
EXPLORING WRITING ASSESSMENT IN ANOTHER CULTURE: CHINA AND AMERICA

Speaker: Marie Jean Lederman, LaGuardia Community College, CUNY

This session's premise was that the values of a culture are revealed through its examination system or systems. As she discussed writing assessment in both ancient and contemporary China, Marie Jean Lederman invited participants to examine similar issues in their own testing programs.

Lederman began by describing China's ancient Imperial Examination System, which lasted some 1,300 years. This first attempt to create a merit system for government positions was the earliest writing assessment program in the world (Sui Dynasty, 589 A.D.-618 A.D.). Candidates wrote essays explicating the writings of Confucius, a body of material which set forth the moral and ethical basis of society. These examinations were given on three levels, culminating in the capital examination in the Forbidden City in Beijing for the top three hundred candidates.

Among the issues which examiners faced was reader reliability, and so the procedure of using two independent readers and a third in case of disagreement was developed. Other issues were the problem of the relationship between the fixed form of the examinations and the creativity of the examinees, retest policies, the control of cheating, and equity. These problems are reflected in literature widely separated in both time and space: the novel *The Scholars*, written by Ching-Tzu Wu around 1750 and John Hersey's *The Call*.

Lederman briefly traced the imperial examinations through 1905, when they were finally abolished in China. She then focused on the period immediately following the Cultural Revolution when the National Unified Entrance Examination for Institutions of Higher Education began (1977). The last years of the Cultural Revolution were a time of great educational ferment, centering on college admissions standards and entrance examinations. What types of assessments should be used? Who would be included and excluded? Who should be in the universities? This controversy was also reflected in the popular media, evidenced in the emotionally-charged Chinese film called *Breaking with Old Ideas* (1975).

The question was resolved in favor of the academically demanding university entrance examination which has become more stringent every year since 1977. It includes a section on Chinese language and literature--one half of which is an essay. Lederman distributed a Review Syllabus for the Chinese language and literature section, and participants noted similarities and differences between the demands of writing assessments in China and the United States. The discussion focused not only on criteria for writing but on what these criteria imply about the values in both cultures.◊