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Title

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Journal

L2 Journal, 5(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/L25116033

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Researching Chinese History and Culture through Poetry Writing in an EFL Composition Class

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This article describes a pedagogical project designed to optimize opportunities for individual, creative expression in L2 academic writing. Conducted in four EFL Composition classes in a university in mainland China, a writing project using poetry as a research methodology, first introduced by Hanauer (2010), was implemented and assessed for effectiveness. The writing activities for this project were designed to empower individual voices, advance L2 research writing skills, and provide “opportunities to construct deeply ‘local’ meanings” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 390). Following a genre-based approach to classic English poetry, students researched personal memory of Chinese history and culture through poetry writing. The second language writers/poets created a body of over 200 poems that both informed and individualized personal understandings and cultural identity. In this paper, I argue that the use of poetry as a research methodology is an effective tool for exploring personal memories and knowledge of national history and culture. I further argue that creative writing in L2 academic contexts equalizes linguistic inequities, establishes a unique space for personal identity negotiation, and promotes second language development.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent publication of the history of English writing instruction in China, You (2010) noted that, in the past, teaching English composition to students in China was stained with distaste for anything with a Chinese trace. According to You, Anglo-American literary standards over-shadowed attempts to create meaningful second language (L2) texts that expressed personal identity and affirmed cultural, linguistic heritage: “Teachers foreclosed opportunities for students to experiment with English or to produce creative, hybrid texts, which are staples of contact zone writing in postcolonial, multicultural societies” (You, 2010, p. 134). However, in the 1990s, revolutionized by discourses of globalization, teaching English as a second and foreign language (TESL/TEFL) shifted focus from *normative* Anglo-American literary standards to communicative goals and processes which engaged and prepared English language learners for international, intercultural communication. Nonetheless, even with a de-emphasis on a sterile *native-like* proficiency, L2 writers still struggle with structural and lexical constraints to fit their meanings and motives to English texts. At the same time, in academic writing contexts, L2 writing instructors are grappling to create space and give credence to second language voices in non-standard expressions of meanings.

This article is a description of a pedagogical project to test pragmatic and theoretical boundaries of an EFL Composition course designed to optimize individual expression in L2 writing. As an EFL writing instructor in a Chinese University, ideally, I sought to design writing activities that empowered individual voices, advanced L2 research writing skills, and

provided “opportunities to [writers] to construct deeply ‘local’ meanings” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 390). The creative use of poetry as a research methodology, as introduced by Hanauer (2010), challenged me to test the effectiveness of this methodology to accomplish these objectives in my research writing classes. However, in any language learning and teaching context, constraints are present. Relevant to my understanding of these constraints, sociolinguistic studies by Blommaert (2005), Stroud (2009), and Williams and Stroud (2012) drew my attention to linguistic inequalities embedded in institutionalized discourses—differences in access to linguistic resources and differences in capacities to interpret contexts. Providing theoretical support for the use of poetry, these studies implied that linguistic inequalities are best explored and challenged *via* performance-oriented approaches and creative linguistic practices. Working through these constraints, I designed a poetry writing project to develop English writing skills, provide space for individual expressions of L2 identity and voice, and potentially, contribute to L2 writing research. Therefore, this paper primarily explores two questions: 1) In what ways does poetry writing in an EFL research writing class enhance second language learning and writing skills? 2) How can poetry as a research methodology (Hanauer, 2010) contribute to personal and collective understandings of history and culture?

TRENDS IN ESL/EFL WRITING INSTRUCTION

Although communicative and cognitive approaches in foreign/second language education are still viable, over the last two decades, these approaches have been relegated to the background by critical transformative pedagogy (Canagarajah, 2002; Pennycook, 1997) and the sociocultural turn in language acquisition and education (Vygotsky, 1986; Labov, 2000). In addition to critical, reflective teaching practices, learner contributions to language learning are complex and now call for examination of multi-layered interactions of individual cognitive, sociocultural, and historical factors (Block, 2003). According to Cook (2001), goals for L2 teaching have continued to shift from a reductive assimilationist approach toward an additive transitional language teaching approach that “allows people to function in the majority [target] language of the country [or classroom] without necessarily losing or devaluing their first language” (p. 167). Cook makes a distinction between *local* goals, *international* goals, and *individual* goals. In second and foreign language classrooms in international contexts, students entertain a myriad of motivations for learning a foreign language which may or may not be acknowledged in the instructor’s course design or approach. Purposes for learning a second language may be to open doors of education, information, communication, entertainment, travel, or economic and/or political opportunities. To maximize engagement in the learning process, instructors should acknowledge these multiple motivations for learning a language. Furthermore, adding to this complex of goals, Cook (2001) maintained that the first language is always present and important along with the learning and teaching of the second (p. 170).

Also to be considered, current trends in L2 writing education strongly advocate a genre-based approach along with process for teaching ESL/EFL writing in academic contexts (Byram, 2004; Hyland, 2007; Matsuda, Cox, Jordan & Ortmeier-Hooper, 2011; Paltridge, 1996; Reid, 2001). According to Miller (1984), a genre—a type of writing identified by its similarities in forms, strategies in discourse, in audience, in modes of thinking, and in rhetorical situations—is intrinsically linked to social action. The assumption behind this approach to foreign language (FL) writing posits that L2 students benefit from explicit

instruction that distinguishes different social contexts, specific literary text features, and purposes surrounding a type or form of literacy (Hanauer, 1999). Ann Johns (2011) describes her approach with minority language students as socioliterate approach. She supports genre-based instruction with the following argument:

If we provide our students with assignments that vary in terms of task complexity and constraints, context, roles, purposes, genre and other features, they will have an opportunity to reflect on the differences in their strategies—and on what does and does not work when approaching different types of literacy tasks. (p. 295).

