stereotyping, but was also methodologically unsound. Similarly, Liu (1996) critiques the validity of Matalene's conclusion about the indirectness of Chinese rhetoric. Liu maintains that this kind of generalization makes about the same sense as trying to define the structure patterns or formal features of Western rhetoric "in general" on the basis of a few samples of contemporary undergraduate essays from randomly chosen American colleges. These scholars also criticize Kaplan's and Matalene's assumptions of an unbroken trans-historical continuity in Chinese rhetorical theory (Benda, 2006) because their assumptions overlook the historical fact that the eight-legged essay style was abolished in the early twentieth century. As Kirkpatrick (1997) argues, contemporary Chinese textbooks on composition no longer teach students to use the eight-legged essay nor Qi, Cheng, Zhuan, He text structure, which characterizes itself as approaching the topic indirectly by turning around a topic and by shifting the topics unexpectedly. Instead, Kirkpatrick (1997) explains that the textbooks teach students to take a direct approach to the opening and closing of a text, clear arrangement of idea, and the linear structure of both deductive and inductive reasoning. Therefore, Kirkpatrick (1997) claims that the "English writing of such students will be similarly influenced by Western rather than by traditional Chinese styles" (p. 225). Based on such responses to potential indirectness in Chinese rhetoric, we can see that there are a couple of rather serious problems with the early research of Kaplan and Matalene. One is that their research sample corpora were possibly too small to be realistically representative of Chinese rhetoric. The other is that the explanation of the eight-legged essay influencing Chinese students to write in an indirect manner is not convincing.

Another perspective on the organizational patterns of Chinese rhetoric, represented by Wang and Becker, states that Chinese writing can be regarded as a mixture of directness and indirectness. Wang (1992) argues that the ESL data used by some scholars might not accurately reflect the rhetorical patterns and conventions of the source language. Thus, he used Chinese texts from 20 Chinese journal articles and English texts from 20 English journal articles as the major data corpus for his analysis. He found that the methods for paragraph structure were similar in Chinese and English writing. There were, however, differences in how the arguments were made. The English writing tended to use a deductive method while the Chinese writing displayed deductive, inductive and a combination of the two in the

writing organization. Wang (1992) attributes this phenomenon to “the interaction between Chinese rhetorical tradition on the one hand and modern English influence on the other” (p. 133). Wang’s use of Chinese texts by native Chinese writers rather than that of ESL students may reflect more accurately the organizational structures of Chinese writing. This method, in turn, may help to examine the untested premise of indirectness as “a defining characteristic of Chinese rhetoric” (Matalene, 1985). Wang’s study does not, however, contribute directly to solving the ongoing controversy as to whether Chinese ESL/EFL students’ English writing is influenced by Chinese writing conventions or not, because no Chinese ESL/EFL English writing was analyzed here. As a result, Wang’s study does not yield any indications on whether Chinese culture may impact the Chinese students’ English writing.

Becker (1995), rather than examining one essay per subject as has been the case in many contrastive rhetoric studies, looked at five ESL Chinese students’ English and Chinese essays written over the course of one semester. She found that the Chinese ESL students’ English writing exhibited several organization patterns. In many English essays, the main topics were introduced at the beginning of the essay and paragraph, the subpoints were sequenced in a pattern considered logical to American readers, and the topics were discussed directly. In other English essays, new topics were introduced at various points in the essay and paragraphs. Also, the focus of the essay, instead of being consistently placed at the beginning, was frequently near the middle or the end of the text. Instead of discussing the point directly, several examples were presented, leading the reader to draw the cognitive connections. However, Becker (1995) believes that this latter nonhierarchical pattern, although certainly different from the English pattern, was not a “spiral” and Kaplan’s use of that particular label represents a somewhat inaccurate oversimplification about Chinese ESL writing. Again, however, Becker’s conclusions might not be easily generalized because of her small research sample.

### The Present Study

#### *The Research Questions*

1. Do argumentative essays written in English by Chinese college ESL/EFL student participants at Xi’an International Studies University differ from the same kinds of essays written in English by U.S. college students at Texas Tech University?  
If so, in what ways do they differ? If not, how are they similar?
2. What might be the cultural factors that may cause the differences or similarities between the Western and Chinese rhetorical organization or structure in the argumentative essays written by the Chinese ESL/EFL college students and by U.S. college students?

