

“THE STONE FROM ANOTHER MOUNTAIN CAN HELP TO POLISH JADE”: IMITATION AS A CHINESE L1 COMPOSITION PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

In L1 writing instruction, imitation pedagogy is potentially practiced in different parts of the world, yet there has been very little communication among practitioners and researchers on this topic. In the study to be reported in this paper, we aimed to answer the question “How is imitation recommended as a writing pedagogy in a sample of books on Chinese L1 composition?” Discussions of how to use imitation as a writing pedagogy were extracted from a sample of 41 books on Chinese L1 composition to form a dataset of 68,700 Chinese characters. Qualitative content analysis was applied to the dataset in NVivo 12 using a data-driven approach and resulted in a coding structure. In the paper we focus on elaborating two dimensions of our coding structure that addressed the research question in a practical light: “Implementing the imitation pedagogy” and “Going beyond imitation to achieve innovation.” Our findings point to similarities between Chinese and Western practices in using imitation as a writing pedagogy, and highlight a distinction between imitation and plagiarism made in the dataset as well as a range of strategies recommended for going beyond imitation to achieve innovation. It is hoped that our paper would contribute to exchanges on L1 writing education between China and the rest of the world.

Keywords: imitation; composition books; writing pedagogy; L1 writing education; teaching Chinese composition

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1. INTRODUCTION

As may be true in any other culture, in Chinese culture, imitation (*mofang* 模仿) is traditionally valued as a critical means for learning to write. Sayings such as the following, each pointing to the value of imitating or learning from the more knowledgeable others, are familiar to the Chinese ear: “Learn 300 Tang poems by heart, you will be able to chant them even if you cannot write a poem by yourself” (“熟讀唐詩三百首，不會作詩也會吟”); “If you read over ten thousand volumes, you will write smoothly with magic” (“讀書破萬卷，下筆如有神”); and “Indigo blue is extracted from the indigo plant, but is bluer than the plant it comes from” (“青出於藍而勝於藍”). The line in the title of the present paper: “The stone from another mountain can help to polish jade” (“它山之石，可以攻玉”), also stresses upon the value of borrowing others’ strong points to better equip oneself. In this paper, we aim to demonstrate that imitation is richly conceptualized in contemporary Chinese L1 composition teaching. By showing how a sample of books on Chinese composition recommend imitation as a writing pedagogy, we hope to introduce the rich meanings of imitation pedagogy in Chinese composition instruction to writing educators outside China and thus to promote exchanges between different traditions of L1 writing education.

2. IMITATION IN WESTERN RHETORIC AND WRITING PEDAGOGY

Our study is not a historical study, nor a comparative study between China and the West. However, we find it necessary to first give a historical overview of the notion of imitation in the Western context below, drawing on primarily English academic literature that originated in the United States due to their accessibility to us (there may be relevant literature in other languages which we cannot access). We believe that in the broader context of imitation being a mainstay of the ancient rhetoric in the West and imitation pedagogies continuing to be used by teachers in contemporary classrooms in the U.S. and potentially other countries, and yet having largely fallen out of favor in the current English-medium discussions of writing education, sharing of Chinese experience through our study would be particularly valuable.

Suggesting that “imitation is an elusive term at best,” Farmer and Arrington (1993) offered a working definition of imitation in the realm of writing instruction: “imitation is the approximation, whether conscious or unconscious, of exemplary models, whether textual, behavioral, or human, for the expressed goal of improved student writing” (p. 13). Overall, the literature that features imitation in English L1 writing pedagogy seems mostly old (published sparsely between the 1970s and the 1990s) (e.g., Corbett, 1971; Farmer & Arrington, 1993; Flanigan, 1980; Kehl, 1986), although there is some more recent scholarly interest (e.g., Eisner & Vicinus, 2008a; Matthiesen, 2016; Vandenberg, 2011). Together, the old and more recent literature reveals insights along several lines, as elaborated below.

Imitating good models of orators and authors was a mainstay of the ancient rhetoric which dated “as far back as 3,000 B.C.” (Flanigan, 1980, p. 211). It was the very foundation of rhetorical instruction from Plato’s Greece to Quintilian’s Rome and it continued to be practiced throughout the Middle Ages (Corbett, 1971; Farmer & Arrington, 1993; Matthiesen, 2016; Swearingen, 1999; Vandenberg, 2011). From the late 18th century, while writing pedagogy began to be dominated by “rules of proper writing and instruction” (Geist, 2005, p. 171), “a common mimetic element” carried on in the 19th century European literature (Macksey, 1996, p. 1057).

In the 1970s–1980s there witnessed a resurgence of interest in the role of imitation in relation to invention in composition instruction in the United States. Discussions of when and how to use models and sharing by individual teachers in implementing imitation pedagogy fruitfully in their classes were found (e.g., D’Angelo, 1973; Flanigan, 1980; Kehl, 1986). D’Angelo (1973) pointed out that it was unfortunate that for some, imitation “connotes counterfeiting, tracing, and stereotyping,” when it can actually save fledgling writers some “fumblings” in the dark and that “creative imitation” precedes originality (p. 283). In line with the rising paradigm of the process approach at the time, it was also suggested that imitation not only involves the product, it is also about imitating the writing process (Flanigan, 1980) and even the identity of the original writer (Brooke, 1988).

In the 1980s–1990s the process movement that dominated the scene of U.S. writing education nevertheless did lead to an aversion to imitation pedagogy, which was often associated with the antecedent product approach (Raimes, 1991, p. 409). Yet at the same time, many compositionists maintained a conviction in the value of imitation pedagogy (Farmer & Arrington, 1993). Their justification for implementing an imitation pedagogy could vary. As Arrington (1996, p. 495) pointed out, “scholarly efforts to justify imitation for use in process and post-process classrooms ranged from the stylistic to the ‘social’ and intertextual,” with “some of these justifications” “made and grounded in a number of postmodernist thinkers,” including Bakhtin (1981). The latter scenario was exemplified by Minock’s (1995) postmodern pedagogy of imitation in her undergraduate writing class. She developed this pedagogy “in response to a dilemma posed by expressivist composition pedagogy,” where her students “could not ‘look into their hearts’ and write academic prose or genre-specific texts such as literary analyses, nor would their freewriting about ideas necessarily result in academic presentation” (p. 491). She reported:

I developed procedures that ensure that students read and respond in writing, at least a half dozen times, to certain *difficult* texts in academic and literary genres. In these responses, students interpret their negotiations within the social context of the group, without the usual school bias that these texts should be comprehended, explicated, abstracted, or quarried for the “main idea.” (p. 492)

This imitation pedagogy, which hinged upon students writing responses to authoritative texts and their being “encouraged to play” (Minock, 1995, p. 492) in appropriating diction, syntax and style for their own purposes, seemed a relatively advanced

form of imitation. But the example shows that imitation is a versatile pedagogy that can be designed in view of specific pedagogical contexts.

Into the 21st century, it seems imitation pedagogy continued to stay in the back of the mind of writing specialists. For example, Eisner and Vicinus (2008b) reported: at “a conference that placed plagiarism in dialogue with notions of originality and imitation,” “[m]any participants asked but did not answer the question, ‘Why has imitation fallen out of composition studies?’” (p. 3). Meanwhile, there is evidence that imitation has been alive and well in some classrooms, including creative writing classrooms in universities (Brinkman, 2010; Butler, 2002; Farrell, 2020; Pugh, 2008). In addition, it should not be forgotten that imitation is a component of genre pedagogies, which have been influential in different parts of the world, practiced by those following the Australian tradition in teaching school students (e.g., Derewianka & Jones 2012) and those following the ESP tradition in teaching university students (e.g., Cheng, 2018).

