

# Conversing Across Cultural Boundaries: Rewriting "Self"

XIN LIU GALE

We speak first, and then learn what we have said and whom we have become.

Kurt Spellmeyer

Four years ago today, I went through Customs in San Francisco and for the first time in my life set foot on a foreign land, a country that exists more as a fiction than a reality for most Chinese people. As the friendly officer pointed at my name and said, "Xin Liu?" I realized, in panic, that I was no longer the Liu Xin in China whose family had lived in the city of Wuhan for thirty-six years (ever since her birth) and in the same neighborhood for twenty-five years. For the first time in my life I felt that I was nobody, a person without a history, a person who had nothing but a passport to prove her identity to people. In the past four years, this feeling of disorientation and lack of identity has both scared and motivated me, for it is the desire to know who I am that started me on a search for the "self," a process that has changed and reshaped me both as an individual and a writing teacher.

## **From Chinese to the American Culture: Losing "Self"**

To my colleagues, friends and relatives in China, my being accepted by an American university and awarded a teaching assistantship was just another of the many successes in the past ten years of my life, after Mao's Great Cultural Revolution was put to an end. Despite the ten-year revolution, which deprived my generation of a complete secondary education and which consequently diminished our ability to compete in the most competitive national annual college entrance examinations after the revolution, I was lucky enough to survive the competition. Thus, I received a higher education that was denied to 99 percent of the people of my age, thanks to my intellectual parents who had taught me at home in those crazy revolutionary years when knowledge was considered a crime. Ever since then, life seemed to have been a series of successes for me: a Bachelor's degree in English; a permanent teaching position at a large university upon graduation; a master's degree in British and American literature from one of the most prestigious Chinese universities; publication of the translations of two American novels; awards and prizes from various contests at the university and in the

country; students' written compliments of my teaching in the university newspaper; a position of editor of English at one of the university's journals; and finally, America. The Liu Xin in China was thus simultaneously the object of envy and admiration, with an established social status and a stable world to move around in. She never worried about who she was or where she came from--she was unquestionably a member of the world in which her ancestors had lived for centuries and centuries; in which she was born and grew up; in which she was associated in numerous ways to the people around her; in which she spoke the same language and dialects as her friends, neighbors, and colleagues; in which she wore the same clothes and appeared like millions of others. She had never thought that she would ever ask herself the question: "Who am I?"

When I was leaving China for America, neither my friends nor I had ever imagined that living in a foreign country would cause an identity crisis in me and that I should experience shame and loss in a country well-known for the freedom and happiness her people enjoy. The sharp sense of loss was closely associated with my awareness that all my past successes in China meant little in the new country, that all the connections and relationships that gave me identity helped little here, that all the competence I had for speaking my native tongue became a burden rather than a merit. In America I was only a graduate student, a foreigner, an outsider. Here I was mainly differentiated from others by labels such as "Chinese," "Asian," or "international student." I moved around in the new country feeling ashamed of my inability to name things in English, of my ignorance of American life and culture, of my foreign accent, of my lack of a history and a place that would give me the sense of belonging and identity. For a long time I was torn between a nostalgia for the familiar, the secure, the certain life in China and a longing for the unknown, the adventurous, the challenging life in America. For a long time I was torn between the desire to remain loyal to my own culture and language and the aspiration to speak perfect English without an accent and to melt into American culture without feeling guilty. For a long time I was torn between the feeling of pride for who I was in China and the feeling of shame for who I was in America. I wandered between the two cultures, I was caught between the two languages, and I was split into two "selves," with the old one lost and the new one unfound. "Who am I?" I desperately wanted to know.

#### **From Uni-Discourse to Multi-Discourse: Searching for "Self"**

We are what we speak, I was told by Chinese and Western philosophers. "Perhaps mastering Western academic discourse is all I need to find my 'self' in the new culture," I said to myself. Such a task should not be difficult for me, for I was confident that the rigorous training I had received in the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages from the prominent British and American professors in the early 1980s would provide me with a good place to start: Noam Chomsky's transformational and generative grammar, Ferdinand de