Thus, along with a creative genre-based approach and consideration of individual goals and constraints, theoretical undercurrents flowing through this paper reinforce a global perspective of ownership of English. This perspective is consistent with Stroud's (2009) notion of "linguistic citizenship" which emphasizes the diversity of speakers working through modalities/genres as opposed to language as a system of ordering communication. The English language has been disseminated, taken-up, and reframed in global terms—English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), English as a Language of Wider Communication (ELWC), and World Englishes (WE)—so how does this ideological position play out in an EFL research writing classroom in a university in northeastern China? Working to maximize student engagement and ownership of English, as well as to provide space for self-expression and personal identity construction as English writers in an academic context, I included two creative genres (autoethnography and poetry), along with a traditional academic research paper in the design of a research writing course.

According to Dai (2010), promoting creative writing in English language classes in China improves language proficiency and critical thinking, and provides Chinese writers a space for sharing common cultural experiences and perspectives with a wider audience. However, summoning Chinese EFL students into creative writing spaces was not always easy. In a foreign culture more familiar with a highly structured learning environments and conservative uniformity in terms of student behavior and response, students in this study needed encouragement to play with the English language without fear of failure. With the freedom of poetic license, students were instructed to focus on creating word pictures and to experiment with new vocabulary—not on spelling and grammar. The language playfulness encouraged in this kind of creative writing space attracts more readers who share common experiences of "life in several languages" (Kramsch, 2006). In the case of Thai English writers, Buripakdi (2012) found that creative manipulation of the English language empowered writers, strengthened emotional attachment to the language, and consequently, weakened hegemonic linguistic practices and oppression.

Therefore, the argument for creative writing in the second language classroom builds on these personal, individual benefits as well as the advancement of poetry as a research methodology. Along with the use of poetry in the L2 writing classroom, a call for papers from Kramsch (2010) highlighting the importance of teaching culture in the second language classroom and the roles of history and memory in the process of cultural reproductions inspired the idea of focusing on history and culture in the research writing class. Utilizing poetry as a research methodology (Hanauer, 2010), student memory of Chinese history and culture was explored, recreated, and re-contextualized in poems written in English. Drawing from the previous studies mentioned, I included this poetry writing project in the research writing course to employ a critical, creative, contextualized approach to EFL instruction

which recognized L1 language and culture and highlighted diversity and individual identities among the L2 writers in my classes.

RATIONALE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The poetry writing project was implemented in four EFL research writing classes taught by a foreign faculty member from the US during my second semester at the university. By the second semester, I had developed good rapport with a degree of openness with the students. Students in three of the classes had studied with me in Composition 1 the previous semester. In order to increase engagement in L2 writing, the project was designed to empower the students by having them write what they knew. First and second language writing scholars (Owens, 2001; Silva, 2011; Tobin, 2004) have long maintained that students should be allowed to choose topics, and to write about people, places, and things that are personally meaningful to them. In addition to the potential of poetry writing as a vehicle of creative self-expression and space to play with the English language, writing about personal experience (or individual memory) was anticipated to provoke a stronger degree of engagement and emotional investment in the writing process and final text.

Also significant, motivation to research individual memory of Chinese history and culture through poetry writing emerged from class discussions the previous semester when students had commented on public criticism of their generation's lack of knowledge and lack of appreciation for Chinese history and culture. Collectively challenging this assumption by focusing on individual memory and understandings, we set out to explore what the students remembered and how they thought about Chinese history and culture. In the end, results showed that re-contextualizing this knowledge through English poetry writing often raised awareness of native culture and its influences on personal beliefs, values, and thought.

As stated earlier, the primary questions this study sought to investigate were the ways poetry writing in an EFL research writing class could enhance second language learning and writing skills, and also, to explore how this research methodology could contribute to personal and collective understandings of culture and history. With this critical genre-based approach using poetry writing as the primary research methodology, several other questions were considered: What people, places and cultural objects or events come to mind when Chinese students think about their history and culture? How does personal identity shape individual understandings and memory of national history and Chinese culture? In what ways does writing poems in English enhance or challenge individual and collective understandings of Chinese history and culture? Enacting critical pedagogy, students were given freedom to select topics on the basis of personal significance or selective memory and then creatively transform this historical/cultural knowledge in English texts. As indicated in student reflections of the project at the end of the semester, students seemed to interact with the target language at a more personal level, evidenced in stated changes of attitude about writing in English and personal identity as poets. The results also provided an interesting co-constructed collection of knowledge nuanced by individual identities, experiences and understandings.

TAPPING THE INTERNAL LANDSCAPE OF MEMORY

Research on memory distinguishes between types of knowledge: *episodic*, the autobiographical memory; *semantic*, the stored knowledge of meanings of words, numbers, and general factual

information; and *procedural*, the steps and processes of psychomotor skills and tasks (Tulving, 1972, 1983, 1985). Conway (1997) argued, “Semantic memory is arguably a critically important source of self-defining knowledge” (p. 23). Therefore, due to the nature of retrieving historical information of personal significance, the writing assignments initially tapped data from semantic memory. In the processes of pre-writing and creating the poems, autobiographical memory of personal interactions or experiences with this semantic knowledge was frequently recalled to highlight personal significance of selection, thus creating emotional bonds between the writers and their texts. Within both kinds of knowledge are clues to personal identity and often differences in types of conceptual knowledge that define generations as well.

In the instance of autobiographical memory (AM) knowledge, Conway (1997) maintained that there are three layers of AM knowledge: lifetime periods, general events, and event-specific knowledge (Conway, 1992, 1997; Conway & Rubin, 1993). Conway (1997) stated, “Layers of autobiographical knowledge are represented in knowledge structures in long-term memory and organized by thematic and temporal knowledge” (p. 23). These memories are not stored as complete or discrete units but are fragmented and recalled by specific cues from general and specific events across lifetime periods. Memories are compilations of knowledge at different levels of specificity. They are “transitory mental representations constructed by a centrally mediated complex retrieval process” (Conway, 1997, p. 23). With a given cue, accessed knowledge is evaluated with respect to current task demands.