### Methods

#### *Qualitative Content Analysis*

*Participants.* To look for answers for the first research question, the author recruited two groups of participants. The first group was composed of 50 U.S. freshmen taking Introductory

Composition and Rhetoric (English 1301) at Texas Tech University, USA. The second group was composed of 50 Chinese college junior EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students majoring in English at Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China. Both groups were asked to write an English argumentative essay.

*Data collection.* The author's former colleague, an associate English professor in the Department of English at Xi'an International Studies University, helped administer the writing task for the written argumentative essays in English by the Chinese college junior EFL students from Xi'an International Studies University. The author herself administered the writing tasks for the written argumentative essays in English by the U.S. freshmen from Texas Tech University.

*Prompts for Argumentative Essays in English for Both Groups*

*Instructions.* Among the three essay prompts given below, please chose ONE of them to write an argumentative essay of about 400 words. You will have 50 minutes to write your essay. Please write as LEGIBLY as possible.

1. Some people think that family is the most important influence on young adults. Other people think that friends are the most important influence on young adults. Which do you think is the most important influence?
2. Some university students want to live in a room alone. Others prefer having roommates. Which do you like better—living alone or living with roommates?
3. How do movies or TV influence people's behavior?

*Data analysis.* According to Huckin (2004), the units of analysis or text features to be identified for analysis must be those that emerge logically from the research question. So the text features analyzed in the present study are:

- The presence or absence of a thesis statement (whether the essay had a thesis statement or not)
- The location of the thesis statement (where the thesis statement was placed in the essay, at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end)
- The presence or absence of a summary/concluding statement (whether the essay had a restatement of the thesis at the end or not)

Huckin (2004) also points out that a researcher investigating a more abstract concept, such as the use of certain themes or style, would find coding to be a more challenging task, especially in an exploratory study because identifying the predetermined categories is a multistage process involving several passes through the corpus. Therefore, he suggests that working collaboratively with one or more other investigators helps resolve uncertainties and produces a sample list of reference terms. Huckin further states that once the units of analysis have been determined, two or more investigators should independently sort at least 10% of the data into categories, and then the respective coding should be compared for inter-reliability.

In order to avoid misrepresentation in the data collection of the present study and to increase the reliability of coding or analysis process, as MacNealey (1999) recommends, the author used two co-coders for analyzing the English argumentative essay data. The first co-coder is a native English speaker, and he had two years' ESL teaching experience, and holds a BA in English and Psychology. Thus, the co-coder was not only familiar with English academic writing but also understood the ESL/EFL student writing well. The second co-coder is a native English speaker who was a PhD student in English at Texas Tech University. With the co-coders, 50% of the data was sorted separately into three predetermined coding categories as listed above, and then all the coders met to discuss the results of coding. During this process, the respective sorting/coding was compared for inter-rater reliability, and the final consensus on differences reached.

### In-Person Interviews

#### *Participants*

To look for answers for the second research question, the author interviewed ten volunteer students among the 50 U.S. college freshmen participants (5 females and 5 males) from Texas Tech University. She also interviewed 10 volunteer students among 50 Chinese college participants (4 males and 6 females) from Xi'an International Studies University.

#### *Interview Questions Used for the U.S. Participants*

1. How many years of formal writing instruction did you get before you came to college?
2. What are the major contents taught in your pre-college writing classes?
3. What is your understanding of argumentation?
4. When you write an argumentative essay, where do you prefer to place your thesis or claim statement? Why?
5. When you support your position in an argumentative essay, what kinds of examples or evidence you are most likely to use? Why?
6. What is the most important thing that concerns you when you write an argumentative essay?
7. What do you think are the major American values as far as argumentation is concerned?
8. Among American cultural values, what are the values that you think can exert impacts on your argumentative writing?
9. Have you ever written essays in a second language?
10. If yes, do you think that your first language writing conventions or writing/rhetorical patterns can influence your second language writing organization? Can you use examples to illustrate this?

#### *Interview Questions Used for the Chinese College Participants*

1. How many years of formal writing instruction did you get before you come to college?
2. What are the major things taught in your pre-college writing classes?
3. What is your understanding of argumentation?