Saussure's structuralism, Aristotle's rhetoric, and the New Criticism. But soon I was to discover that things were not as simple as I had imagined. The dominant, masculine, logocentric, Western academic discourse was under fire in America. I was shocked to see how it was problematized and criticized by deconstructionists, Marxists, feminists, social constructionists, and cultural scholars. Instead of finding one discourse that represents the language spoken by the American intelligentsia, I found numerous contesting discourses. I was astonished, puzzled, and confused: the postmodern scene in America is evidently different from what I had learned about America in China. Having experienced the Great Cultural Revolution during my formative years (it started when I was fourteen) and having seen how Mao had used his revolutionary theory to destroy tradition and culture, I was aware of the destructive power of language when it is used in alliance with violence. To me, the American political system was infinitely more democratic and liberal than the Chinese political system. To me, Western civilization was tremendously more humane and tolerant than Chinese civilization, which was characterized by a long history of the cruel reign of emperors and armed rebellions of peasants.

Coming from a family with a deep faith in Western tradition, I was brought up to believe that Western thinking was more objective and closer to truth. However, when Richard Rorty eloquently rejects the traditional view that language can represent reality or truth and argues that truth is made rather than found, when Jacques Derrida critiques Saussure's structuralism for implicitly privileging the signifying system as the center and challenges positivist thinking with his well-known metaphor of *différance*, when Roland Barthes reveals how coherently structured and logically written literary texts actually consist of contradictory narratives and hidden ideologies, when Michel Foucault reveals how the rules and conventions of language are the constraints exerted by institutional power over our use of language, when Catherine Belsey demonstrates how the scientificity of Sherlock Holmes stories is achieved by suppressing women's voice and concealing their sexuality, a unified, homogeneous, innocent, scientific, objective Western discourse does not exist anymore.

I was left with no center, no certainty, no system to study and master. "How can I ever find my 'self' in this country?" I asked in anxiety.

For a long time I struggled painfully to understand the deconstructionists, feminists, radical educationists, social constructionists and even Marxists in this country, trying to determine differences between these radical theories and Mao's Marxist, social constructionist theories and his revolutionary pedagogy. As time passed, as I came to know America better, the differences between the two countries became clearer, as did the differences between Chinese and American academic discourse. The most fundamental difference between China and America lies in its political system: while in China the whole country has always been under one man's rule (whether it was the

emperor or the chairman of the Communist Party, the different titles mean the same thing), in America it is always the people who decide who should govern them. To serve its totalitarian regime, the ruler in China allows only one discourse—that is, a discourse that advocates only the ruler's ideology and suppresses all other dissenting ideologies. Ever since the first Chinese emperor's practice of burning scholarly books and burying dissenting scholars alive to maintain his rule, subsequent Chinese rulers have followed suit in suppressing dissenting ideologies and killing dissidents.

In fact, the Great Cultural Revolution was just another imperial suppression of dissenting intellectuals for the sake of maintaining the modern emperor's rule, the emperor who dressed up in Marxist clothing. I recalled the Chinese dominant discourse of the 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s and remembered only one pattern: either/or. The whole country was forced to think the way the emperor deemed right: either pro-Communist party or anti-Communist party; either pro-socialism or pro-capitalism; either pro-Marxism or pro-bourgeois ideology; either pro-working class or pro-bourgeois class; either pro-Mao or anti-Mao; either serve the proletariat or serve the bourgeoisie. Accordingly, people were divided into opposing groups: either revolutionaries or reactionaries; either Marxists or "bad elements"; either working class or bourgeois class. Consequently, reactionaries, "bad elements," and the bourgeois class were the targets of the proletarian dictatorship, either punished, persecuted, or executed.

I can't forget two incidents in the Cultural Revolution: one is the tragedy of Yu Loke, a victim of Mao's class theory. A boy of nineteen who was automatically denied a higher education and a decent job because he was born into a private business owner's family, Yu wrote a booklet criticizing the Party's college enrollment policy and employment policy, which discriminated against those whose family background was non-proletarian. After being found guilty of sabotaging the proletarian dictatorship, Yu was sentenced to death. Another woman, who worked as a Party propagandist, expressed her suspicion of Mao's wife's pseudo-Marxism and had her tongue cut out before she was executed. The underlying assumption of the Chinese rulers' discourse has always been: if someone expresses doubts about the ruler's thinking, it is the same as having slain the ruler. Even in the 1990s, the ruler's logic remains unchanged; Chinese intellectuals still have to pay for voicing different ideas with life and blood.