Much of the English academic literature on imitation pedagogy seems to have an American origin. Two reports from Denmark are exceptions. Geist (2005) reported on a case of using imitation in a university-level writing course in Denmark. The featured imitation-driven approach of writing instruction consisted of five steps: “The teacher chooses texts and prepares an analysis,” “The students analyze the texts,” “The students write a text,” “The students rewrite,” and “Varying and recombining different sets of features” (pp. 173-177). The five-step model was effective with university students, but Geist (2005) proposed that the method would work optimally in a high school setting. At another Danish university, drawing insights from Quintilian’s (1996) discussion of imitation, Matthiesen (2016) developed a student-driven imitation pedagogical model that consisted of five dimensions: a student’s fascination with a potential target text is the starting point; the student should then analyze the text to identify features worth imitating; this is followed by a critical reflection of the text’s strengths and weaknesses; the critical reflection is then taken further, with the assessment of the text possibly adjusted or transformed; and lastly, the student interacts with the text “by reusing, twisting, and building upon the subject of the chosen text” (p. 221). Overall, Matthiesen (2016) pointed out that the proposed pedagogy was “characterized by the student’s own choice of text, valuing reflexive process over mirroring, and strengthening rhetorical agency” (p. 208).

Beyond the literature focusing on imitation itself, the practice has been discussed in relation to plagiarism in several ways. Firstly, Chinese ESL/EFL students’ proclivity to step on the red line of plagiarism has been attributed to an emphasis upon imitation and memorization in the Confucian-heritage culture of learning (Pennycook, 1996; Sowden, 2005). However, it has been argued that this should not be interpreted as meaning that plagiarism is acceptable in Chinese society or there is any fixed link between Chinese culture and plagiarism (Li & Flowerdew, 2019; Liu, 2005; Ting, 2012). Secondly, it is acknowledged that novices often rely on imitation to find their voices as writers and it can be difficult to distinguish between imitation and plagiarism (often in the form of patchwriting) in this case (Li & Casanave, 2012;

Howard, 1995). Thirdly, from a postmodern perspective (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981), it has been suggested that “perhaps all writing partakes of this mix” of “combin[ing] forms of originality, imitation, and plagiarism” (Eisner & Vicinus, 2008b, p. 5; Kuipers, 2008).

Finally, it is worth noting that beyond writing education, scholarship in the field of assessment and feedback research has revealed that using exemplars can promote students’ academic performance and self-regulated learning (see To et al., 2021 for a systematic review). Analyzing and learning from exemplars of different qualities, as often practiced in pedagogical interventions aimed at boosting students’ performance in assessment, implies a practice of creative imitation.

3. IMITATION IN CHINESE WRITING EDUCATION

Comparable to the case in the West, imitation is without doubt a traditionally valued literacy practice in Chinese rhetoric and Chinese composition of all genres. Other than the traditional adages such as those quoted at the beginning of this paper, remarks from scholars and writers of different times that emphasize imitating and learning from previous works as a crucial means of learning and achieving innovation are numerous. The following quotations from scholars of classical times are illustrative:

Imitation is a learning method upheld by the people in the past. If you learn Han Yu’s [768-824] essays by heart, you would be able to write in his style; if you learn Su Shi’s [1037-1101] essays by heart, you would be able to write in his way. (Zhu Xi [1130-1200])

The style of an article often originated in classical times and it is a result of imitation by a later author. This is not a problem even to highly knowledgeable scholars. (Wu Zengqi [1852-1929])

And from scholars of recent times too:

A teaching text for Chinese study is actually a model text. From this model, students should learn to draw inferences, and develop skills in reading and writing. (Ye Shengtao [1894-1988])

The use of language is a skill and a habit. It can only develop through correct imitation and repeated practice. (Lü Shuxiang [1904-1998])

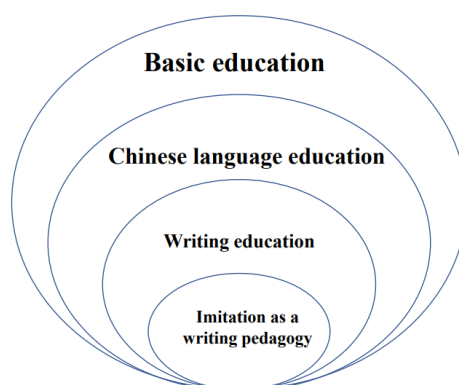
Abundant cases of imitation as a critical pathway to learning and creativity are recorded in Chinese classics. He Shaoji (1799-1873) (n.d.), a scholar in the Qing Dynasty, pointed to the following remark by Confucius (551 BC-479 BC):

The Master said, ‘I was not born with knowledge but, being fond of antiquity, I am quick to seek it.’ (*The Analects: Sayings of Confucius, Shu R 7:20*, trans. D. C. Lau)

He Shaoji (n.d.) then observed that Confucius did not just seek knowledge from one man in antiquity, but from numerous wise men’s thoughts; and “he entirely used his own knowledge to see through the generations of the ancient past, and while it appears as though he was following the past, he was in fact breaking new grounds.”

In the contemporary times, at the curriculum level, imitation as a writing pedagogy is embedded in the broader contexts of Chinese writing education, Chinese language education, and basic education (Years 1-12). Figure 1 depicts the layers of contexts that encompass the writing pedagogy of imitation.

Figure 1. Layers of contexts for imitation as a writing pedagogy



The encapsulating relationship described in Figure 1 suggests that what are described in the curriculum guides for the central commitments of the outer layers (i.e., writing education, Chinese language education, and basic education), would be embodied in the teaching and learning practices of imitation. The moral and ideological functions of basic education are described as follows:

Basic education curricula are the carrier of the Party's [Chinese Communist Party's] education policy and education thought; they stipulate the goals and content of education, embody the will of the state in the field of education, and play a crucial role in fostering virtue through education. (PRC MoE, 2017, p. 1)

The goal of “fostering virtue through education” (li de shu ren “立德树人”), a richly-conceptualized term widely used in the sector of education in China and noted above for basic education, has often been used to characterize the commitment of the writing education in Chinese schools, in particular in relation to the heavy-weight Chinese writing test in the high-stakes *gaokao* (College Entrance Examination) (e.g., Zhang, 2019).

For Chinese language education, *The curriculum guide for the Chinese subject: Compulsory education (Years 1-9)* (PRC MoE, 2011) speaks of its “multi-functional and foundational” role and its “irreplaceable advantage” in “facilitating the inheritance and promotion of the fine cultural tradition and revolutionary tradition of the Chinese nation”; “enhancing identification with the national culture”; and “strengthening national solidarity and creativity” (p. 1).

Reading and writing are the primary means through which the educational, moral, and ideological goals of basic education and Chinese language education are to be achieved. Reading-writing integration or learning from readings to benefit one's writing is a basic curriculum requirement. "Accumulating" (*jilei*) language materials and "reciting" (*beisong*) classic texts are keywords for study methods. For Years 1-9 or the compulsory education stage, the curriculum guide recommends 75 classical poems for recitation in Years 1-6 and 61 classical poems and short proses for recitation in Years 7-9 (PRC MoE, 2011, pp. 35-41). For the senior high (Years 10-12), the curriculum guide recommends 32 classical essays and 40 classical poems for recitation (PRC MoE, 2017, pp. 54-57). The emphasis upon recitation or memorisation of fine texts that have passed down the Chinese literary history implies that imitation, in the sense of learning from readings, including canons, is a crucial feature of the Chinese writing education. At the same time, it is clear that in this context, imitation implicates an expectation on creation. "Inquiry-based," "innovation," and "expressing one's true feelings in writing" are among the key notions upheld in the curriculum guides.

Writing has a significant weight in the Chinese school curricula. The curriculum requirement for writing in Years 7-9, for example, is as follows:

Write no less than 14 compositions each academic year; other kinds of writing practice no less than 10-thousand Chinese characters; able to complete a piece of writing of no less than 500 Chinese characters within 45 minutes. (PRC MoE, 2011, p. 17)

In the high-stakes *gaokao*, which takes place at the end of Year 12, the Chinese composition (*zuowen*) (typically a composition of no less than 800 words) constitutes 60 of the total 150 marks in the Chinese subject test papers in most provinces and regions of the country.

Imitation as a writing pedagogy is commonly used by frontline teachers. Han (2005, p. 52) describes a traditional pattern of the teaching procedure in the writing classrooms of Chinese schools:

Assigning a topic to the students →
 Writing under the guidance of the teacher →
 Correcting the compositions →
 Commenting on the compositions by the teacher.