Furthermore, Eng and Davidson (2007) maintain that memories are culturally charged and often subjected to political interference that creates motivated representations of the past: “Ethnicity, gender, generation and regional circumstances suggest difference in the way memories are recalled, articulated and situate meaning” (p. 6-7). The participants in this study were all Chinese students who had never lived nor studied abroad. They came to the university from a variety of regions across mainland China, from extreme northeast China and Inner Mongolia, from Shanghai in the east, to Yunnan in the southwest, and Hainan Island in the south. Noting the variety of regions that the students came from was important because individual memory is shaped within particular social, collective circumstances (Eng & Davidson, 2007). As Mageo (2001) stated, “Identities appear as sites of transit between layers of historical experience, cross-cut with hierarchies of gender, generation, and regional interests” (p.2). Although the Chinese (however defined) may share similar values and beliefs, they do not possess a singularity of roots—they are individual members of smaller collectives and communities in regions which may be separated by thousands of miles.

MEMORY OF HISTORY AND CULTURE

A special issue of the *L2 Journal* which focused on history and memory in foreign language education explored the effects of historical and political conditions on cultural memory and different worldviews “associated with different interpretations of historical events, memories and aspirations” (Kramersch, 2012, p. 2). Because memories are shaped by social circumstances, it is important to question how these circumstances shape representations and interpretations of national history. In addition to social circumstances, culture plays a significant role in meaning making. If culture is a collection of individuals with “shared meanings” (Hall, 1997), in what ways do these shared meanings influence individual semantic memory? How does culture effect representations of history in different contexts

and life-time periods? In what ways do individuals within the wider collective of Chinese ethnic identity identify with sub-cultures? In an article in this *L2 Journal* special issue, Wertsch (2012) commented that one's view of the past is biased and often built with cultural tools such as a "stock of stories" which "do some of our thinking, speaking, and remembering for us" (p. 11). The focus on individual memory of history and culture in this poetry research project notes the power of the collective memory while seeking to separate and empower the individual L2 learner in the creative writing process. Asking students to create a body of knowledge in poems based on their memories of Chinese history and culture was a complex and multi-dimensional assignment.

CREATIVITY AND VISUALIZATION

With each assignment, the creative processes of poetry writing were explicitly articulated and systematically examined. To paint pictures with words, a higher order of linguistic thought fuses with visual mental images to create texts that evoke emotions and thoughts, ideas perpetuated as long as lines are read, sung, or remembered. Human creativity, difficult to define and measure, is often associated with originality—a requirement of many writing instructors. Runco (2004) suggested that personal creativity is evidenced by the construction of new understandings—novel interpretations and transformations of experience. He maintained that "[w]e do not merely absorb experience; we filter and select it" (p. 23). In this poetry writing project, the creative-process acts of selecting and filtering information to construct original texts were made conscious and explored.

In addition to focusing on creativity and nurturing a formative classroom environment, the instructor emphasized the concept of visualization to enhance the process of writing poetry in a second language. Maintaining the importance of visual images, Reed (2010) stated that "much of thinking can be viewed as reliving our perceptual and motor experiences, rather than as a form of internal verbalization" (p. 12). In this instance the students utilized visualization when recalling autobiographical memory experiences of visiting a historical site or reliving personal moments of inspiration drawn from historical and cultural figures and events. Visualization played a major role as a conceptual space and emotional bridge between L1 memory and L2 poetry writing.

THE NATURE OF POETRY

Poems are an emotional synthesis of knowledge and experience. Poetry is often concise and pushes the poet to label experience with an economy of words that are packed with meaning and emotion. Hanauer (2003) argued that "poetry provides multileveled access to the individual and thus promotes the experience, concept, and understanding of human diversity" (p. 71). In this study, writing poetry in a second language was a complex multilingual process of remembering and visualizing, and then broadly translating knowledge, history and cultural identity in another language (Ricoeur, 2006). In the process of refracting personal knowledge and experience through an English lexicon, students unpacked, examined, and sometimes challenged traditional representations of Chinese history and culture.

PROJECT DESIGN, ANALYSIS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Design

Seventy-five Chinese university students participated in this poetry research project. The students were from provinces located in multiple regions throughout China. The participants were studying in dual degree business programs—one program taught exclusively in English and the other in Chinese. The students, all non-English majors, had limited exposure to creative English writing genres. As *da er* (sophomores), the students were taking required English composition coursework. Most of the students had studied English for approximately 10 years.

At the beginning of the semester, students were shown the syllabus and informed about my intentions to modify the course design to learn about Chinese history and culture through their personal memories which would be communicated in the form of poetry. The poetry component of the research writing course was intended to acknowledge Chinese context and identity by making their culture, the local knowledge, values and beliefs a thematic focus of the EFL experience. With genuine curiosity, the poetry project was conducted as scientific inquiry with questions, data collection, analysis and findings. To maximize engagement and investment in the poetry assignments, we discussed possible benefits of this project. At the start, some students were less enthusiastic than others, expressing doubt that poetry could teach them anything practical about themselves, their culture or history. The project was spread over three months. According to the course design, each month the poetry research project provided a break—a language play space—from the more strict conventions of the traditional research paper that they were writing during the semester.

Analysis

The poems were collected and analyzed according to selection of people, places, and objects/events. The types and frequencies of topics in the poems were categorized and located within a particular period or domain of Chinese history and culture. Overall patterns and themes that emerged were examined as well as individual self-expressions of thought, emotion, and personal identity. At the end of the course, students were asked to write personal reflections of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences participating in the poetry writing project. I analyzed student reflections for ways they addressed the primary research questions. For both questions, I noted responses on language awareness, language skills, attitudes, and information/knowledge growth based on patterns of comments that emerged.