It suddenly dawned on me that my fear and suspicion of the multiple discourses I found in America was rooted deeply in the Chinese ruler's logic and its underlying assumptions: that words are actions; that we are either pro-Western thinking or against it. Such a way of thinking was exactly the cause of the Chinese people's lack of freedom and democracy for the past thousands of years. I suddenly felt that I understood Western thinking and American culture better: it is exactly these multiple discourses that comprise Western thinking; it is these contesting ideologies that open up possibilities

for inquiry and exploration; it is the accommodation and tolerance of these different views and ideas that makes American democracy possible and lasting. America is full of vitality and life because its people are observing, thinking, questioning, critiquing the status quo; America is growing healthier and stronger because its people are inquiring, exploring, experimenting, searching for a better future. I suddenly realized that a nation is like a person: he or she has to be allowed to play and learn, to try and err, to agree and disagree, to ask questions and search for answers, to change and grow.

With this recognition came another: that I will never be able to find my "self," because the "self" is forever shaping, changing, reshaping itself. It exists in relation to the past and the future; it exists in the languages we speak; it exists as the multiple discourses that contradict and complement each other; it is elusive, developing, taking a course of its own, beyond the grip of the language we speak. So I abandoned the attempt to find myself, feeling at the same time consoled that my sense of loss had disappeared. Moving between two cultures, two languages, and two peoples, I am allowed a larger space and a better chance for "self" to develop.

#### **From Chinese to American Classrooms**

What I have experienced in the two different cultures has inevitably changed my perception of teaching. In China, teaching is strictly a business of imparting knowledge and truth (knowledge and truth being equal either to the emperor's thinking in ancient China, or to the Communist Party's ideology as embodied in Marxism, Leninism, and Maoist thought in modern times). Since China has always been a totalitarian country, the classroom has always reflected the oppressor-oppressed relationship in Chinese society. Before the Cultural Revolution, the teacher was the absolute authority in the classroom while the students were passive receivers of what the teacher taught. During the Cultural Revolution, given his political need to eliminate dissidents among intellectuals, Mao called on young students to rebel against the "oppressing educational system" as well as the oppressing teachers, thus completely reversing the hierarchy in the classroom. I will never forget how my most respected math teacher was turned overnight into a "monster" during the Cultural Revolution, with her hair shaved into the "ying-yang" style (half clean, half long), her dress torn into rags, her face smeared with red and blue ink, and her being tortured at various meetings by the Red Guards. I remember with terror how my home was ransacked by the Red Guards, who searched for "bourgeois poisonous weeds" and burned my parents' invaluable collections of Chinese classical literary works and of the classics of world literature. I still tremble at the memory of the scene of a young colleague of my mother's lying in blood, protesting with his death the humiliation and torture imposed on him because he had given up his family wealth and returned from overseas to teach English in his own country. I witnessed my father's indignation and my mother's silence when they were criticized for

poisoning their students with bourgeois ideologies and a Western style of living. I experienced, as a teacher later, students' contempt for any classroom learning as well as for all teachers as the consequence of Mao's persecution of the intelligentsia and glorification of ignorance. I know from my own experience that Mao's reversed hierarchy in the classroom has created not only a new generation of illiterates but that it has also damaged education in China irremediably: instead of changing the traditional classroom of oppression, Mao created a classroom of even more cruel oppression, oppression that was not supported by knowledge but by ignorance and violence. The popular saying during Mao's reign, "Knowledge is useless; political power is everything" is still held as truth today by many Chinese. Like my parents and tens of thousands of other Chinese teachers, no words can express my anger and sorrow over the intellectual and spiritual wasteland created by Mao's Cultural Revolution.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, after Mao's Cultural Revolution, the classroom in China resumed its old order and the teacher, again, became the authority figure in the classroom, working hard to impart knowledge and teach skills to students while, at the same time, avoiding politics as much as possible. For teachers like myself, being allowed the freedom *not* to talk about politics was a rare luxury because Mao's either/or logic used to force the teacher to propagate Marxism and Maoism in the classroom. I was glad that the teacher was finally left alone to decide for him or herself what and how to teach in the classroom. And I was convinced by my experiences that the best way to maintain the integrity of a teacher was to be politically neutral and academically authoritative in the classroom, so that I could help maintain the academic standards of the field and improve the quality of education in China. However, I found that my assumptions about the teacher's role were greatly challenged in America as I became more and more familiar with writings by such radical educationists as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux and numerous others. These radical scholars and teachers reject the view that a teacher can be ideologically neutral, and they contend that teaching writing always involves privileging the dominant discourse and that teaching is actually a process of indoctrination of the dominant cultural values and beliefs in our students. They show a deep concern for the issues of race, class, and gender in society as well as for the writing problems that are associated with these issues. They experiment with different approaches to make students the agents of learning so as to turn them into men and women who love freedom and democracy.