For such composition exercises, "[t]he students were supposed to imitate the texts from their textbooks" (Han, 2005, p. 52). This traditional pattern of writing pedagogy continues to be common in the present-day classrooms even though one can expect diversity, depending on the resource, the study level of the students, and the readiness of the teacher.

There exists a rich body of literature of schoolteachers' reports on their creative use of imitation in teaching writing, as a search in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) (<https://www.cnki.net/>), a mega-database of Chinese academic literature (of primarily academic journals), would reveal. If schoolteachers'

reports provide a valuable literature source for looking into the classroom practices of imitation as a writing pedagogy, what may be recommended for the pedagogy in composition books is also worth exploring. China has a huge market of composition books, which may be unsurprising, considering the weight of writing in the school curriculum and high-stakes examinations. These books provide opportunities for understanding aspects of writing education in China.

On the issue of imitation in Chinese writing, on the research front, based on evidence from classical Chinese texts, Kirkpatrick and Xu (2012) observed: criticism of “slavishly imitating the ancients” (p. 32) was made by Wang Chong (27-100) in *Lun Heng* [The Disquisitions] in the Han Dynasty; Liu Xie (465-520) in *Wen Xin Diao Long* [The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons], a book of literary criticism, emphasized the importance of imitating the terse style of Confucian classics; while Chen Kui (1128-1203) in *Wen Ze* [The Rules of Writing] again warned against slavish mimicking of classics. Kirkpatrick and Xu (2012) also showed that in traditional Chinese schools or academies (called *Shuyuan*), an intensive reading approach was adopted and students were expected to imitate the models of the classics, but again slavish imitating was frowned upon. From an examination of a modest sample of composition books published in China in the 1980s, Kirkpatrick and Xu (2012) further found that both “imitating” and “being creative” are endorsed in these books (p. 198). We believe a more close-up examination of such books published over time in the country should shed additional light on imitation as a writing pedagogy in contemporary China.

4. METHODS

Methodologically our study extends a previous line of research that looked into Chinese L1 composition textbooks to understand advocated writing pedagogies. Other than Kirkpatrick and Xu’s (2012) study which is mentioned above, Kirkpatrick (2002) studied a collection of Chinese textbooks and handbooks on rhetoric and writing to demonstrate that these books teach a diverse range of modes of argument for argumentative writing; Liu (2005) consulted six Chinese composition textbooks (half with mainland Chinese authors and the other half with Taiwanese authors) to see what was said about plagiarism and found they all emphasized that copied material needs to be credited. Compared with these previous studies, our dataset is a result of selection from a much larger pool of books on teaching composition.

Our study was guided by the question “How is imitation recommended as a writing pedagogy in a sample of books on Chinese L1 composition?” To address the question, the first step we took following the ethical approval from the first author’s institution was to create a collection of books (published in mainland China) that contain discussions of imitation (*mofang* 模仿) or imitative writing (*fangxie* 仿寫). We did online searching in the Libraries of the home institution of one of us, combining the search terms “primary school,” “junior high,” “senior high,” and “university” with “composition.” Of the 167 titles checked, 24 titles published from the 1980s to the

early 2010s were found to contain passages or sections on imitation or imitative writing. To search for more recent books not available in the Libraries, we conducted a search in March 2020 on a popular Chinese online bookselling platform which hosts online bookstores, with similar sets of search terms used in the initial rounds of searching but with the terms fine-tuned in further attempts. Based on the book titles and the very brief introductory information occasionally available, 50 titles were chosen and purchased. These more recent titles, published from around the mid-2010s, were checked and 17 titles were found to contain relevant information.

We thus had a total of 41 Chinese composition books (hard copies), including a few books on learning the Chinese language, in which imitation/imitative writing was discussed. The authors of these books are experienced writing educators; the primary audience of these books are teachers, but students are possible readers too. Of the 41 titles, 7 (17.1%) were published in the 1980s, 12 (29.2%) in the 1990s, 7 (17.1%) in the 2000s, and 15 (36.6%) in the 2010s. In terms of the level of study addressed, 2 (4.9%) of the 41 titles target primary school teaching, 13 (31.7%) target junior secondary teaching, 10 (24.4%) are for senior secondary school teaching, 6 (14.6%) target both primary and secondary school teaching, and the rest 10 (24.4%) are for university teaching. The Appendix shows the bibliographic information of the 41 titles in the five categories.

One question here is whether we could claim “representativeness” for the 41 composition books. Kirkpatrick (2002) rightly observed that there were too many Chinese books on composition which would make it hard to choose in a textbook-based study of Chinese composition pedagogies; he then chose “a representative few” to examine for his purpose (p. 247). In our case, although we felt we do not have a solid basis to claim “representativeness,” we believe that our sample, covering books published over time and targeting readers teaching or learning at different levels of study, is likely to lead to findings that have some generalizability in the context of Chinese composition books.

From the 41 books, the chunks discussing imitation/imitative writing, ranging from a short passage to several pages, were identified, typed up and saved, with the book titles used as the filenames. This collection of texts, totaling 68,700 Chinese characters, became the dataset for the present study (but not for any other purpose or dissemination). Table 1 presents a profile of the 41 books, both by target readership and with the number of Chinese characters on imitation extracted from each book indicated.

Table 1. A profile of the 41 books: Target readership and number of Chinese characters on imitation

Target readership	Books	No. of Chinese characters in each book	Sum
Primary school teaching	Cui (2014)	4,323	7,965 (11.6%)
	Wu (2019)	3,642	
Junior secondary school teaching	Editorial Office of Shanghai Education (1988)	245	16,512 (24%)
	Cheng (1987)	192	
	Dai (1994)	449	
	Dai (2018)	2,571	
	Hu, Zhang, Xu & Zhang (1985)	1,097	
	Li (2008)	4,444	
	Li (1997)	708	
	Wang (2016)	415	
	Wang & Li (2015)	1,274	
	Wang (1983)	873	
	Yao (1996)	30	
	Yu (2015)	4,095	
Senior secondary school teaching	Zhang (1993)	119	8,335 (12.1%)
	Beijing Haidian Teachers Training College (1986)	124	
	Deng (2018)	65	
	Guo (2000)	465	
	Huai & Zhao (1999)	398	
	Lü (1998)	399	
	Xiang (1997)	398	
	Xiong (2017)	4,095	
	Yang & Zhao (2018)	1,807	
	Yu (1988)	427	
Primary and secondary school teaching	Zheng, Wu, Liu, Ru & Che (1990)	157	30,135 (43.9%)
	Fu (2018)	12,175	
	He (2019)	10,579	
	Li (2018)	893	
	Liu (2017)	69	
	Zhang (2017)	2,937	
University teaching	Zheng (2018)	3,482	5,753 (8.4%)
	Luo (2006)	259	
	Mao (1991)	277	
	Su, Qin & He (1988)	29	
	Wang & Li (2008)	2,212	
	Wu (2002)	117	
	Ye (2005)	165	
	Zhang (1991)	1,342	
	Zhang & Chen (1997)	38	
	Zhang (1997)	1,071	
Zhu (2007)	243		
Total		68,700	68,700 (100%)

The dataset of the 41 separately named texts was then imported into QSR International's NVivo12 for analysis. As our research question required looking for patterns in the body of textual data, we adopted a form of qualitative content analysis, i.e., content categories analysis (Lankshear & Knobel 2004, p. 334). It was used in a data-driven approach in NVivo, which means that as we went through the texts in the dataset, we grouped segments of text (a sentence, several sentences or a passage) on the same topic (e.g., "using peers' writings as model texts") or having the same meaning (e.g., "imitation is not the purpose but the first step"). A three-level hierarchical structure of categories and subcategories took shape in the coding process. In this structure, the lowest, first-level codes are always key phrases or key short sentences extracted from a text, the second-level codes are the topics or meanings exemplified above, and the third-level codes are broader categories or dimensions of meanings. This process of developing a coding structure was a two-stage process: in the first stage of the coding, two of us split the work but maintained communication in the coding of separate parts of the data; then in the second stage, the coding work was merged and checked by the first author, who repeatedly refined and adjusted the codes, and eventually constructed a provisional three-level coding structure.

