

# Indirectness in Chinese Students' Academic Essays

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**Abstract.** There has been much debate regarding indirectness in Chinese students' academic essays but the research to date is inconclusive. Therefore, a small study was conducted at Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University using essay and questionnaire data collected from sixteen Year One Chinese students. It was found that while no work demonstrated the traditional Chinese rhetorical patterns, thesis statements that are placed at the beginning of essays in the English rhetorical style seem to be delayed. In terms of paragraph organization, spiral rhetorical moves are characterised by multiple ideas, and the absence of a topic sentence at the beginning.

**摘要.** 关于中国学生英文学术作文的“不直接”引发了诸多争论但是直到目前一直都没有定论。因此，在西交利物浦大学进行的此项研究旨在就此问题进行进一步地探索。16个大学一年级中国学生参与了本项研究。本研究中所用到的数据均来自学生的作文和问卷调查。研究发现没有一篇作文呈现出传统的中国式修辞模式。但是，与英文作文修辞风格不一样的是，中心句似乎还是没有在一开篇就被引出。至于段落结构，所用段落都呈现出“绕”的修辞模式。这种段落上的“绕”体现在一个段落拥有多个观点以及段落一开始缺乏主题句。

## Introduction

The issue of whether Chinese students' academic essays truly demonstrate indirectness has generated much discussion since Kaplan (1966) claimed that the development of the paragraph in Oriental writing was *spiral* as opposed to the English linear fashion and that Chinese students' L2 writing was influenced by the 八股 (*ba gu*) or *eight-legged* organizational structure (Kaplan, 1968 cited in Cai, 1993). Classroom teachers who are familiar with this approach to writing can inform students of their own rhetorical traditions who can then become conscious of the implicit assumptions behind the way they arrange ideas in writing and behind the way English does (Leki, 1991). Since Kaplan's pioneering work, a number of studies have been conducted in an attempt to address this issue. Some contrastive rhetoricians argue that Chinese students' L2 essays demonstrate indirectness mainly characterized by the *ba gu* or the 起承转合 (*qi-cheng-zhuan-he*) known as *beginning-following-turning-concluding* rhetorical patterns (Matalene, 1985; Fagan & Cheong, 1987; Cai, 1993; Ji, 2011).

*Ba gu* was first used as an essay format in the Chinese civil service examinations during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1645-1911) dynasties. The eight parts in the *ba gu* structure are known as: opening-up, amplification, preliminary exposition, first

point, second point, third point, final point, and conclusion. The thesis is introduced in the second part (Cai, 1993). *Qi-cheng-zhuan-he* was first introduced as an organizational pattern in persuasive and expository writing during the New Cultural Movement in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Zhang, 1938 cited in Cai, 1993). In the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* pattern, *qi* only introduces a topic partly related to the theme (Hinds, 1990 cited in Chen, 2006). *Cheng* follows the beginning paragraph and expands on it. *Zhuan* presents another perspective on the topic and *he* concludes the essay with a particular point that refers to the theme (Chen, 2006). However, others maintain that Chinese students now construct essays in a way similar to that of their Anglo-American counterparts in terms of the placement of a thesis statement and a topic sentence at the beginning (Chien, 2007; Yang & Cahill, 2008). One possible explanation for these contradictions is that school education advocates directness in contemporary Chinese writing manuals and textbooks (Liu, 1996; Yang & Cahill, 2008). As the research findings are contradictory, this study sought to clarify the current situation and to examine the implications this can have on teachers. In addition, to date few studies have investigated paragraph organisation. As a contribution to this ongoing debate, a small study was

conducted at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), which aimed to answer the following questions:

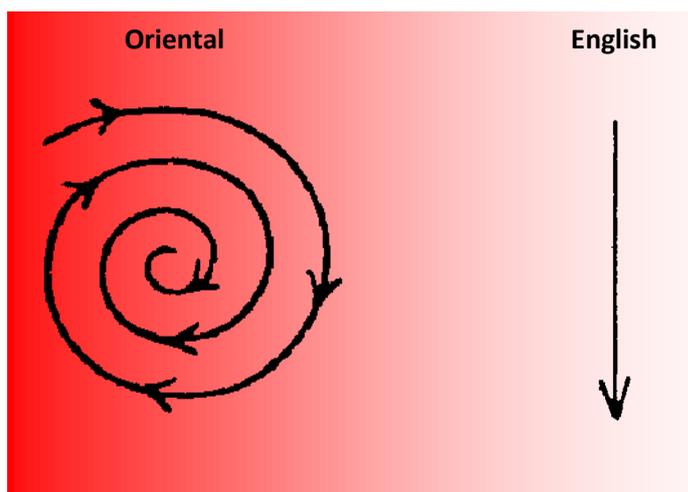
1. Do Chinese students' academic essays still demonstrate the ba gu or the qi-cheng-zhuan-he rhetorical moves?
2. Are thesis statements indeed introduced at the beginning in Chinese students' academic essays as in the Western direct approach?
3. Do Chinese students' paragraphs demonstrate spiral rhetorical moves? If so, to what extent?

In this article, indirectness at the essay level is defined by a delayed thesis statement as opposed to its placement at the beginning of an essay. Indirectness at the paragraph level is defined by a spiral organization of sentences instead of the English deductive and linear

fashion, namely a lack of a clear topic sentence at the beginning and lack of coherence in paragraphs (for a clear outline of coherence and cohesion, see Waller, this issue).

### Literature Review

A number of researchers (Kaplan, 1966; Matalene, 1985; Fagan & Cheong, 1987; Cai, 1993; Ji, 2011) have examined Chinese students' L2 writing and found evidence of indirectness. In his ground-breaking work, "Cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education," Kaplan (1966) argues that a typical English paragraph develops in a linear fashion around a central idea while the development of the paragraph in Oriental writing tends to have, in his words, "circles" and "gyres" that turn around the topic (see Figure 1). Kaplan (1968, cited in Cai, 1993) further argues that Chinese students' L2 writing is influenced by the ba gu organizational structure, which was used as the classic essay format of Chinese imperial examinations.



**Figure 1.** Kaplan's (1966) "Doodles" of Cross-cultural Differences in Paragraph Organization

Kaplan's (1968) argument is echoed by Matalene (1985) and Cai (1993). Matalene's (1985) study shows that the structure of her Chinese students' L2 essays is influenced by the ba gu. Similarly, Cai (1993) claims that Chinese students' L2 essays still inherit the ba gu structure or the more modern qi-cheng-zhuan-he organizational pattern. In addition, Fagan and Cheong (1987) found empirical evidence of the qi-cheng-zhuan-he four-part pattern in 50.6% of the sixty L2 compositions by nine-grade Chinese ESL students in Singapore. No relevant research has been identified since that time until Ji (2011)

analysed twenty-six L2 argumentative essays written by undergraduates and found that one third of the essays exhibited *circular* or *indirect* characteristics. He claimed that these essays were not influenced by the structure of the ba gu essay but by the modern Chinese prose exhibiting the qi-cheng-zhuan-he pattern.

Kaplan's (1966) "doodles" may therefore represent a stereotypical view of the culture (Zamel, 1997 cited in Kubota & Lehner, 2004) as well as overgeneralizing models from closely related languages (Connor, 2002) such as Korean and Japanese. As for the ba gu theory, it probably

has little influence on contemporary Chinese writing, thus it seems impossible to be transferred into L2 writing (Kubota & Lehner, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1997 cited in Wu & Li, 2010). In Cai's (1993) study, the evidence for the *ba gu* is a Chinese essay of the late Qing dynasty, which is clearly out of date. Moreover, the evidence for the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* organizational pattern is one student ESL essay and one newspaper article (overseas edition). The size of the sample therefore is inadequate to form any solid argument. In Ji's (2011) study, only one third of the sample demonstrates the circular or indirect characteristics which is not statistically convincing. Fagan & Cheong's (1987) finding shows evidence of indirectness in the form of the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* four-part pattern but again the sample size is too small.