As I read and pondered their writing, I came to another revelation: in China, whether in ancient China or in Mao's China, teachers were either fooled by the ruler to help maintain the status quo or threatened by the ruler to keep their mouths shut if they had different ideas. That Chinese teachers have been believers in intellectuals' aloofness and neutrality for thousands of years could be seen as one of the main reasons for the long-lasting totalitarian

rule in China. In China, a politically committed teacher who dares to criticize the ruler will be despised by his or her colleagues as non-academic and punished by the ruler as conspiratorial and dangerous. Chinese intellectuals' neutrality, therefore, is an indication of the success of the Chinese ruler's coercive and oppressive politics and his ability to control discourse. And what the American radical educationists and teachers are trying to do is to prevent the tragedy of China from happening in America. As I came to know America better, as I came to understand my American students better, I began to problematize my role as a writing teacher more: When I think that I am teaching students how to write by prescribing to them what to write, am I actually restricting their freedom of thinking and expression? When I think that I am upholding academic standards by giving students lower grades, am I actually rejecting their different ideologies and cultures? When I believe I am working hard for their benefits by assigning them numerous grammar exercises, am I actually trying to turn them into slaves of rules rather than writers capable of playing "the game of truth" (Foucault's description of the formation of knowledge)? When I believe that I am imparting knowledge and hear only my own voice in the classroom, am I actually satisfying my own desire for authority and power, like the dictators in China? As I keep asking myself these questions, my role in the classroom changes: instead of trying to maintain my authority in class, I encourage students to assume their own authority as writers and to write about what they are genuinely interested in; instead of merely finding errors and problems in students' writing, I try to help students see why and how their writing needs improvement; instead of positioning myself above them as the knower, I share with them what I know and I learn together with them what I don't, thus participating together with them in the process of creating knowledge. By treating my students as equals, I strive to make them agents rather than objects of writing and learning.

Four years in America as a graduate student and a teacher of composition has been both a painful and rewarding experience. Had it not been for the warm friendship and generous help from many of my American friends, I would never have been able to survive in American culture, a culture that is so different from my own. Had it not been for the constant encouragement and effective guidance of my American professors, I would never have been able to overcome the frustration and confusion I felt when facing the challenges of the postmodern American academic world--a world so different from its Chinese counterpart. Had it not been for the genuine interest in and enthusiasm for writing as well as the open-mindedness of my students, I would never have been able to pursue my teaching career in a country where so many people speak better English than I do.

My friends have mediated the pain I experienced crossing the border from one culture to another with their love and support. My teachers have helped change my "self" by opening my eyes to different discourses and perspectives. My students have helped me change my role in the writing

classroom through their understanding and appreciation. And America has shown me her pioneering spirit of inquiry and exploration, her deep concern for equality, democracy, and happiness, her great reverence for tradition and knowledge, her enlightened acceptance of difference and diversity, and her tremendous vitality and potentiality for changing for the better. I wish I could give my students what America has given me: that I could mediate their pain as well as guide them as they are crossing the border from their adolescence to adulthood, from the discourse of their respective communities to academic discourses, from their minority culture to mainstream culture, from their respective communities to the community of academics; that I could encourage them to participate in writing as a process of "trial and error" and help them change and grow in due course; that I could help introduce them to different perspectives and multiple discourses; that I could help develop in them not only a willingness to embrace difference and diversity, but also the American spirit of inquiry and exploration. Most important, I want to tell my students that writing is a process of learning and living that has no closure: we write our "selves" in the process of living; we learn about our "selves" in the process of writing--we are lucky that we can write.

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