Given the profile of our dataset as shown in Table 1, we did wonder whether our findings suggest differences across the decades and/or across the levels of study that the books targeted. But our analysis did not reveal clear qualitative differences along the two axes. We believe the consistency along both the time axis and the study level axis indicates that imitation is considered a valuable part of the pedagogical tradition in Chinese L1 writing education for learners at different stages of their study. At the same time, it can be seen from Table 1 that the smallest proportion of the dataset came from a collection of 10 books on university writing instruction, at 5,753 characters (8.4% of the total size of the dataset). We would like to assume this implies that in the Chinese context, it is in the writing education in the pre-tertiary stages that imitation is more likely to be emphasized as a valuable teaching and learning strategy. In the context of the present study, it would mean that a bigger part of the evidence that can be cited for illustrating our findings (as we do in the findings section below) addresses pre-tertiary teaching and learning.

To test the applicability of the coding structure in a wider context, we searched on a combination of "imitation" and "writing instruction" in the CNKI (<https://www.cnki.net/>). From about 280 hits, we picked and went through 20 articles published in the 2010s. These 20 articles were all written by front-line teachers sharing their experience of embedding imitative writing into their writing instruction, predominantly at the primary, junior secondary, or senior secondary level and occasionally at the university level. We did not analyze this additional collection of papers as our data. However, going through this collection of journal papers was valuable in two ways: firstly, it confirmed to us the importance of imitation pedagogy in contemporary Chinese writing education; and secondly, it validated our coding structure, in the sense that there was sufficient evidence from the additional literature to justify our codes, even though this separate literature (larger in size and more

detailed in content than our modest dataset) potentially warrants a more complicated coding structure which can be explored in future research.

The three-level coding structure that we developed from a data-driven process described above consists of three dimensions (the third-level codes), with each dimension subsuming two sub-categories (the second-level codes). The first dimension is “The importance of imitation in learning to write,” subsuming “The nature of imitation and its position in learning” and “Imitation facilitating a reading-writing connection.” Given that the evidence in our dataset for this first dimension is primarily brief theoretical discussion and that the focus of our study is on pedagogy, in the findings section below, we will focus on elaborating the second and the third dimensions, which address our research question in a practical light. These two dimensions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Imitation as a Chinese L1 composition pedagogy in 41 books: Two practical dimensions

Implementing the imitation pedagogy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selecting and presenting model texts • Scope and types of imitation
Going beyond imitation to achieve innovation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discouraging mechanical imitation and warning against plagiarism • Innovation and how to achieve it

In the findings section below, we will aim to elaborate on the two dimensions summarized in Table 2 by citing evidence from our dataset, to address our research question of how imitation pedagogy is recommended in our sample of Chinese L1 composition books.

5. FINDINGS

In this section, the codes shown in Table 2 will serve as the headings. All extracts to be presented in the section were translated from Chinese into English by us; due to space constraint, the Chinese version would not be included (but a vivid Chinese idiom or saying occasionally follows its literal English translation). All the references cited in this section are among the 41 books listed in the Appendix, with the only exception being a reference to Ye (1961/1980) for explaining a term.

5.1 *Implementing the imitation pedagogy*

5.1.1 *Selecting and presenting model texts*

In our collection of composition books, imitation is defined as a method that involves modeling on a prior text (*fanwen*), that is commonly used when one learns to write,

and that is effective and can speed up such learning (Dai, 2018; Guo, 2000; He, 2019; Li, 1997; Li, 2018; Wang, 2016; Wu, 2019; Ye, 2005).

The overall procedure of implementing imitation is summarized as “Selecting the target model text—Studying it repeatedly and reflecting upon its writing—Doing imitation exercise” (Li, 2008, p. 146). Deciding what texts to model after is considered the first step in imitation. The figurative idiom “drawing a gourd after a calabash” (“依葫蘆畫瓢”) is quoted in this context (Cui, 2014; Fu, 2018; He, 2019; Li, 2008), with one book figuratively referring to the process of selecting a model text as “selecting a calabash” (Li, 2008).

A variety of sources are recommended in our collection of books as providing model texts: classics, textbook texts, peers’ writings, sample texts written by teachers (the so-called *xiashuiwen* “下水文”), or a combination of these (Dai, 2018; Fu, 2018; He, 2019; Li, 2008; Wu, 2019; Yu, 2015; Zhang, 1997; Zheng, 2018), as to be elaborated below.

A book for university writing emphasizes starting by modeling after well-known texts, and suggests only getting to lesser texts later with a discernment:

In *Canglang Poetry Talks*, speaking of the significance of the selection of model texts, Yan Yu [around 1195-around 1245] said: “One should be on the right track from the beginning, and one should have a high aspiration” and “make efforts from higher to lower levels.” (Zhang, 1997, p. 43)

A book for junior secondary students (Li, 2008) both emphasizes imitating famous texts that have been passed down for generations and, somewhat surprisingly, talked negatively about published collections of exemplary writings by peers (such collections having been a regular feature in the market of writing books in China). It says that if one does not want to be led astray, the latter can only be “flipped through” instead of being used as model texts, while the former, time-tested good writings have “endless treasure” and are “the true canon” to learn from (Li, 2008, p. 148). (But see below for peers’/classmates’ writings being recommended as model texts.)

At primary and secondary levels, it is textbook texts that are commonly recommended as the No. 1 target for modeling. According to Wu (2019), in preparing for imitation pedagogy using textbook texts, it is a good idea for teachers to work out an overall plan for imitative writing ahead of time. He shared:

At the beginning of the semester, we went through the whole textbook with the teacher of the Experiment Class, categorized and ordered what will be modeled after, made an overall plan of the semester’s “sketching in class,” and set a training procedure. (p. 115)

While one author discouraged reliance on published exemplary texts written by students, as noted above (Li, 2008), a good number of books advocated using peers’ writings as models. Based on their own experience of teaching, the authors of a few books observed that students enjoyed listening to and commenting on classmates’ exemplary texts, which could facilitate a deep understanding of such texts and effective imitation (He, 2019; Wu, 2019; Yu, 2015; Zheng, 2018).

Other than acclaimed classic texts, textbook texts, and peers' writings, it is recommended that teachers themselves write *xiashuiwen* (“下水文”) to serve as model texts (He, 2019). *Xiashui*, literally meaning “getting into the water” (as in swimming), was a metaphorical expression famously coined by author and educator Ye Shengtao (1894-1988) in proposing that teachers “write often, or write on the same topics as the students or on other topics, so that they can help the students more effectively and speed up the students' progress” (Ye, 1980 [1961], p. 488).

Finally, as the opposite of exemplary texts, “negative samples” can also be used (He, 2019). The purpose here is for students to, firstly, critique such samples and revise them; then “they move on to revise their own writings and peers' writings, progressively advancing their revision and continuously achieving new targets” (He, 2019, p. 77).

Related to the question of what sample texts to select is when to present them to the students. Cui (2014) spoke of how to present different types of model texts at different points of time (pp. 66-67):

- A model text can be shown before writing, if the writing topic is unspecific, to enlighten the students on possibilities.
- Passages from a model text can be shared during students' writing when they run into difficulty in dealing with a challenging topic.
- A model text composed by the teacher with the problems in students' writings in mind can be presented during the comment and feedback session.

Overall, according to Cui (2014, p. 67), as the students' writing abilities improve, the timing of sharing a model text can be postponed, to encourage students' initiation and creation.

He (2019) likewise pointed out that the intervention of presenting model texts can occur before, during, or after the students' writing practice. The same author also proposed that teachers could present model texts creatively, including by employing multimedia means. Additional points on the purposeful use of model texts were also covered in our collection: to imitate or benefit from many texts to gradually form one's own style (He, 2019; Li, 2008; Zhang, 2017), to select model texts that one enjoys reading (Li, 2008; Zhang, 1991), and to make connections between the model texts and one's own life experience to inspire an interest in writing (Li, 1997).