4. When you write an argumentative essay, where do you prefer to place your thesis statement? Why?
5. When you support your position in an argumentative essay, what kinds of examples or evidence are you most likely to use? Why?
6. What is the most important thing that concerns you when you write the argumentative essay?
7. Among Chinese cultural values, what are the values that you think can exert impacts on your argumentative writing?
8. Do you think your Chinese writing conventions influence your English writing?
9. Do you organize your English and Chinese essay the same way? Why or why not?
10. When you write your English essay, do you plan it in Chinese and then translate it into English? If this is true, could you explain why you do this?

#### *Data Collection and Analysis of In-Person Interview Data*

The author used a basic method advocated by Viera (1998): taking notes to collect the data for the interviews. At the same time, MacNealy (1999) claims that “in a face to face interview, the respondent’s attitude is often evident from tone of voice or body language” (p. 206). Therefore, the author also tried to discern the information disclosed by the participants’ non-verbal communication such as kinetics, proxemics, paralanguage and chronemics, paying special attention to the cultural differences of using these non-verbal communications between the U.S. and the Chinese participants. The author would have used a tape-recorder to record the interviews; however, some participants indicated that using the tape-recorder during the interviews might make them feel nervous. The author decided to focus on taking notes and to repeat questions as necessary to ensure accuracy.

To analyze data with one co-coder, a PhD student in English from Texas Tech University, the author used a similar coding process for the qualitative content analysis mentioned previously. The author used some predetermined categories such as value factors, writing experience factors, linguistic factors, and educational factors to identify the data collected. The author and the co-coder classified the categories into different constructs and analyzed the apparent patterns.

#### Focus Groups

##### *Participants*

To triangulate the interviewing method and to explore more extensive answers for the second primary research question, the author used two focus groups. The first group was 13 volunteer student participants from Introduction to Technical Writing (English 2311) class at Texas Tech University. The second group was 13 volunteer student participants from two junior classes in the English Department, at Xi’an International Studies University.

*Focus groups interview questions used for the U.S. participants.* The questions were the same as the interview questions used for in-person interview for U.S. participants.

Table 1: Chinese and USA College Student Participants' English Argumentative

<b>Rhetorical Organization</b>	<b>English Essays by the Chinese EFL College Student Participants (n=50)</b>	<b>English Essays by the USA College Student Participants (n=50)</b>
Deductive	40 (80%)	42 (84%)
Inductive	10 (20%)	8 (16%)
None of the above	--	--

Essay (n=100)

*Focus groups interview questions used for the Chinese participants.* The questions were the same as the interview questions used for in-person interview for Chinese participants.

*Data collection and analysis of focus groups.* The author held the focus groups discussion in a classroom with students sitting in a circle, and the whole discussion lasted for 60 minutes. The author had two volunteers for each group take notes during whole discussion. The author also worked as a moderator while taking her own notes during the discussion. When focus groups research finished, the author had the same coder, the PhD student in English from Texas Tech University, work with her to go through the data analysis as they did with the in-person interview.

## The Results and Discussion

### *Rhetorical Choice*

Through comparing and contrasting 100 English argumentative essays by the participants from the two participant groups, the author obtained the following results on what kind of rhetorical choices the students from two studied countries made in the organization of their English argumentative essays.

For the purpose of the present study, the author applied the following operating definitions of a thesis statement, deductive organization, and inductive organization to collect and analyze the data:

- A thesis statement is the basic stand one takes, the opinion one expresses, the point one makes about one's limited subject; it is one's controlling idea, tying together and giving direction to all other separate elements in ones' paper (Skwire, 1979).
- Deductive—A thesis statement is presented at beginning of essay, followed by supporting details and a possible restatement of the thesis in the conclusion.
- Inductive—Examples and details are presented first, and a thesis statement is placed in final/concluding paragraph.



Table 1 reveals both similarities and differences as to how the U.S. college student participants and Chinese college EFL student participants organized their English argumentative essays. Although the majority of Chinese participants used deductive organization as most of the US student did in their essays, quite a number of Chinese participants (20%) still followed an inductive approach (referring to presenting the thesis statement in the concluding paragraph) in the organization of their English argumentative essays.

There are some important implications arising from the findings of the first research question in the present study. First, the findings suggest that it might be useful to revisit the notion of Chinese writing as essentially indirect in character. Second, while previous studies also demonstrated a similar “mixture” of deductive and inductive organization in Chinese ESL/EFL students’ English essays, the present study attributes these results to different causes. Such a conversation, however, is beyond the scope of the current discussion.