Implementation

The students were initially introduced to English poetry by examining Robert Frost's (1923) "Stopping by the woods on a snowy evening." After a brief discussion of context and authorship, we examined common components and features of English poetry such as line, couplet and stanza, rhyme, repetition, sound, and visual imagery. Throughout the semester, students completed three poetry writing assignments that included individually selecting topics, pre-writing activities, and writing three poems based on personal memory of a famous person, place, or object/event in Chinese history and culture. At the end of the semester, students chose their favorite poems, practiced reading them dramatically, and then in a formal poetry reading event, performed their original works for their classmates and

invited guests. As a final activity, students wrote reflections of the whole experience highlighting their feelings about participation in the project, benefits or obstacles, their perceptions of their work, and ways the project contributed or did not contribute to their development as writers and/or students of English. The following chart (Table 1) displays a description of the poetry research project with writing assignments, pre-writing activities, and objectives for each assignment.

Table 1: Project Tasks, Activities, and Objectives

Writing Tasks	Pre-writing Activities	Objectives
<p>Introduction to English Poetry and Research Project</p> <p>Read “<i>Stopping by a Snowy Wood</i>” by Robert Frost.</p> <p>Discussed literary poetic devices: rhyme, repetition, assonance, sensory & visual imagery, stanza, couplet, and line</p>	<p><i>Practicing poetry writing.</i> Go outside and find an inanimate object. Observe it carefully. Think of words in English to describe it. If this object could talk to you, what would it say? Write a practice poem about this object using the literary device of personification.</p>	<p>Encourage creative thinking and writing and reduce fear of poetry writing. Understand how literary devices impact technique, imagination and product.</p>
<p>Assignment #1: Write one poem about a memorable person in Chinese history and culture. Do not consult an outside reference source. Use your personal memory and thoughts inside your head when you think about this person. Your poem should consist of at least four lines or one stanza.</p>	<p><i>Brainstorming and Visualization.</i> When you think about Chinese history or culture write down the names of people you think of first. *Close your eyes and choose one. Visualize this person. What does he/she look like? In English, write down words for each idea. What is he/she doing? What is the person thinking? Feeling? Saying? List words and phrases to describe this person. Create a picture--“Show not tell” using English language.</p>	<p>Identify a figure in Chinese history or culture who has made a strong impression on you. Understand how this person symbolizes some important period of time in history, contributed or harmed society, or exemplified a quality or value of Chinese culture. Answer why others should know about this person? Think about why this person is important to you? Practice drawing from visual mental images to create verbal texts in English.</p>
<p>Assignment #2: Write one poem about an interesting or special place that is significant in Chinese history and culture. Your poem should consist of at least four lines or one stanza</p>	<p><i>Choose a place.</i> Visualize it. List words in English that describe this place. In class, be prepared to explain why this place is important to you.</p> <p>Play with words, word order, and literary devices to create a visual image of this place.</p>	<p>Expand class knowledge of historical and cultural places in China. Understand how personal connections to place are linked to identity and personal dreams. Raise awareness of ways culture is embedded in language.</p>
<p>Assignment #3: Write one poem about an object or event that is significant in Chinese history or symbolizes Chinese culture. Your poem should consist of at least four lines or one stanza.</p> <p>Write a Reflection</p>	<p><i>Identify an object or event</i> that reflects Chinese culture. Think of a personal experience with this object or event.</p> <p>Why do you think this object or event is significant or interesting? Does it have special meaning for you?</p>	<p>Understand how objects in the material world symbolize culture, reveal values and beliefs and construct collective identity.</p> <p>Consider culture from outsider perspective.</p>

RESULTS

The following chart, Table 2, presents lists of the different people, places, and objects/events that were presented in the student poems. Discussions of general and

thematic results will follow. The asterisk (*) indicates multiple poems about this person, place, or object/event.