5.1.2 *Scope and types of imitation*

For imitative writing instruction using textbooks texts, teachers are suggested to set modest targets and achieve them through frequent “mini-writing” (Dai, 2018; Fu, 2018; Wang, 2016). With Year 7 students in mind, Wang (2016) spoke of the steps to be taken (see also Li, 2008, on the overall procedure of implementing imitation, noted earlier), and then emphasized that the target for imitation should be “specific and small”:

“Intensively read the model text and write through imitation” is a writing instruction approach suitable for the first semester of Year 7. The basic procedure is as follows:

Clarify the teaching objectives→Select the model text→Study its characteristics→Distill focal writing methods→Write by imitation. Here the teaching objectives refer to the ability targets to achieve in a particular writing class. The target should be specific and small; the amount of imitation should be manageable, taking the form of mini-writing. Imitation exercise can become a frequent class exercise. (p. 018)

The quote above also indicates that analyzing the features of the model text and identifying the “focal writing methods” that students can imitate is a necessary step to take. This is about deciding what to imitate.

On “what to imitate,” our collection of books offers a range of ideas, suggesting that it is through accumulating different kinds of learning from reading and engaging in various forms of imitation that students will benefit in the long run (Dai, 2018; Hu et al., 1985; Li, 1997). With a chosen model text, it is pointed out that imitation does not need to be all-encompassing. If one tries to cover all facets, the result could be “drawing a tiger into a dog” (“畫虎不成反類犬”) (Li, 1997, p. 306). Focusing on one characteristic part of a model text, guiding students’ understanding of its structure and rhetoric, and then assigning an imitation task would also be productive, as Cui (2014) illustrated:

The text *The pearl of the east* follows a structure of preview—detail—summary, and each paragraph in the body part begins with a topic sentence. In order to help the students apply that to their own writing, I have assigned the task of writing a short essay using the same text structure or writing a paragraph using the same paragraph structure. (p. 107)

Depending on the genre and the distinguishing features of a model text, an imitation exercise can focus on the syntax (Yu, 1988); modes of expression such as description, exposition and discussion (Guo, 2000; Lü, 1998); linguistic features of genres, such as using analogies in scenery description and describing actions in narratives (Wang, 2016); logic in argumentation (Yang & Zhao, 2018); expression of feelings (Zhang, 1997); structure (Guo, 2000; Zheng et al., 1990); techniques of expression such as simile, personification, and symbolism (Li, 2018); or the overall theme and design (Guo, 2000; Li, 2008; Yu, 1988).

Several authors emphasized text-level holistic grasp as a general principle in imitation (Dai, 2018; Wang & Li, 2008). When the imitation of an entire text, especially in terms of the form or rhetorical style, is involved, this has been characterized as “putting new wine into an old bottle” (Li, 2008; Yang & Zhao, 2018).

Several books talk about different types of imitation at a more theoretical level (Fu, 2018; He, 2019; Li, 2008). For example, Li (2008) spoke of five types of imitation in an ascending order of challenge. The first is to imitate the syntax (*moju* “模句”), which suits beginners well. The second is to imitate the writing and structure of the whole text (*mopian* “模篇”), which echoes the holistic grasp noted above. The third is to imitate the “form” (*moxing* “模形”), including the register, language style, and figurative speech. The fourth is to imitate the theme (*moyi* “模意”). And the fifth is to imitate the “spirit” (*moyun* “模韻”). The five represent a developmental process that progresses from imitation to innovation (Li, 2008, pp. 149-150).

5.2 Going beyond imitation to achieve innovation

5.2.1 Discouraging mechanical imitation and warning against plagiarism

The books in our collection draw a firm line between imitative writing as an effective way of learning to write, and a text produced from mechanical, rigid imitation. Several books pointed to a common problem: that teachers often stop at asking students to “imitate” without providing additional guidance, so that students can only imitate the “form” but cannot get the “spirit” (Cui, 2014; Li, 2008; Wang & Li, 2015). A consequence may be mechanical imitation, which is strongly and consistently criticized in our collection of books published over time (e.g., Hu et al., 1985; Editorial Office of Shanghai Education, 1988; Dai, 1994; Guo, 2000; Li, 2008; Wang & Li, 2015; Fu, 2018). Two figurative comments on mechanical imitation are as follows:

The result of learning from others should not make one feel that “although the cap and the coat are different, the body is the same”. (Dai, 1994, p. 80)

If you imitate mechanically, mix others’ sentences with your own words, cook them together, the result would be a ridiculous product: it does not look like yours, nor others. (Li, 2008, p. 151)

What the authors in our collection of books mean by *mofang* (模仿 imitation) is basically *jiejian* (借鉴 borrowing, learning from). *Jiejian* is distinguished not only from mechanical imitation and copying, but also from creation—for *jiejian* is still some distance away from the creation proper (Zhang, 1991). Imitation in the sense of *jiejian* can be of different kinds, as illustrated earlier; but it should not involve the replication of content, for the latter is plagiarism (Cui, 2014; Li, 1997; Wang, 1983; Wang & Li, 2008).

A good number of authors explicitly stated that imitation is not plagiarism, which should not be allowed, and imitation should be clearly distinguished from plagiarism (Hu et al., 1985; Guo, 2000; Li, 1997; Li, 2008; Wang, 1983; Wang & Li, 2008; Yu, 1988). Cui (2014) further pointed out that the replication of content, which becomes *de facto* plagiarism, often involves the replication of “feelings,” which in turn means that the writing becomes “fake, big and empty.” She advised against copying a particular feeling/emotion from a model text but recommended learning the techniques, such as the rhetorical strategies and structural forms, used for successful emotional expression.

“A bad trend” of some students practicing mechanical imitation of model texts and “even copying whole paragraphs” was discussed as early as the mid-1980s by Hu et al. (1985, p. 236). In more recent years, partly as a result of students developing coping strategies for high-stakes examinations (such as *gaokao* or the College Entrance Examination), imitative writing has sometimes led to wide-spread similarity among student texts on a certain topic, with the students following certain rhetorical patterns and templates, and even memorizing model texts (Cui, 2014; Xiong, 2017).

The authors also warned against a form of intentional plagiarism, i.e., to take over someone else's text and just do some modification: "changing the expression somewhat without changing the views; revising the sentences while keeping the same content" (Fu, 2018, p. 196). A strategy for coping with plagiarism check at Chinese universities, the practice has migrated into school students' writing to some extent, according to Fu (2018). "A text's integrity counts as much as a person's integrity," Fu emphasized (p. 196).

5.2.2 Innovation and how to achieve it

It is unanimously stated or implied in our collection of books that imitation is only the first step in learning to write. Model texts are figuratively described as "a crutch" (Cui, 2014, p. 67) or "baby walkers" (Zhang, 2017, p. 92), implying that "one should leave them eventually and jump and run" (Zhang, 2017, p. 92).

Xiong (1997), in a book on senior high school writing, pointed out that the term *chuangzuo* (創作, literally "to create and compose"; to write) essentially means "creation led by one's own meaning, rather than imitation." This is similar to Lü (1998, p. 6) saying that blindly following others' writings without innovation is "against the proper way of writing" ("有悖於為文之道"). Wang and Li (2008, p. 12) referred to the human nature of favoring novelty to explain why writing with creation should be the norm. He (2019) explained what is wrong with "mere imitation" from the theoretical perspective of writing as a socially situated practice:

As a way of language use, writing takes place in a structure constituted by the writing agent, language, and the writing context. Mere imitation focuses on the linguistic form but discards other elements in the language use activity. The organic nature, the integrity and the process of writing are ignored, but only the written product is attended to. (p. 80)

Writing with innovation is recommended for all stages of learning: primary (Fu, 2018), junior secondary (Hu et al., 1985; Li, 2008), senior secondary (Lü, 1998; Yu, 1988), and university (Zhang, 1997; Zhang & Chen, 1997; Zhu, 2007).