#### *American Cultural Factors vs. Chinese Cultural Factors*

The author’s in-person interviews and focus groups discussions with the student participants from the two countries shows that there are two main cultural factors that impacted the students’ rhetorical choices in the organization of their argumentative essays. These two factors are cultural values and culturally specific rhetorical and literary traditions.

First of all, the American values of freedom of speech and belief in individualism influenced U.S. student participants in taking a more direct approach in their argumentation according to the information provided by the U.S. interviewees and focus group participants.

Triandis and McCusker (1990) define individualism as “a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, [and] rights,...and emphasize the rational analysis of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others” (p. 1012). Summarizing the characteristics of American individualism as independence, autonomy, privacy, personal achievement, and equality for each individual, Althen (1988) emphasizes the role of liberty in American life. He maintains that Americans believe that individuals should have sufficient freedom, and that neither the government nor any other external force or agency should dictate what the individual does. Therefore, Americans chafe from constraints arising outside themselves and are grateful for the opportunity “to do their own thing” and “have it their own way” (Wu, 1998, p. 43).

These sentiments on individualism were exactly those expressed by the U.S. college participants in their understanding of how they approached their argumentative essays. For example, one U.S. student explained that placing the thesis in the first paragraph allowed her to write in a more aggressive/competitive and individualistic manner, “to show that she is sure of herself.” Still other students suggested that “freedom of speech” made them willing to express their personal ideas about a particular topic directly (such as in the introduction) no matter what the topic might be. For instance, they would not be concerned that their arguments might hurt other people’s feelings, as long as they believe that they have the right to speak their minds and that their ideas are correct.

On the other hand, some of the Chinese cultural values that influenced the Chinese student participants’ argumentation emphasized different aspects of argumentation from those

of the U.S. students. The Chinese cultural values of collectivism and philosophical ideas such as Confucius' *zhongyong zhidao* (Doctrines of Means or the Middle Way), and Laozi's theory of *bu zheng* (non-contention) exerted an impact on the Chinese student participants' writing.

Collectivism may be defined as a cultural characteristic in which individuals "see themselves as parts of one or more groups (family, co-workers, tribe, nations); are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives; ... and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives" (Triandis & McCusker, 1990, p. 1011). Generally, people from collective societies are more concerned with affects of their actions on others, sharing benefits, and losing face. They are also willing to accept others' opinions, and they want to feel that they are contributing to the lives of others (Hui & Triandis, 1986). These aspects of collectivism are indeed reflected in the Chinese ESL/EFL college participants' attitudes in writing the English argumentative essays. For example, several Chinese college participants stated that collectivism influences their argumentation. They pointed out that they were taught that their individual opinions have limitations, and, thus, they should consider how other people look at the same questions when arguing. As a result, several students stated that, in their argumentative essays, they would use a mild tone when expressing their personal ideas and would use an indirect approach such as giving examples and reasons on a topic to prepare the readers for their forthcoming personal opinions before presenting their arguments/theses and avoid using sharp expressions when criticizing others' opinions.

Another Chinese cultural value identified by the Chinese college participants was the Confucian Doctrine of Means ("The Middle Way") which refers to a proper way of dealing with the world. The Doctrine of Means tells people that "Going too far is as bad as not going far enough" (Xiao, 2000, p. 105). Zhu (1994) points out that, by the "mean," Confucius meant that all things connected with human beings should strike the proper chord and should not go beyond nor fall short of it. For example, courage is the due mean between cowardice and rashness, and modesty is the due mean between impudence and bashfulness. The character of Confucius himself provides us with typical examples of the man who always adhered to the mean: he is said to have never gone to extremes, and his general manner was "mild, and yet dignified; majestic, and yet not fierce; respectful, and yet easy" (Zhu, 1994, p. 15). The influence of the Confucian Doctrine of Means was also reported by the Chinese participants as they claimed that "the Middle Way" made them aware that, in their argumentative writing, they should focus on persuading people, instead of arguing with people or criticizing people and that they should never go to extremes such as claiming that their ideas are absolutely correct. Instead, they should always take a middle way so as to leave some room for themselves to adjust their ideas when the need arises later. Therefore, they stated that they were careful in where they placed a claim.

