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INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT OF WRITING IN CHINA: THE NATIONAL UNIFIED ENTRANCE EXAMINATION FOR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Editor's Note: *For background on the history of writing assessment in China and the United States, see the preceding article "Why Test?" by Marie Jean Lederman.*

Marie Jean Lederman (MJL)

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that in the beginning was not the word but the examination. The Imperial Examination System began in China during the Sui Dynasty (589 A.D.-618 A.D.) and lasted until 1905. In this earliest attempt to create a merit system through competitive

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examinations for government positions, candidates wrote essays on the teachings of Confucius, a body of material setting forth the moral and ethical basis of society. The examinations were given on three levels, culminating in the capital examination in the Forbidden City in Beijing. There the top three hundred candidates sat for a three-day examination, presided over by the Emperor. The stakes were high, for not only jobs but social position, wealth, and power were obtainable—for any man¹—through the examination system.

The examiners in ancient China faced many of the same problems we face today in writing assessments throughout the world. A prime example is the problem of reader reliability. By the fourteenth century in China, the procedure of using two independent readers and a third in case of disagreement was developed. Other problems not so easily solved but debated through the centuries were the tension between the examination's fixed form and the candidates' creativity, the control of cheating, retest policies, and the overarching problem of equity.

In 1905, the Imperial Examination System was abolished as a result of a series of imperial edicts. One reason was that by the turn of the century social advancement via degrees from modern schools and universities (and school examinations) already had begun to substitute for advancement via the Imperial Examinations. Implicit in this change was the belief that knowledge of the teachings of Confucius was less vital to government officials than knowledge of disciplines such as science and technology.

Throughout the tumultuous years of the twentieth century, China's examination policy mirrored her political and social needs and values—as, indeed, examinations do in all cultures. For example, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) there was enormous suspicion and hatred of those systems which ranked people on a purely intellectual dimension. Competitive examinations for the universities were abolished, and entrance to the relatively few institutions still open in those years depended solely on a candidate's service to the party and work history. When the Cultural Revolution ended, however, there was a dramatic return to emphasis on academic qualifications for university admission. Once again this was ascertained through testing, this time through a combination of multiple-choice, short-answer, and essay questions.

Since writing assessment began in China over thirteen hundred years ago, evaluation through writing has become increasingly important throughout the world. It is fascinating to see that much of what we do in the west in assessing student writing was done centuries ago in China. We have adopted, largely unknowingly, many of her practices and procedures. We have inherited many of her problems as well. As we continue to struggle with issues which were incendiary in China in the fourteenth century, it is interesting to see how Chinese educators deal today with the assessment of writing in their current examinations for university admission.

The National Unified Entrance Examination for Institutions of Higher Education began in 1978. Requirements for passing this demanding entrance examination have been stiffened almost every year since. The

examination is composed of a number of sections, depending on the student's prospective discipline. However, *all* candidates must take the section on Chinese language and literature and, since 1981, achieve a minimum score on this section in addition to their overall score. A written essay counts for between forty to fifty percent of the Chinese language and literature section.

The teaching of writing to students in the middle (secondary) schools, the writing task on the national entrance examination, and the assessment of this writing are the subjects of this article. But first a word about how this dialogue came about. Gao Jie and I met in the summer of 1985 at the Sino-American Academic Exchange Conference on Teaching Methods in Higher Education. Co-sponsored by The Chinese Educational Association for International Exchange, Shanxi Branch, and the Chancellor's Office of The City University of New York (CUNY), approximately fifty educators from both countries met for two weeks in the city of Taiyuan. I was then directing CUNY's minimum competency assessment program and Professor Gao was directing the teaching of English at Shanxi Mining College. It was natural for us to talk about the writing skills of college students and how we assess those skills. At a second conference held in New York the following summer, we made plans for co-authoring this article. We decided that Professor Gao would describe the background and current practices in teaching and assessing writing in the middle schools as well as issues involved in assessing student writing on the current national university examinations. I, in turn, would suggest comparisons with similar issues and practices in the United States. We feel that the material we discuss here offers perspectives on assessment of basic writing and, indeed, writing at all levels.

Gao Jie (GJ)

It is difficult to collect materials on writing assessment. While there are a lot of general materials about writing techniques, very little information can be found about writing assessment; it seems to be a topic rarely dealt with. Writing assessment is undoubtedly a very complicated problem and, unfortunately, there are too few people doing research on it. The only authoritative documents available now deal with the method of writing assessment used in the National Unified Entrance Examination for Institutions of Higher Education (NUEE). Because of the importance of the examination, great efforts have been made to improve the method of writing assessment.