One needs to do the following in order to avoid mechanical imitation and move beyond imitation to achieve innovation and originality, according to our collection of books. The first is to learn from different authors and imitate many texts (Cui, 2014; He, 2019; Li, 2008; Wu, 2019; Zhang, 2017). Wu (2019) pointed out that this would promote independent thinking:

In presenting texts for study, teachers can give several texts, so that students will see that writers' descriptions of one phenomenon (such as the scenery of autumn) can be immensely divergent, for every writer has their own ways of observing the world, and their own style and language. This way, students' independent thinking can be fostered. (p. 216)

Cui (2014) emphasized that the multiple model texts provided should have some commonality:

At least two texts are needed and they should have something in common—the same structural design, similar language style, or similar descriptive approach. The similarity is in the form, while the content varies. Thus the texts demonstrate “how to write” in a concise and straightforward manner. (p. 27)

The second is to engage in repeated and sustained practice (Cui, 2014; Li, 2008; Su et al., 1988; Wu, 2019), as conveyed by a familiar Chinese saying: “Do not stop practicing the boxing, and do not stop practicing the tunes” (“拳不離手，曲不離口”). One example of a teacher using repeated practice informed by imitation as a teaching strategy in a Year 3 primary writing class was provided by Wu (2019):

For instance, when Ms Lin P. was teaching the lesson on *Grandpa*, she first let the students read aloud and act out to deepen their understanding of relevant paragraphs, to feel how the author conveys a central idea through description of the appearance and manner. Then she arranged four “sketching” tasks with increasing difficulty levels: first, write a sketch (of oneself or someone else) by looking at a photo; second, observe each other with someone face to face and write a sketch of the person (the name not included and the classmates to be invited to guess the identity of the person); third, write a sketch of a family member based on impression; fourth, write a sketch of a classmate in ten years’ time based on imagination. At the end of each exercise, she asked the students to refer to *Grandpa* in the feedback session. (p. 115)

It can be seen from the example above that “repeated practice” does not mean drilling or rote learning but involves the performance of a sequence of related writing tasks which vary in the design of the rhetorical context.

Third, to move beyond imitation to achieve innovation and originality, it was also suggested that we need to cultivate critical thinking, to discern both the strengths and the potential weaknesses of a model text and then decide what to absorb from it and what not to (Zhang, 1991; Zhang, 1997), and to assess the differences between a range of texts (Fu, 2018). On the latter, Fu (2018, p. 198) gave an example of a Year 6 textbook containing four texts of different genres (novel, narration, remembrance, and historical account) written by four authors on writer and literary critic Lu Xun (1881-1936), and observed that the texts are different in focus, details, and the core values expressed.

Fourth, it is advised that to achieve innovation, it is essential that we accumulate materials from our life experience, aim to express true feelings by drawing upon our own materials while learning from others’ texts, and gradually form our own style (Li, 1997; Xiong, 2017; Zhang & Chen, 1997). This point is figuratively made by Li (1997) as follows:

It is like bees making the honey of lychee: fixing on collecting the pollen of the flower of lychee, and gathering pollen from other flowers at the same time, to produce the sweetest honey: a piece of writing that has both the characteristics of the model text and its own novelty, and that is even better than the model text in some ways. (p. 307)

Fifth, stepwise guidance by the teacher is needed, to achieve a state of “my hand writing my heart” (freely expressing one’s true feelings), Fu (2018) suggested, with an example of procedural instruction provided:

In teaching the text *Hong Kong, a shining pearl*, a teacher distilled a sequential structure of long shot—medium-range shot—close-up shot for the fourth paragraph. The students then watched a video of an animals' show in Disneyland, and practiced writing through the three lenses. Following feedback, students were asked to choose a particular scene in the video to describe. Then students set on a scene or location in life and adopted an approach of their choice to put to words the sight, sounds and feelings. (p. 152)

Finally, the notion of “imaginary restoration writing” proposed by Fu (2018) as a form of imitation is worth noting. Such imitation likewise aims to achieve innovation, by going through three stages: to restore the original author’s writing process, to critically assess it, to formulate one’s own views, and then to express oneself (pp. 197-199).

Good imitation itself embodies creativity and innovation (Wang, 1983; Wang & Li, 2008); neither is a developmental sequence of “imitation—change—innovation—expressing from the heart” linear (Fu, 2018, pp. 81-82). In a nutshell, “writing instruction is a complicated, dynamic and organic process which requires a teacher’s careful guidance and exploration,” as Fu (2018, p. 82) put it.

6. DISCUSSION

In the above we presented evidence from a collection of books on Chinese L1 composition to answer the question “How is imitation recommended as a writing pedagogy in a sample of books on Chinese L1 composition?” Relevant passages on imitation/imitative writing drawn from 41 books formed a dataset which was coded by a data-driven approach. In presenting our findings, we focused on two dimensions in our coding structure that addressed our question in a practical light: implementing the imitation pedagogy, and going beyond imitation to achieve innovation, with both elaborated by two sub-strands of meaning. Overall, it can be seen that imitation as a writing pedagogy is richly conceptualized in the Chinese context. In the following, we will discuss our findings, firstly, by highlighting similarities between Chinese and Western practices in using imitation as a writing pedagogy; secondly, by pointing to a distinction between imitation and plagiarism emphasized in our dataset; and thirdly, by examining the strategies recommended in our dataset for going beyond imitation to achieve innovation.

6.1 *Similarities between Chinese and Western practices in using imitation as a writing pedagogy*

While the English research literature (mainly with an American origin) is primarily concerned with the tertiary context, the Chinese discussions of imitation pedagogy in our dataset tipped over to pre-tertiary contexts. Yet similarities between Chinese and Western practices in using imitation as a writing pedagogy can be found. Like Chinese teachers talking about drawing upon a variety of texts as models for imitation, in the American context it has been proposed that “models should be congenial

to students” (Kehl, 1986, p. 287) and exemplary essays written by students’ peers are believed to provide enlightening models (Roberts, 1999). Butler (2002, p. 25), a writing teacher, reported how Roberts’ (1999) classic book, *Writing about literature*, in its 9th edition by then, helped him learn to write as a student, as follows: it “gave me the freedom to develop ideas by offering a form for me to imitate, a model from which to structure my own essays.” In addition, just as our collection of books value the modeling effect of the texts written by teachers themselves (the so-called *xiashuiwen*, a term coined by Ye [1961/1980]) for certain teaching purposes, there is also evidence from English writing classrooms that using teacher-authored texts was effective in imitation pedagogy (Farrell, 2020).

Following the selection of a model text, careful analysis of the model and deciding upon a manageable target that focused on imitating certain aspects of the model text (as opposed to adopting an all-encompassing approach) is emphasized in our collection books on Chinese composition. This point is also made in the English literature (Brinkman, 2010; Geist, 2005; Matthiesen, 2016). In a very early illustration of how creative imitation can work in a college composition class, D’Angelo (1973) reported that he chose Irwin Shaw’s short story *The eighty yard run* and did a fine analysis of the introductory paragraph with his class at stylistic, structural, syntactic, and lexico-grammatical levels. Specific instruction reflecting the analysis should be given to the students for their subsequent imitation task, D’Angelo recommended. A version of specific instruction he suggested, as in giving an assignment, was as follows:

Write a paragraph based on the Shaw model in which you depict a subject in motion. You may do either a loose imitation or a close imitation of the model. Use cumulative sentences, with participle phrases and absolute constructions being the predominant kind of free modifiers. Use active participles, manner adverbs, and active verbs. In your choice of diction, try to choose words that appeal to the senses. Be aware of the rhetorical situation, and if it is at all possible, draw upon your own experiences for the content. (p. 290)

The stepwise guidance by the teacher, the scope and types of imitation, encouragement of drawing upon one’s own experiences for the content, and the overall aim of working towards innovation, as illustrated by D’Angelo’s class case above located in an American university, by Geist’s (2005) five-step model of using imitation as a writing pedagogy at a Danish university, and by Matthiesen’s (2016) five-dimension model of student-driven imitation pedagogy at another Danish university, are all echoed in our findings.

In Minock’s (1995) postmodern pedagogy of imitation at an American university composition class, designed on inspirations from postmodern thinkers’ insights of the dialogic nature of writing (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981), undergraduate university students “immersed” themselves in reading challenging texts and writing responses repeatedly “in academic and literary genres” (p. 492). The aim was for the learners to create a dialogic relationship with the target texts, and in the process, to absorb language for their own rhetorical purposes and to nurture competence in academic discourse. Although this is somewhat different from the idea of creating new texts by

modeling on other texts, as was the focus of the imitation pedagogy discussed in the Chinese L1 composition books surveyed in our study, Minock's (1995) example has echoes in our dataset: that imitation pedagogy can be flexibly used depending on the target students, and that learners are encouraged to engage with the source texts in multiple ways including by composing in different genres, and to absorb elements for their own rhetorical purposes.