Table 2: Persons, Places, and Objects/Events in Poems

Person	description	Place	province	Object/event
Cai Lun (m.)	inventor of paper	Anshan (mountain)	Liaoning	Abacus
Cao Cao* (m.)	Emperor Wei Kingdom/poet	Beijing* (city)	Hebei	Blue /white porcelain
Cixi (f.)	Empress Qing Dynasty	Changjiang	Hainan island	Brush painting
Confucius (m.)	greatest philosopher/teacher	Dalian(city)	Liaoning	Change face
Diao Chan (f.)	romantic fictional character	Da Lishu (village)	Liaoning	Cheongsam
Dong Chun Fei (m.)	ancient martial artist	Feng Huang*(city)	Hunan	Chinese Er Hu
Dong Chunrui (m.)	Mao soldier political poster	Gu Lang Yu* (island)	Fujian	China ink
Guan Yu(m.)	general of a warlord	Gui Lin (city)	Guangxi region	Chinese Knot*
Jia Bao yu (m.)	romantic fictional character	Hangzhou (city)	Zhejiang	Chinese New Year*
Kong zi(m.)	(also known as Confucius)	Hometown*	not named	Chinese Vase (Song)
Kroraina (f.)	an excavated mummy	Hong Kong*(city)	Special region	Chinese Zodiac
Lao She (m.)	modern novelist/dramatist	Imperial Palace*	Beijing	Chi-pao
Lao Zi (m.)	(master teacher Confucius)	Inner Mongolia	Auto. Region	compass
Lei Feng (m.)	Propaganda Poster Soldier	Jin Mao Tower	Shanghai	Chop sticks
Li Bai*(m.)	Poet of Tang Dynasty	Lake on campus	Liaoning	Chui tang ren
Li Lianying (m.)	Head Eunuch of Empress Ci xi	Lijiang (town)	Yunnan	Dragon
Li Qingzhao (f.)	Song dynasty famous writer	Lu Hui Tou Park	Hainan Island	Embroidery
Li Shi Min (m.)	2 nd Emperor of Tang Dynasty	Mount Tai	Shandong	Foot-wrappings
Li Shizhen (m.)	herbalist & acupuncturist	Potala Palace	Tibet	Gunpowder
Li Xiaolong (m.)	martial artist/actor Bruce Lee	Qing Hai Lake	Qinghai	Hair clasp
Lin Daiyu (f.)	literary woman figure in DRC	Shanghai (city)	Jiangsu & Zhejiang	Hometown
Liu bei (m.)	military general/emperor	Summer Palace *	Beijing	Jade
Liu Che (m.)	Emperor Wu of Han Dynasty	Tian Shang Ren Jian	Shanxi	Jin Mao Towers
Lu You (m.)	12 th century patriotic Poet	Tian Jin (city)	Hebei	Junpo Festival
Mao Zedong*(m.)	PRC Revolutionary/Leader	Tai Pei	Taiwan	Kite
Mei Lanfang (m.)	Peking Opera star	Taishan*Mountain	Shandong	Kong Ming Lantern
Mu Lan (f.)	legendary Chinese heroine	The Great Wall*	NE to NW	Li Brocade
Qin Shi Huang*(m.)	1 st Emperor of Unified China	Tibet	Auto. Region	Martyr stone
Song Qingling (f.)	pol.activist, wife Sun-Yat-sen	Wenbi Mountain*	Yunnan	Miniature tree
Su Xiao Xiao (f.)	famous courtesan and poet	West Lake*	Zhejiang	Moon cakes
Tang Bohu *(m.)	artist,poet, romantic scholar	Wu Nu Mountain	Liaoning	National Day
Tao Yuaming (m.)	pastoral poet East. Jin Period	Wu Tai	Shanxi	Ocarina (mummy)
Wang Zhao jun (f.)	concubine sent to Mongolia	Wu Zhen (town)	Zhejiang	Olympics
Weng Cheng (f.)	princess married Tibet king	Xin Le	Liaoning	Panda*
Wu Kexi (m.)	two Qing generals	Yalu river hometown	China & N.K.	paper
Wu Zetian* (f.)	Empress of Tang Empire	Yuan Mingyuan	Beijing Palace	Peony
Xiang Yu (m.)	military /pol. figure Qin Dyn.	Zigong(city)	Sichuan	printing
Xiao Zhuang (f.)	Empress of Qing Dynasty			Quad. courtyard
Xu Zhimo (m.)	modern poet western ed.			Red Envelope*(bag)
Yang Gui Fei* (f.)	consort of Emperor Xuanzong			Spring festival*
Zhang Jiao (m.)	lead rebellion, Taoist, sorcerer			Terra Cotta Warriors
Zhang Liao (m.)	warrior general to Cao Cao			Writing brush
Zheng He (m.)	Muslem-Hui eunuch, explorer			
Zhu Ge liang*(m.)	military strategist 3 Kingdoms			
Zhou EnLai*(m.)	1 st Premier of PRC under Mao			

Overview of Results

Students wrote poems featuring forty-six different memorable people in Chinese history and culture. Thirty-three males and thirteen females were creatively lauded with the majority from Chinese Imperial Times (221 BC to 1911 AD). Confucius (551-479 BC) was the only person remembered from Ancient Times while there were seven poems written about individuals, all males, who had lived in the Modern Age (1912 to the present). Students imagined and described a total of thirty-eight significant places in China. Widely dispersed, memorable places were located in fourteen different provinces, three autonomous regions, and two neighboring countries. Half were located in northern or northeast China with other places in the east, south and southwest regions of the country. The *Yalu* River, which

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separates a part of the northeastern coast of China and North Korea, as well as Inner Mongolia and Taipei, Taiwan, received poetic treatment. Forty-two different objects or events, symbolizing Chinese culture or representing some significant event in Chinese national history were presented in the third poem assignment.

Table 3 below shows the different types of characters, places, and objects or events. Several student poets chose to write about the same person, place or object/event. Again, the * indicates topics which were selected by multiple writers.

Table 3: Types of People, Places and Objects or Events

Person type	number	Place type	number	Object/Event type	number
Emperor*	4	Mountain*	5	Invention*	6
Empress*	3	Lake*	3	Art/craft*	10
Princess	1	Palace*	4	Holiday/festival*	5
Consort*	3	Monument*	1	Food	1
Eunuch	2	Park*	1	Plant/animal *	4
Warrior/Military*	6	City*	9	Custom/dress	5
Poet/writer*	7	Region	4	Structure/building*	4
Artist/performer	3	Island*	3	Natural resource	1
Literary character	4	Hometown*	7	Artifact/excavated site	2
Philosopher/teacher *	2				
Doctor	1				
Inventor/farmer	1				
Political/official	3				
Political activist	1				
Revolutionary*	2				
Propaganda Poster soldier	2				
Totals	46		38		42

Poems of People

Findings showed that the two groups of historical figures most frequently mentioned in poems were poets/writers and Emperors/Empresses. Not surprising, four Chinese Emperors were memorialized—some as good, some as bad. Emperor *Cao Cao* was remembered not only for his military prowess but also because as one L2 writer expressed, he “wrote countless wonderful poems.” First Emperor of unified China, *Liu Che*, the *Han Wudi*, was extolled as the greatest emperor, although his legacy is still debated thousands of years later. One student expressed this ambivalence about *Wudi*’s memory by writing, “You like a God bring happiness to the people; /You also like a Devil change people’s fate.” Interestingly, three Empresses and one Royal Princess were chosen as key figures in the development and historical progress of the Chinese people. Although not a popular monarch, Empress *Cixi* found some empathy with a student poet who projected her own dramatic personality as she assumed *Cixi*’s persona in her poem:

Fairy flowers blooming quietly in my golden backyard
Walk ahead, slaves behind.
Looked back, faces down,
The suspecting, the unwilling, the disgusting,
I knew it and I don’t care.
Whatever their feelings are, they’re still my slaves.