MJL

Current interest in writing assessment in the United States was generated by the increasing importance of the results of large-scale testing programs and the impact of these assessments on writing instruction. In the last eight or nine years many statewide and systemwide writing assessment programs have begun on levels ranging from the elementary schools through the universities. Such programs may identify students in need of additional instruction, determine the nature of that instruction,

certify competency or proficiency, and/or help institutions rank candidates. Major professional journals published in the United States today contain numerous articles reporting on these large-scale writing assessment programs as well as on writing assessment in the classroom. Articles range from highly polemic pieces to reports on carefully controlled research. Moreover, several books on writing assessment have appeared within the last two years. Despite all of this activity in the United States most of us would agree that we still don't know enough.

GJ

Before we look at writing assessment in China today, we should go back a little in history and look at the teaching of writing in the middle (secondary) schools of old China. The Chinese course consisted of reading and writing, and students took the course through all six years of school. They read many articles, most in classical literary Chinese, and wrote compositions, one each week or two. Students learned to read and write in a natural way, without formally learning grammar or logic; they acquired writing and reading skills largely through practice. As Du Fu, a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty wrote, "After having read ten thousand volumes of books, you will write excellently as if helped by Gods."

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949), great efforts were made to modernize the teaching of Chinese, and the comprehensive Chinese course was split into two courses, Chinese language and Chinese literature. The language course was based on linguistic theories, but this did not work well. Teaching language and literature separately was unsuccessful because teachers often forgot the purpose of the course. They focused on teaching the knowledge of language and literature but paid little attention to helping students develop an ability to use the language. As a result, writing was neglected. Students knew a great deal about the language but could not use it efficiently as a tool of communication.

After much trial and error, a new comprehensive system of Chinese was set up which was a combination of Chinese language, literature, logic, and rhetoric. Students read a number of works of Chinese and world literature and are taught some fundamental knowledge of logic, rhetoric, and grammar. This has been the practice for the last twenty-five years and has proved successful. In this new comprehensive system, students read articles as models for writing, and they learn to write through frequent writing. We must admit, however, that in China middle school students are not always trained adequately. They do not always have frequent writing practice and their compositions may not always be corrected properly. As a result, they write poorly. Fortunately, there are also many effective writing teachers who give students suitable topics and pertinent instruction before the students start writing. These teachers correct student compositions carefully and comment on them. In my opinion, this is the only way to teach writing.

MJL

Professor Gao talks of the role of the teacher in improving student writing. While we would add the importance of students reading and writing for each other, few of us would disagree with the importance both of frequent writing and a patient, sympathetic teacher to respond to that writing.

The history of writing instruction in the United States also shows the splitting apart and recombining of the teaching of reading, writing, and grammar. Most language teachers agree today that reading and writing should be taught together and that students learn to write by writing. In the summer of 1987, an important English Coalition meeting was organized by the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Conferees issued a joint statement on the importance of linking the study of writing and literature at all educational levels. Yet many, if not most, high school and college systems have frozen “separateness” into their bureaucratic structures through separate disciplines, licenses, programs, and departments of reading and writing.

As in China, the teaching of language skills varies widely throughout a given department, institution, or region. While the best writing teachers try to integrate the study of language and literature into frequent writing practice, it remains a juggling act. Now we know that language teachers half a world away have also been trying to keep those same aspects of writing balanced in the air.

GJ

I would like to turn now to the ways in which we score school pupils’ compositions in China. We use two systems: the grade system and the hundred-mark system. Some teachers mark their students’ compositions in four grades, which are equivalent to your A, B, C, and D. Some find this system too crude and further divide each of the grades into three subgrades with pluses and minuses, thereby making a twelve-grade system. Other teachers use the hundred-mark system. In Chinese schools the hundred-mark system is used in all other subjects, so it is sometimes necessary to convert a grade-system score into a hundred-mark system score, especially on examinations. Because of this, a correspondence was established between the two systems by defining a range of marks for each grade. However, both systems are really relative, because there are no clearly defined criteria generally accepted by all or at least by most schools in a city or region, much less in the whole country.

MJL

This sounds familiar. Teachers in schools and colleges in the United States also use either letter or numeral grades on student compositions, although sometimes they use narrative comments instead of grades. Nevertheless, students’ work must be evaluated at some point in a more public way, and generally that evaluation is expressed either in letters or numbers. While each school or college works on the assumption that

these letters or numbers have the same meaning, in reality we do not have clearly defined and accepted criteria for writing any more than in China. That is one of the reasons why many colleges and universities use SAT or ACT scores as part of their admissions criteria. It is also why so many colleges have decided to test students' writing skills after they have been admitted.

GJ

In recent years, a new factor has promoted the development and perfecting of writing assessment methods in China: the National Unified Entrance Examinations for Institutions of Higher Education (NUEE). Reading and writing are considered a very important part of education, and both are assessed in the NUEE. Every candidate, whether he or she is going to pursue science, engineering, or liberal arts, must take the Chinese language and literature part of the examination. This part used to be worth 100 points as is each of the other parts of the examination. But after 1982, the value was raised to 120 points, indicating the relative importance of this section. The writing part is a composition, covering 45-50 points out of the 120 points.