As noted earlier in this paper, our data analysis did not reveal visible differences in the discussion of imitation pedagogy for writing instruction at different levels of study in terms of the overall principles, although there may be a greater emphasis on more challenging tasks at more advanced levels. The convergence on the productivity of imitation pedagogy for learners across the years of study in our dataset also echoes Geist's (2005) suggestion that his five-step model, which worked well in a university context, would work even better with high school students.

6.2 *Imitation versus plagiarism*

Existing literature reveals complex relationship between imitation and plagiarism (e.g., Eisner & Vicinus, 2008b; Howard, 1995). English-medium literature seems to suggest sometimes that copying from a prior text is acceptable in China for school and university students (Sapp, 2002; Sowden, 2005), an assumption which may be commonly held nowadays by teachers of Chinese ESL students in dealing with the latter's transgressive intertextual practices at Anglo-American universities. The assumption, which in our view mistook the prevalence of a problem in some quarters of the Chinese society for its general acceptance, is misguided in view of the evidence generated in our study. Our study shows that Chinese composition specialists were firm on distinguishing between imitation and plagiarism. In their definition, imitation means *jiejian* (borrowing, learning from a model text), which implies creativity rather than copying.

Nevertheless, the book authors in our dataset did express concerns over plagiarism, which, from their perspective, has often occurred among both school and university students, with a problematic trend among the latter having had a negative impact on the practices of the former. It seems true that in average Chinese secondary schools, there is a chance for an overwhelming concern over getting high marks in the high-stakes exams such as *gaokao* to dominate, leaving limited space for teachers and students to benefit from the process of moving from imitative writing to innovation. Memorizing useful passages and re-using them in one's writing has thus become a shortcut for school students sometimes, often with the encouragement of their teachers (Wang, 2012). In this way, the students may stop at imitating the "form" but did not imitate the "spirit" of the model texts, as the authors in our dataset put it. When the students bring their high school habit of re-using memorized, or ready-made chunks of texts found on the Internet into their university assignment writing, they can be charged with plagiarism when their texts are screened by automated plagiarism checks (Chen, 2019). To tackle the problem, we believe

explicit and specific instruction on what is plagiarism in both schools and universities would be necessary (Li & Flowerdew, 2019). At present, such education for students and related training for teachers is far from adequate in China, which has undesirable implications for Chinese students' overseas study experience in English-medium universities.

By explicit and specific instruction on plagiarism, we mean that beyond the conceptualization of plagiarism in terms of large-scale copying, as has traditionally been the case in the Chinese context, the students should be helped to recognize plagiarism (and its opposite, proper source use) at local sentence- and paragraph- levels. The traditional conceptualization is reflected in the sections that talk about plagiarism in the same composition books from which we extracted data for the study reported in this paper. In fact, these books typically discuss plagiarism in moral and general terms. A consequence for learners to fail to understand the varied forms that plagiarism can take might be this: unable to distinguish between imitation and plagiarism or to benefit more fully the learning potential that imitative writing could offer on one's journey to develop an authorial voice.

6.3 *From imitation to innovation*

The book authors in our dataset converged on emphasizing that imitative writing is only the first step in learning to write and innovation in writing is a target for learners at all stages of learning. This message echoes the same teaching found in classical Chinese books on rhetoric (see Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2012). A range of principles were suggested by the composition specialists to facilitate the progress from imitation to innovation: to learn from different authors and imitate many texts to foster independent thinking; to engage in repeated and sustained practice to address varied rhetorical contexts and purposes; to cultivate critical thinking so as to discern both the strengths and potential weaknesses of a model text; to aim to express true feelings by drawing upon one's own material from life while learning from others' texts; and to imitate the writing process of the original author while using one's own material.

Of these, the proposal of imitating the writing process harks back to an argument in the early days of the paradigm of the process approach in writing education in the United States: that imitation involves both the product and the writing process (Flanagan, 1980). The emphasis on cultivating independent thinking and critical thinking would pose a contrast to a stereotypical view that students from Asian countries were used to a reproductive system of education characterized by teachers' transmission of knowledge and students' reproduction of knowledge (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). The advice on engaging in repeated practice with creation echoes both Minock's (1995) imitation pedagogy implemented at an advance level, as noted above, and the notion of "multigenre responses," which has been found to promote critical thinking and genre awareness in language arts classrooms (Gillespie, 2005).

Finally, the emphasis upon expressing one's true feelings based on materials drawn from one's own life echoes D'Angelo's (1973, p. 290) instruction to his students—that they should as far as possible “draw upon [their] own experiences for the content,” as quoted earlier. Of course, the teaching is also a direct reflection of a requirement stated in the *Curriculum guide for the Chinese subject* for the stage of compulsory education (i.e., Years 1-9), issued by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2011): that children should be encouraged to express their true feelings, and “fake and empty talk should be avoided” and “plagiarism should be resisted” (p. 23). As a traditional tenet in Chinese rhetoric, the message of expressing one's true feelings, conveyed both in our dataset and in the curriculum guide, is highlighted in the wider Chinese academic literature as well, where to write without one's own material derived from life has traditionally been compared to trying to “cook without rice” (e.g., Li, 1980).

It should be acknowledged that although our dataset contains segments that address university writing, discussion of imitation in relation to academic writing can hardly be found. In Chinese universities, the teaching of Chinese L1 academic writing to undergraduates in humanities and social sciences is a relatively recent phenomenon that has grown in the wake of a system-level concern with raising awareness for academic norms (e.g., Miao, 2013); the traditional “university writing” course (on Chinese L1 writing), which has been on the wane, usually targets Chinese majors and bears resemblance to the first-year writing courses in American universities. It would be reasonable to suggest that the range of principles suggested in our dataset for fostering progress from imitation to innovation can be applied to academic writing instruction too. The two imitation pedagogy cases reported from Danish universities, by Geist (2005) and Matthiesen (2016), would provide additional references.

7. CONCLUSION

In the study reported in this paper, our dataset consisted of extracts of discussions of imitation/imitative writing from a collection of books on Chinese L1 composition. It can be seen that some recent titles are referenced more frequently in the findings section of this paper, indicating that they contain a richer amount of information and that interest in imitation as a writing pedagogy remains robust in contemporary China.

Earlier in this paper, in introducing the Chinese context, we presented Figure 1 to make the point that imitation as a writing pedagogy is embedded in several layers of contexts and that the educational, moral, and ideological functions of these layers, as stated in the curriculum guides (e.g., PRC MoE, 2011, 2017), would be manifested in the literacy practices of using imitation as part of the teaching and learning processes. Given the nature of our dataset, such a theoretical perspective is not illustrated in our study. We believe an ethnographic methodology, including classroom observation, would be needed to produce evidence to illustrate and enrich such a theoretical stance on writing education in the Chinese context. Application of such

an ethnographic perspective on imitation would also necessarily imply its investigation in relation to the implementation of other pedagogies in local contexts, such as the process approach (e.g., Li, 2021) and the genre approach (e.g., Pan, 2007) which are imprinted with Chinese characteristics, as well as many other teaching strategies that extend the tradition of Chinese writing education. Insights from such research can be compared with findings of L1 education from other contexts (e.g., Hogarth et al., 2021).

Also in terms of the nature of our dataset, on the whole, our collection of composition books does not contain many concrete examples to illustrate how teachers implement imitation pedagogies in writing classrooms, which may be understandable as imitation is only one of the many topics covered in those books. Yet an abundance of illustrations is found in the Chinese academic literature accessible through the mega-database China National Knowledge Infrastructure (<http://www.cnki.net>), as mentioned in the methods section earlier. This additional body of materials can be explored in the future to deepen the understanding of imitation as a teaching and learning strategy in Chinese L1 writing. Future research can also find out through fieldwork how imitation pedagogy is actually implemented by teachers in their classrooms and how it is received and practiced by students in their writing processes, including at the tertiary level, a context under-represented in the dataset of our study. The thorny relationship between imitation and plagiarism can also be investigated at different levels of schooling and in different subject areas, for it has been suggested that “The level of cognitive development of the learner and/or the type of subject being studied determines the level of mimicry required and tolerated” (Bhattacharya & Jorgensen, 2008, p. 195).