I am the queen and I am the king
 Control my country is my destiny
 What I did, my country needed. (written by You)

One female student interpreted history through the lens of modern feminism by choosing the ‘unmarked’ masculine title for the Empress *Wu Zetian*. In her poem, the student wrote, “I adore Emperor Wu Zetian who is a lady.” She credited *Wu Zetian* with re-writing Chinese history. In another poem, the *Wencheng* Princess was immortalized for her courage [or submission] because she left the civilized world of the Tang Empire to marry the Tibetan King. In the student’s English poem, Princess *Wencheng* is penned with Chinese flavor, “Like Snow lotus blossomed on plateau/Until eternity.” Other types of historical figures often mentioned in poems were writers and poets. Performers and artists were honored in several poems, and perhaps even more notable, three poems were devoted to fictional characters who contributed ideal archetypes of the romantic hero and heroine, embodying cultural standards of romantic love and devotion—nostalgic icons which still endure in the thoughts of Chinese lovers today. Other types mentioned included courtesans and eunuchs, warriors and military leaders, politicians and revolutionaries, philosopher teachers and farmer inventors.

Poems of Place

Of the thirty-eight different places described in the student poems, types of places were categorized as mountains, lakes, palaces, monument parks, man-made structures, cities, towns, islands, and regions. The places recalled were located throughout China. Natural wonders, such as mountains and lakes, were praised in more than eight poems. Writing of Mount *Tai* in Shandong province, one student visualized the scene and addressed the object of her gaze: “There she is, in front of me, so glorious and peaceful; / Sun is her hat, stones are her eyes.” Reflecting on the same mountain, another student also personified Mount Tai, but in a slightly different voice: “He is natural soul; / He is grandiose and verve; / Everyone is infatuated with his splendor.” In northern China, *WuNu* Mountain was remembered as a place where “[f]ive girls sacrifice their life to save others.” One student created a soft and magical impression of *Wenbi* Mountain on the southern island of Hainan. The L2 poet wrote:

It’s a comfort comfort world
 In a far far heaven
 Only the fluctuating river
 Asserting its enduring ambition. (written by Liu)

Several lakes in China were commemorated but none more than the West Lake in the southern Zhejiang Province. A lake “west of *Jia* Pavilion” as one student wrote, was also imagined as “the fairyland in my dream” by another poet who wrote, “When the sun hides his face behind the mountain, / Lights appear on the boat against the twinkle wave on the lake.” Personal memories of visits to this lake evoked strong emotions and vivid poems. Although West Lake was never named in the following poem, one L2 student wrote:

White Moon light bright the running lake,

Flowing west,
 Leave silence the only thing can be heard,
 Like a thinker told me to deep think. (written by Wang)

In addition to the beauty of mountains and lakes, many students chose to write poems about large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and even Taipei in Taiwan, as well as ancient villages and towns. Others wrote of their hometowns with longing and intimate details. One student wrote passionately of *ZiGong*, his hometown: “You are my root. /With dream with heart with feeling.” The body of poems of place co-constructed an amazing picture of China from an insider’s perspective.

Deeply moving in its simplicity, in “Inner Mongolia, The Whole Life Treasure,” another L2 poet remembered the experience of leaving the yurt and the vision of:

Blue sky
 White cloud
 Green grass
 Just three single color
 Make up a flawless, simple picture (written by Wang)

In poems of palaces, parks, the Great Wall, and the martyr stone at Anshan, students often addressed the site in the second person, offering words of adoration or reprimands for human misdeeds that occurred at these places. Of the Summer Palace, outside of Beijing, a student wrote: “You are a miracle in human history, / You are the mother of million gardens.” One student commented that the scene of Tibet was so mysterious she decided to describe in her poem the people’s behavior in the sacred place, in her words, “the place we started crying.”

Poems of object or event

In the last poetry assignment, following poems of people and places, students selected forty-one different objects or events in Chinese history and culture as the themes of their poems. Students wrote of Chinese inventions, arts and crafts, holidays and festivals, customs and dress, and culturally symbolic plants and animals. The panda was seriously represented as “a symbol of peace angel in our heart” and comically as a bamboo-eating night owl—“having dark circles under eyes / don’t tell me no sleep last night.” The uniquely Chinese musical instrument, the *Er Hu*, was described with “Two strings play the love and loss.” Overlapping with poems of place, there were several poems about the Great Wall, *Jin Mao* Towers in Shanghai, and the Terra Cotta Warriors at *Xi’an*. One of the most surprising findings was the limited number of poems about food. World-wide, Chinese culture is known for its great variety of foods and distinct regional cuisines. Food was only mentioned in two poems and in both instances, the two foods, mooncakes and *chui tang ren* (blown candy), were special foods for parties or holidays. In spite of an unexpected shortage of poems about traditional Chinese food, a very interesting picture of the most common eating utensils, chopsticks, was expressed as “two girls with willowy shape.”

Only one poem presented a natural resource, jade, which, to the writer, “symbolizes upright and honest.” Deep feelings and abstract thoughts were expressed as one student

wrote of the miniature tree and likened it to a “landscape picture but have life” that “give audience feeling of poetry.”