In addition, some of the Chinese interviewees also pointed out that Chinese philosophical Daoism's idea of *bu zheng* (non-contention) also had some impact on their argumentative writing. The Chinese Daoism rhetorical tradition emphasizes the balance of Yin and Yang in its metaphysical view. Laozi, the founder of Daoism, believed that the Yin-Yang balance is maintained through a harmonious relationship between humans and nature as well as among humans, and that deliberate efforts to impose external forces would create imbalance or chaos (Lu, 2000). In addition, Laozi advised humility. He wrote in *The Way and its Virtue* that one should "never be too sharp, or you will lose your edge; better stop than fill the cup to

overflowing” (p. 76). Laozi also warned people that “If you don’t know where to stop, you will put yourself in danger, but if you know how to be content, you will not suffer disgrace” (Lao, 1990, p. 79). All these philosophical ideas of Daoism represented by Laozi lead to the view that a virtuous person should be withdrawn and non-aggressive in his or her daily communication. People are expected to be humble, deferential, polite and concerned with other’s “face” (Hu & Grove, 1991).

Some of the Chinese interviewees stated that the influences of the Daoist philosophy of *bu zheng* (non-contention) reminds them to avoid taking an aggressive approach such as being too radical in expressing their ideas but instead trying to assume a relatively “humble” or “modest” tone in presenting their arguments. To do so, they explained that they thought presenting the thesis statement at the end of an essay would make them appear less aggressive when arguing since they give the reader their reasons first. The Chinese participants’ essays did exhibit Daoist influence. For example, one student introduced his thesis statement in the last paragraph, “Generally speaking, I prefer to live in a dormitory with roommates than living alone.” Another student also presented her thesis sentence at the end, “Through the comparison, perhaps, I should say raising two or three children is the best for a family.” Still, one student stated her thesis in the last paragraph as “So, in my opinion, if I have chance, I want to live in a large family.”

In addition to the cultural values that influenced student participants’ argumentative essays from both groups, the Chinese literary and Western rhetorical tradition also impacted the student participants’ rhetorical organization respectively.

Chinese literary tradition that advocates indirect writing as superior to the straightforward way of expression (Malcolm & Pan, 1989) has greatly influenced how Chinese students may approach their argumentative essay.

This literary tradition is reflected in many Chinese proverbs and writing concepts such as *hua long dian jing* (paint the dragon, draw the eyes) and *hanxu* (be suggestive).

*Hua long dian jing* (paint the dragon and draw the eyes) literally means that when an artist paints a dragon, he/she paints in the eyes last. One Chinese explained, “It’s not a dragon if the eyes are not painted in; it is the eyes which give it life” (Young, 1994, p. 93). In fact, there is a legend behind the proverb, *hua long dian jing*. The legend goes that a skillful painter once drew a dragon without eyes. When he added the eyes as the last stroke, immediately, the dragon became alive and flew away. The story is intended to teach Chinese writers how important the last part of their writing could be. Many writing instructors and students nowadays still hold the proverb, believing important things always come last in people’s writing (Fei & Han, 2007). This belief certainly influences many Chinese students in that they prefer to place their thesis statement, the most important part of the essay, at the end of the essay instead of in the beginning of the essay.

*Hanxu* (“be suggestive or reserved”) is another much appreciated Chinese literary tradition that exerts an impact on Chinese writing. Aesthetic suggestiveness is a major category in Chinese art: verbal, visual, and auditory (Gu, 2003). As Fung (1966), the renowned historian of Chinese philosophy, puts it, “Suggestiveness, not articulateness, is the ideal of all Chinese art, whether it be poetry, painting, or anything else” (p. 12). Fung (1996) further explains that “according to Chinese literary tradition, in good poetry ‘the number of words is limited, but the ideas it suggests are limitless.’ So an intelligent reader of poetry reads what is outside the poem; and a good reader of book reads ‘what is between lines’” (p.