In contrast to the studies discussed above, Chien (2007) analysed forty second- and third-year university students' L2 essays and found that the writing was mainly in contemporary Anglo-American direct rhetorical style rather than in traditional Chinese indirect style. However, as the study is conducted among second- and third-year university students, Chien's (2007) finding cannot work as strong evidence that indirectness does not exist in the work of the students who have not received any L2 writing instructions. Yang and Cahill (2008) analysed 200 essays among which fifty were written by American university students in English, fifty by Chinese students in Chinese, and one hundred by Chinese beginners and advanced learners of English. They found that all groups preferred the placement of the thesis statement and the topic sentence in the beginning, indicating a positive cross cultural transfer in terms of writing style from L1 to L2. Yang and Cahill's (2008) finding seems to be a strong proof of directness in both L1 and L2 writing at both text and paragraph levels.

To explain the possible reason behind this directness, Liu (1996) argues against the notion of a Chinese preference of indirectness. Liu claims that the emphasis on straightforwardness as the principle in presenting the main idea of an essay can be found in the standard textbooks for college Chinese majors used in the PRC since the mid-1980s. Likewise, Yang and Cahill (2008) claim that the tendency for direct organization can be found in the expository essays in the senior high school Chinese textbooks published in 2002 and

in contemporary Chinese writing manuals.

The above studies suggest that the direct approach in contemporary Chinese L1 writing can be transferred to the L2 writing. Thus, the present study was designed to further research into whether Chinese students' academic essays are indeed organized in a direct fashion and whether a direct approach is taught in schools, since there has been a lack of qualitative research in Chinese students' educational background. In addition, since few studies have addressed the issue of paragraph structure, this study was also designed to look into the paragraph structure in Chinese students' academic writing.

## Methodology

16 Year One Chinese university students participated in the study. The study was conducted on the first day of Week One of Semester One Year One. Therefore, none of the participants had received any instructions in essay writing in the English style. They were assigned to write a 250-word essay on life at a Chinese high school as homework. A spider gram was provided with subtopics, such as the curriculum and learning styles, to help them organize ideas. A questionnaire survey was also conducted among these participants. It contained 18 closed questions on the placement of a thesis statement, essay, and paragraph structures.

## Results and discussion

### *Do Chinese students' academic essays still demonstrate the ba gu or the qi-cheng-zhuan-he rhetorical moves?*

Regarding the first research question, 13 out of 16 (81%) essays contained three parts: introduction-body-conclusion. No work demonstrated the *ba gu* or the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* four-part structures. This is supported by the questionnaire data. 12 out of 16 (75%) participants reported that they normally included three parts when writing essays in Chinese. Furthermore, 12 out of 16 (75%) participants reported they tended to organize Chinese essays using the *总-分-总* (*zong-fen-zong*) or *general-specific-general* pattern, which is a contemporary rhetorical style in Chinese essays. This Chinese three-part pattern is close to the English introduction-body-conclusion

pattern (Lin, 2007). It can be seen that both the qi-cheng-zhuan-he and the ba gu rhetorical traditions are no longer emphasised writing styles among the Chinese. Hence, they seem unlikely to be transferred to the L2 writing (Kubota & Lehner, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1997 cited in Wu & Li, 2010).

***Are thesis statements indeed introduced at the beginning in Chinese students' academic essays as in the Western direct approach?***

In terms of the second research question, six out of 16 (37%) participants presented a thesis statement at the end of the introduction. Eight out of 16 (50%) participants did not write a thesis statement in the introduction but included a statement that referred to the theme in the conclusion. Here are some typical examples:

*Now when I recall my high school life, I think it is sweet and unforgettable.*

*My high school life was very interesting, and I will remember it forever.*

*All of these make up my life in high school, which I will cherish forever.*

*So, I love my high school life.*

*This is my sweet high school life.*

Interestingly, when asked where they liked to present the theme, 11 out of 16 (69%) participants reported that they liked to present the theme in the beginning known as 开门见山 (*kai men jian shan*). Similarly, when asked about the purpose of the introduction, 10 out of 16 (63%) participants reported that introduction was supposed to introduce the theme. According to Wang (1994), the method *kai men jian shan* (which literally means “open the door to see the mountain”) is recommended for a good introduction in Chinese when the writer presents the thesis in the introduction. Therefore, students had probably been taught this method before coming to the university.