Commenting on a recent archaeological discovery, two student poets creatively drew imaginary visions of the ancient mummy of the Eurasian Steppes that was uncovered in the last decade at *Djumbulak-Kum*. In one of the poems titled, “Remained Dream of Kroraina,” the L2 poet wrote:

By chance came a day,
Thy mysterious face reemerged,
After strong wind blew the dust of age away. (written by Shen)

Equally intriguing, another student also moved by the significance of this discovery for Chinese ancient history, titled his poem “Ocarina” and addressed the mysterious woman in a more personal voice:

You are always laying down somber sleep under the earth
One day, I flick off the dust, blowing and find the immemorial grief
Across the desert outside, through the loess, with the ever travelling birds
Returning to the melody, composing for the leaving once more
(written by Wang)

Among the poems of objects and events, not all were happy memories. In “Foot-wrappings,” the L2 poet wrote of the “bad dream for ancient China women,” a custom that “stand for prefer boys to girls.” Although, the poem ended on a positive note that expressed, “Status of woman increase unprecedented, / Foot-wrappings can not be seen any more.” As evidenced by the unusual selections of the topics, this project drew from the students’ memories selectively important aspects of their culture and national history.

Student reflections

Several themes emerged from student reflections of the poetry writing project. Overall, students expressed more confidence in their English writing skills, changes in attitudes about poetry and writing in English, a new/renewed interest in Chinese history, an increase in knowledge of Chinese history and culture, an expansion of English vocabulary, phonemic awareness, and an understanding of poetic devices that characterize English poetry. As one student wrote:

All in all, I think I have learnt much from the poem writing. My knowledge about Chinese culture, my skills in writing poems and my confidence in writing have been improved a lot. Though at the beginning, I think it useless to write poems because I am a student learning finance, now my opinion has changed, and I think no matter what major I study, writing poems is very useful and beneficial for me. It not only helps me in the writing skills, but also helps me to think more about our Chinese ancient culture.

The following chart (Table 4) demonstrates how student comments in their reflections addressed the main research questions. To evaluate the effectiveness of this activity based on

student reflections, I analyzed these responses in terms of how they reflected development or changes in language awareness, language skills, attitudes, and information or knowledge acquired through the poetry writing research project.

Table 4: Categorization of selected student reflections to research questions

	Language Awareness	Language skills	Attitudes	Information/ Knowledge
Question #1 Promotion of L2 writing skills through poetry writing?	<p>“Use of rhyme”</p> <p>“This is my first time to write poem in English. I can see the picture, hear the sound, feel emotion from the poem.”</p>	<p>“I had to learn more adjectives so that I can use them to describe the thing I want to write.”</p> <p>“From the study of write poem, I have learned how to refine my sentence.”</p> <p>“Now, I can use several words to explain my idea and show the highlight.”</p>	<p>“I think I have improved a lot this term.”</p> <p>“I have become more confident than before, I can read my works aloud and feel pride.”</p> <p>“I still don’t like writing poems.”</p> <p>“I was so happy that I could write English poem. It will be my wonderful memories.”</p> <p>“When I write poem, I will not consider the grammar, the tense, the fragments. I can write the sentence what I want to...”</p>	<p>“I can know more interesting place[s] and different culture from the classmates’ poem.”</p> <p>“I found out that the English poem was different from Chinese poem.”</p> <p>“Through writing poems, I learned a lot about Chinese history. Chinese history is important for us.”</p>
Question #2 Viability as a research methodology	<p>“It made me observe things very carefully.”</p>	<p>“If someone see a beautiful scenery or something is meaningful they can make a poetry to remember that time or feeling.”</p>	<p>“This experience writing poetry helps me with arousing the memory of history, and it reminds me of paying attention on learning history.”</p>	<p>“Even though I am a Chinese person I don’t know much about Chinese history...I get a lot of Chinese history person, Chinese traditional goods. I will go on studying Chinese history.”</p>

As evidenced in this table, the sampling of student responses reflected a consensus of the group of participants—only two negative responses were noted. Reflections reported an overwhelmingly positive attitude toward participation in the project and identified specific skills and knowledge gained through this experience.

DISCUSSION

Overcoming textual terror through the power of poetry

In *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*, Bloom (1998) wrote of “textual terror” that often occurred when her first language English composition students were asked to analyze or write in classic literary genres such as poetry. This same genre-phobia is intensified with reluctant L2 poets in the EFL context, especially because of the elevated status of poetry in the Chinese culture presented an even more intimidating barrier for some students. Initially, many were reluctant to engage in the process of poetry writing due to the esteem that Chinese poets have traditionally garnered. As evidenced by the number of poems students wrote about poets and writers, poetry and classic written texts are revered in China. The students commented that their early Chinese literacy experiences often included memorizing ancient poems. This practice continued along with in-depth analysis of poetry throughout primary and secondary education. Expressing the esoteric nature of classic literature, ancient Taoist poet *Lu Ji*, translated by Barnstone (Barnstone & Lu, 1996) claimed, “Writing can’t express what writing is because it is more than itself; it is an essential relation, a spiritual voyage that connects impulse to action, words to music, and the self to the world” (p. 5).

At the beginning of this study, it was interesting to see how the attitudes of the students toward poetry and poetry writing were mixed: some expressed a love of the genre while some felt poetry writing was unattainable and were fearful because they had never imagined themselves as Chinese poets, much less English poets. A very small, sometimes vocal contingent thought poetry was very tedious and not at all practical in an L2 learning context. Another challenge was the difference in language abilities and access to linguistic resources, evident in one group, in particular, who had a noticeably lower level of English language skills. Although, in time, as students participated in class discussions, pre-writing activities, and frequent readings of poems, reluctant students became more engaged in the project. Also, I think student performance of the poems heightened enjoyment and participation in this project. However, the students in one class did not have the same level of enthusiasm and experimentation noticed in the groups with higher language skills. Interestingly, this was the class that I had not taught the previous semester and we were just beginning to know one another. Significantly, final reflections of the poetry research project revealed that feelings and interest in L2 poetry writing shifted considerably from hesitation to enthusiasm during the semester.