12). Yang (1958) also comments on poetic language: “What is valued is subtle reserve (*hanxu*). That words may end but implications are endless is a supreme adage under heaven. On the se zither of the Purity Temple, one string is plucked and three other will echo in sighs, thereby producing lingering notes” (p. 266). Therefore, Gu (2003) claims that, in their efforts to make art adequately represent observed reality and imaginative thought, Chinese artists found in suggestiveness an effective way to represent unlimited life with limited artistic means. Thus, suggestiveness (*hanxu*) gradually became an essential part of Chinese subtle rhetoric and has been considered by Chinese people as the height of culture and the mark of good breeding (Snively, 1999). As a result, a Chinese writer “delights both in sharing his or her erudition and in adding an extra meaning to the passage; the reader delights not only in recognizing the reference, but in deeper appreciation and understanding of the message conveyed in the reference” (Snively, 1999, p. 39). Just as Young (1994) notes, “subtle but sophisticated allusions and analogues may be unfathomable to most Westerners, yet they are constant sources of fascination to Chinese readers whose culture stresses the delight and stimulation of ‘meaning beyond words’ and ‘inexhaustible meaning’”(p. 97). The influence of this Chinese subtle rhetoric of *hanxu* (be suggestive) on contemporary Chinese writing instruction and Chinese students’ writing is profound. For example, it makes many writing instructors emphasize the elegant and indirect approach in Chinese essay writing in the same way the author’s Chinese interviewees reported that some of their Chinese writing teachers taught them to place their thesis statements in multiple places in their essay to achieve some rhetorical effects.

By contrast, the Western rhetorical tradition that has been based on Aristotelian classical rhetoric has influenced how the American participants organize their argumentative essay. Although Aristotle introduced both deductive and inductive reasoning in argumentation, the Western rhetorical tradition seems to favor using a deductive reasoning mode more than that of inductive reasoning. In fact, argumentative writing in the West is taught as a deductive reasoning mode; argumentative writing is taught as consisting three main parts: claim, support, and reasoning. Many writing teachers or scholars in North American universities have noticed how a typical argumentative discourse has been taught in North American colleges. For example, Vries (2002) describes that the typical structure of paragraph structure in an English language academic essay as:

The expected thought sequence is linear in its development. In written communication in English, for example, the paragraph begins with a topic statement and then proceeds to develop that statement by example and illustrations. The central idea is related to all other ideas in the whole essay, and therefore, a good piece of writing is considered to be unified with no superfluous information. (p. 3)

Fox (1994) also states that a typical Western academic audience’s expectation for academic writing in the United States is that in addition to its structure of a clear and direct thesis followed by convincing reasons that support it, the argument should be assertive, confident, short, logical, and “to the point” without irrelevant digressions.

Thus, we can say that the preferred style of argumentative writing in the West is straightforward, direct, and explicit. The tone should be assertive and authoritative, specificity and originality are valued, and the logic of the writing is characterized as linear and

containing analytic precision. As a matter of fact, virtually all the U.S. college interviewees in author's study stated that they placed the thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph (introduction) because they were explicitly taught since high school to place their thesis at the first paragraph of a persuasive essay. Most of them maintained that the purpose of such a placement of the thesis statement was to provide a clear direction for the reader in terms of what the paper is going to discuss and what will be the author's stance on the issue.

### Conclusion

The present study shows that both Chinese and U.S. college participants were aware of the fact that the cultural milieu in which they were raised had a significant impact on how they approached argumentation. Although both groups tended to use similar rhetorical organizational patterns in the English argumentative essays they composed for the present study, both also spoke about having different preferences as far as rhetorical organization in argumentation was concerned. The U.S. students tended to believe that the core Western values of individualism and free speech led them to prefer a direct approach to argumentation. The Chinese students, on the other hand, seemed to believe that the core Chinese values of collectivism, the mental flexibility of the Middle Way, and the advice of humility by Daoism led some of them to prefer a more indirect style in their argumentative writing, which suggests that using an indirect mode of argumentation is an important culturally impacted persuasive rhetorical tool to some Chinese students. However, to fully interpret the finding that the majority of Chinese student participants took a direct approach in their English argumentation calls for more future research in contrastive rhetoric and intercultural communication because it raises questions on how far the influences of culturally defined values in the context of globalization can go in terms of rhetorical styles. In other words, we need to examine all kinds of influential cultural factors that can impact rhetoric and intercultural communication from a more dynamic perspective. For example, in the Chinese cultural context, we need to look at changing educational context of how English teaching and learning environment has improved in past several decades and at what impact it has on Chinese students' English writing. We also need to consider how the process of globalization such as conducting cross-culture business with the outside world and meeting with diverse values of other cultures has changed many traditional Chinese mentalities including preferred rhetorical style. The broad implication here is that, when conducting cross-cultural communication, we should always consider the dynamic and flexible nature of culture in its specific national and social contexts; thus, we may make this communication more effective and thoughtful.

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