For future work in both teaching and research, Matthiesen’s (2016) pedagogical model, being an example of “propelling” Quintilian’s discussion of imitation “into today’s teaching,” as the title of her article put it, is a reminder that the rich historical legacy of rhetoric, of which China has its own and in which China likewise takes great pride, potentially offers a significant treasure house of insights for today’s writing education.

In contrast to the general enthusiasm for international exchanges in second language (L2) education, much less seems to have happened in L1 education (Araujo et al., 2021). In L1 writing instruction, imitation pedagogy is potentially practiced in different parts of the world, yet apparently there has been very little communication among practitioners and researchers on this topic. It is hoped that our paper takes a modest step in the direction of promoting exchanges on L1 writing education between China and the rest of the world, hence contributing to transnationalism or going “beyond nation-state borders” in writing education (Donahue, 2018, p. 23).

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APPENDIX. THE 41 BOOKS ON CHINESE COMPOSITION USED IN OUR STUDY, IN FIVE CATEGORIES BY THE LEVEL OF STUDY TARGETED

1) 2 (4.9%) books for primary school teaching

- Cui, L. (2014). *Jiao zuowen you qiaomen: Zuo jia laoshi de 58 ge jianyi* [Tips on teaching composition: A writer-teacher's 58 suggestions]. East China Normal University Press.
- Wu, L. (2019). *Zuowen jiaoxue yanjiu lunji* [Collected papers on composition instruction research]. Shanghai Educational Publishing House.

2) 13 (31.7%) books for junior secondary school teaching

- Editorial Office of Shanghai Education. (1988). *Chuzhong zuowen jiaoxue chengshi* [Junior secondary composition instruction formulas]. East China Normal University Press.
- Cheng, W. (1987). *Chuzhong yuwen chuanguo siwei xunlian: Di san ce* [Junior secondary Chinese creative thinking training: Volume 3]. Tianjin Education Press.
- Dai, W. (1994). *Chuzhong zuowen baiti fudao* [Tutorials on 100 topics for junior secondary composition]. Shanghai Joint Publishing Press.
- Dai, Y. (2018). *Chuzhong zuowen xuliehua jiaoxue jiaocheng* [A course on junior secondary composition serialised instruction]. Zhejiang Gongshang University Press.
- Hu, T., Zhang, L., Xu, R., & Zhang, E. (1985). *Chuzhong yuwen jiaoxuefa* [Junior secondary Chinese pedagogy]. Beijing Normal University Publishing House.
- Li, T. (2008). *Rang kuai le yu zuowen tongxing—chuzhong zuowen 100 jiang* [Happy composition—100 lessons on junior secondary composition]. Shandong Education Press.
- Li, Y. (1997). *Chuzhong zuowen jiao yu xue* [Teaching and learning of junior secondary composition]. Beijing Normal University Publishing House.
- Wang, L. (2016). *Wang Li de chuzhong zuowen jiaoxue chuanyi* [Wang Li's creative ideas on teaching junior secondary composition]. China Light Industry Press.
- Wang, Y., & Li, A. (2015). *Xiezuo jiaoxue de zhihui* [Wisdom in writing instruction]. Shanxi Education Press.
- Wang, Z. (1983). *Chuzhong zuowen jiao'an xuan* [Selected teaching plans on junior secondary composition]. Journal Editorial Department of Shanxi Normal University.
- Yao, J. (1996). *Chuzhong zuowen zhidao yu fanwen pingxi: Chusan* [Junior secondary composition instruction and sample writing commentary: Year 3]. Beijing University of Technology Press.
- Yu, F. (2015). *Zuowenke women you banfa* [Tips on composition class]. East China Normal University Press.
- Zhang, Z. (1993). *Yuwen* [Chinese]. Peking University Press.

3) 10 (24.4%) books for senior secondary school teaching

- Beijing Haidian Teachers Training College. (1986). *Gaozhong zuowen fudao yu lianxi* [Senior secondary composition tutorials and exercises]. Guangdong Education Publishing House.
- Deng, T. (2018). *Gaokao zuowen zhunbei: Deng Tong juan* [Preparing the composition test in the College Entrance Examinations: Deng Tong's volume]. Shanghai Educational Publishing House.
- Guo, L. (2000). *Gaozhong zuowen xin gainian* [New concepts of senior secondary composition]. Beijing Publishing House.
- Huai, M., & Zhao, L. (1999). *Shiyong gaozhong yuwen xuexi fangfa* [Practical methods for senior secondary Chinese learning]. Kaiming Press.
- Lü, Q. (1998). *Gaozhong yuwen dixie yiti* [Integrating reading and writing in senior secondary Chinese]. Shandong Education Press.
- Xiang, Z. (1997). *Gaozhong zuowen zhidao: Jiqiao jiupian xunlian* [Instruction on senior secondary composition: Technique, correction, training]. Zhongguo Zhigong Press.
- Xiong, F. (2017). *Gaokao da zuowen* [Composition test in College Entrance Examinations]. Lijiang Press.
- Yang, L., & Zhao S. (2018). *Gaozhong zuowen xiezuo jiaocheng* [A course on senior secondary composition writing]. Zhejiang University Press.
- Yu, Y. (1988). *Gaozhong yuwen jiaoxue zhidaoshu* [A guidebook on senior secondary Chinese instruction]. Shanghai Educational Publishing House.

Zheng, L., Wu, L., Liu, G., Ru, N., & Che, Y. (1990). *Yibai fenzhong yileiwen—gaozhong zuowen xiezuozhidao* [100 minutes for one genre—Instruction on senior secondary composition writing]. Beijing Normal University Publishing House.

4) 6 (14.6%) books for both primary and secondary school teaching

Fu, D. (2018). *Xizuo zhishi jiaoxue de sikao yu celüe* [Thoughts and strategies about instruction on composition knowledge]. Zhejiang Gongshang University Press.

He, J. (2019). *He Jie laoshi de quancheng xiezuozhuoxuefa* [Teacher He Jie's pedagogy of whole-process writing]. Fujian People's Publishing House.

Li, M. (2018). *Qiaokai yuwen de guoke* [Cracking the nut of Chinese]. Fujian Education Press.

Liu, D. (2017). *Xin siwei zuowen 55 ke* [55 lessons on new thinking composition]. Tsinghua University Press.

Zhang, Z. (2017). *Zenyang zuowen* [How to write composition]. Zhonghua Book Company.

Zheng, G. (2018). *Xiezuozhuoxue yanjiu* [Writing instruction research]. Guangxi Education Publishing House.

5) 10 (24.4%) books for university teaching

Luo, B. (2006). *Daxue yuwen* [College Chinese]. Jiangxi Education Publishing House.

Mao, X. (1991). *Xinbian daxue yuwen: Xiezuozhuo pian* [New college Chinese: Writing]. Zhejiang University Press.

Su, W., Qin, J., & He, L. (1988). *Daxue xiezuozhuo* [College writing]. University of Electronic Science and Technology of China Press.

Wang, X., & Li, H. (2008). *Xinbian daxue xiezuozhuo jiaocheng* [New college writing course]. Peking University Press.

Wu, H. (2002). *Daxue yuwen* [College Chinese]. Southeast University Press.

Ye, H. (2005). *Daxue xiezuozhuo* [College composition]. Zhejiang University Press.

Zhang, G. (1991). *Daxue yuwen yanjiu* [College Chinese research]. Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press.

Zhang, J., & Chen, S. (1997). *Daxue yuwen* [College Chinese]. The Open University of China Press.

Zhang, J. (1997). *Daxue xiezuozhuo gailun* [An introduction to college writing]. Wuhan University Press.

Zhu, Z. (2007). *Shiyong daxue yuwen* [Practical college Chinese]. Fudan University Press.