Over the course of the semester, students began to anticipate and embrace poetry days. Textual terror at the beginning had been replaced by individual ownership of L2 texts and the power of expression. The word pictures that the students created were so vividly expressed that interest in Chinese culture and history grew significantly. Often, at various stages of writing, the poems were read aloud in class by the instructor and students were surprised by the beauty of the language they had created. The findings in this study were consistent with Fu’s (2003) work with ESL Chinese immigrants in New York. Overcoming fear of writing in English, young, newly transplanted Chinese Americans “realized that their limited English proficiency didn’t limit them from using poetry writing to express what lay deep in their hearts. They came to understand that anything they said and wanted to say could be a poem” (p. 97). Fu expressed surprise at how freely students learned to express feelings, “as if poetry was a path that led them to emotional freedom” (p.97). An L2 writing project that began with “terror” ended with a celebration of achievement and a formal poetry reading with invited guests.

Use of poetic devices

In the body of L2 poems written for this project, repetition and alliteration were the most often used poetic devices. Frequency of use of these textual literary characteristics were not systematically counted as in Hanauer's (2010) study of poetry as a research methodology, but patterns of use emerged. Multiple poems repeated a letter in the initial words of lines in a stanza, introduced each line of a stanza with a one-word repetition such as "You," or began each stanza with a repeated phrase like "It's a" or "Don't ask me." One aspect of sound that several students mastered was that of alliteration. Beautiful lines with alliteration, "softly sprinkle silvery silklike moonlight" and "a steady stream of people skelping on streets," demonstrated an understanding of how the same consonant can enhance the sound and emotion of the poem. There were very few instances of rhyming words which are often found in L1 English poems by novice writers. The L2 poets often used similar ending words but combinations of rhyming vowel sounds seemed to be missing, perhaps, indicating lexical limitations or stronger focus on meaning construction rather than phonemic awareness of vowel sounds. In a reflection, one student noted a raised awareness of sounds in her English poems in contrast to poems in Chinese. She commented that "The Chinese poetry don't worry about [what] the pronunciation is like." However, repetition was a poetic device that crossed cultures.

Expressions of gender

What made this L2 writing project linguistically liberating was the emphasis on personal memory and freedom of expression with poetic license. The rights and diversity of "linguistic citizenship" (Stroud, 2009) were celebrated. Individual students owned their memories and many females were bold in expressing personal, gendered points of view, unlike existing written texts on history and culture. The expressions of feminism contested a study by Paletschek and Schraut (2008) who stated, "Cultural memory mirrors the bourgeois gender model and has a male orientation despite the claim that it is universal and inclusive. Women as actors, their agency and their self-perceptions and aims, are often marginalized and forgotten" (p. 10). Contradicting the perception of Chinese women as indefensible and submissive, many female students identified with strong women—from Empress *Wu Zetian* of Imperial Days to *Song Qingling*, a modern political activist and former wife of Sun-Yat-Sen. These women were represented as bravely challenging cultural limitations to lead both men and women.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, our memories are influenced by smaller collectives of sub-cultures and regional values and beliefs. The student poets from the northern provinces of China often expressed admiration for the strength of Chinese women of the north. Their strengths and values were illuminated by Johnson (2011) who surmised that, "Behaviors valued in [Northern Province] women [included] courage, physical bravery, military action, loyalty and education" (p. 2). On the other hand, there were also poems that applauded traditional female role models. Several historical figures, the *Wencheng* Princess and the concubine *Wang Zhao*, who left their homes to marry strangers in Tibet and Mongolia, were remembered for their submission and sacrifices for family, emperor, and country. While important women in Chinese history and culture were most often polarized by beauty or strength, men were multi-dimensional, mentioned for multiple kinds of achievements, acts, and contributions. This implies gaps of information about the extent of contributions of women and also supports theories mentioned earlier in this paper (Eng & Davidson, 2007; Paletschek & Schraut, 2008; Wertsch, 2012), suggesting national memory is dynamically

recursive, temporal, and influenced by dominant collective discourses which often have male orientations.

Gaps and traces

Other gaps not fully explored in this paper were the minimal number of poems of people and significant events of the Twentieth Century in modern Chinese history. Less than ten percent of the poems were written about modern leaders, political figures or initiatives, artists and writers, buildings, and inventions. To this researcher, this gap was surprising in light of the politicization of education through multiple campaigns to interpret and promote awareness of China's struggles during the 20th century. There was no mention of the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956), nor the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976); although, in one of the pre-writing activities, one student openly expressed post-memory (Hirsh, 2008) family trauma as motivation for selection of place. Perhaps, the explanation of the project signaled ancient Chinese history and culture; therefore, students chose to reach as far back into history as their memories allowed. Another question not explored pertained to the influence of contemporary media on individual memory construction. Most of the poems of people were from the Imperial Age—now, a very popular theme in Chinese cinema and electronic video games.

Importantly, there were traces of Chinese in the poems. Code mixing was evident with expressions such as: *Jia* Pavilion, Mount *Tai*, and *WuNu* Mountain. *Chui teng ren*, (blown candy), a title of a poem, was described but without explanation of what it was in English. Chinese idioms such as “people mountain, people sea” were inserted in poems. One of the most common Chinese grammatical patterns was the double adjective to express a greater degree of emphasis. Writing of *Li Xiaolong* (Bruce Lee), one student expressed that he was “handsome, handsome.” In several poems, this pattern was adapted as the major poetic device, reaffirming and expressing Chinese identity.

CONCLUSION

Based on student work and their final reflections of this activity, we can conclude that poetry writing has pedagogical benefits in this context and shows great potential as a research methodology, beyond the second language classroom. In conclusion, returning to the main research questions, this study shows that using poetry as a research methodology is a profoundly effective tool for exploring personal memories and generational information about national history and culture. As a second language teaching methodology, this type of creative writing establishes a unique space for personal and cultural identity negotiation as well as second language development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Eric Leuschner and Sharon Graham of Fort Hays State University and Dr. Donna White at Arkansas Tech University. Thank you for your support, encouragement and help. Also, my kindest regards and respect for the students in these classes who made this experience so meaningful.

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