The inconsistency between the questionnaire and essay data indicates that students do not necessarily apply the *kai men jian shan* strategy into academic writing. This is further proved by the questionnaire data. When asked whether they wrote their English essays like the way they wrote their Chinese essays, 10

out of 16 (63%) participants reported negative. It seems that L1 transfer might not always be responsible for the way Chinese students construct their academic essays.

***Do Chinese students' paragraphs truly demonstrate spiral rhetorical moves? If so, to what extent?***

Regarding the third research question, in terms of the existence of a topic sentence, nine out of 16 (56%) participants did not write a topic sentence at the beginning of each body paragraph. The issue of topic sentence was also investigated in the questionnaire. When asked whether they wrote topic sentences when writing English paragraphs in high school, the majority (69%) reported negative, suggesting that teachers' writing instruction may significantly influence students' rhetorical strategy (Chien, 2007; Mohan & Lo, 1985).

In terms of paragraph unity, most body paragraphs contained multiple ideas. Here is a typical example of such paragraphs:

*In my high school, we had much homework. Every day we had to do homework and had to return homework at next day. So we are very tired every day. Teachers supervised us tightly, but sometimes we also kidded each other. It is a strange but very splendid relationship between teachers and students. It didn't give us any pressure and even helped us to release our pressure.*

It can be seen that the development of this paragraph is less direct compared to the English direct (deductive and linear) style (see Waller, this issue). Indeed, it seems that the subject is not looked at directly but is shown from tangential views (Kaplan, 1966). The first sentence talks about having much homework. The second sentence expands the topic. The third sentence digresses by talking about being tired as a result of having much homework. The following sentence moves still further away from having too much homework by talking about supervision and teacher-student relationship, which is related to homework but only tangentially. This sentence is tied to the next two sentences which continue the digression of teacher-student relationship. Surprisingly, when asked how many ideas they normally included in one

paragraph, 11 out of 16 (69%) students reported one. This is inconsistent with the above observation. They had probably thought that there was only one idea in each of the paragraphs because the sentences were loosely connected and belonged to the same topic. Thus, what seems spiral to the Western audience may appear to be direct to these Chinese students. In other words, directness can be defined differently by people of various cultural and educational backgrounds, and may span a spectrum.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the issue of indirectness in Chinese students' academic essays. Generally speaking, Chinese students' academic essays no longer demonstrate the *ba gu* or the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* organizational structures but the thesis still tends to be delayed. In addition, Chinese students' academic essays seem to demonstrate the general-specific-general pattern which is close to the English introduction-body-conclusion pattern. Interestingly, though the thesis tends to be delayed in their academic writing, Chinese students seem to be familiar with the strategy to introduce the theme in the introduction when writing Chinese essays. In terms of paragraph organization, Chinese students' paragraphs tend to demonstrate spiral rhetorical moves which lack topic sentences at the beginning and contain multiple ideas. Furthermore, what appears spiral to the Western audience seems direct to the Chinese students. Therefore, when teaching the formal aspects of English essays to Year One Chinese students, teachers can teach with "cultural intelligence" (see Livermore, this issue), reminding students of the general-specific-general structure which they are familiar with, and then introduce the alternative. In addition, teachers could particularly emphasise the initial placement of a thesis statement while borrowing the concept of *kai men jian shan*. Teachers should also focus on the structure of a body paragraph, elaborating on the deductive logic in paragraph organization. They should point out that what seems direct to them might be indirect to the Western audience.

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