These examinations are held in China once a year, usually early in July. Every summer, tens of thousands of graduates from middle schools all over the country take the examinations. The assessing of examination papers is carried out in each of the provinces in the same time period. In each province, hundreds of college and school teachers are organized to read the examination papers. Candidates are accepted or rejected according to the total sum of marks in all subjects. Universities and colleges want to select the best students, and students either gain or lose the opportunity to pursue higher education on the basis of this examination. Therefore, the scoring must be as fair and objective as possible, and clearly defined unified criteria are essential.

This is less difficult with other subjects where referential answers are provided and necessary principles defined. However, assessing writing is much more complicated. The quality of a composition is determined by many different factors which may influence the examiners in complex ways. In schools, the same composition might be given very different scores by different readers. Such a state of affairs must be avoided in any examination and, especially, in one as important as the NUEE. It was evident that some appropriate unified criteria had to be worked out for the readers to follow. So every year the Committee for the NUEE provides a set of Criteria and Principles for assessing all of the subjects on the examination, including the writing part. This document is not published but provides working guidance. It is the only authoritative document concerning writing assessment available at the present moment in China.

MJL

English teachers in the United States spend much time debating the best kinds of topics as well as the fairest and most accurate ways of assess-

ing student writing. It is informative, therefore, to discover how these matters are being handled today for China's most important examination.

GJ

We are continuously making efforts to improve the writing assessment system in the NUEE, and significant changes occurred between the 1984 and 1985 examinations. I will talk first about writing topics and then about scoring. In both 1984 and 1985 the writing part of the NUEE was worth 50 out of the possible 120 points in the Chinese language and literature section. However, the writing tasks were quite different. These were the directions for the written part of the 1984 examination:

Some students say, "When we are to write a composition, we often feel that we have nothing to say and can only hash some empty talk or cook up materials to make a cut-and-paste essay." On the other hand, some teachers say, "Every time the students write compositions, I take great pains to correct and comment on them. However, the students do nothing more than glance at the score, paying little attention to the problems in their compositions. Therefore, they make little progress in writing."

Relating the above two passages to your own writing and that of your classmates', write an argumentative essay commenting on the situation of middle-school students' compositions. The examinee should give an appropriate title to the essay. The length of the essay should not exceed 800 Chinese characters. The essay should have clear ideas, certain analysis, and true feelings.

This was the 1985 topic and directions:

Suppose that the Qianjin Chemical Plant near the Chengxi Middle School eliminates harmful waste water and gas to the surrounding area every day. Because of the pollution of the environment, the health of the teachers and students and others living in the vicinity is impaired and their work and study disturbed. In recent years, the school has asked the plant numerous times to solve the problem satisfactorily, yet the plant's leaders have been dragging their feet on the pretext of burdensome production tasks, insufficient technical ability, and the high cost of necessary changes. Therefore, the problem remains unsolved.

Based on the information given above, on behalf of the Students' Union of the Chengxi Middle School, write a letter to the editorial department of the *Guangming Daily* describing the situation and appealing for a prompt solution to the problem.

(The *Guangming Daily*, by the way, is one of the most influential newspapers in China.) If you want to see a sample paper actually written in response to this topic as well as detailed comments written by a teacher, please turn to Appendix A. Both the article and comments were published in the periodical *Xiezuo* (Writing) No. 5, 1986. Of course it

is not possible to write such detailed comments when we actually grade the examinations, but this should give you an example of the criteria which we follow.

MJL

A comparison of the two topics indicates that the 1985 topic is much more highly rhetorical than in 1984. Audience and purpose are both specified, and the issue dealt with is a significant one in China today. The question of specified audience and purpose is hotly debated in large-scale writing assessments in the United States. Most believe that such specification makes it easier for students to write, but others believe that, especially on timed writing tasks, specification makes it more difficult. Research at the moment is inconclusive, and much more needs to be done. But the decision of the NUEE Committee to use a highly rhetorical prompt will probably be seen as an enlightened one by most English teachers.

GJ

Improvements were also made in 1985 in the criteria for grading the essays. These criteria are offered every year as a working document by the NUEE Committee.

The scoring system which we use is a combination of the grade system and the one hundred-mark system. Usually four to five grades are set up, with a certain range of marks (within clearly defined upper and lower limits) corresponding to each of them. When reading a paper, one first considers which grade should be given and then, after that, what mark should be given. The final score is given in a one hundred-mark form. This has been the general practice in China since the entrance examinations for universities and colleges were resumed after the Cultural Revolution. I believe that it combines the best of both the grade and the hundred-mark systems for three reasons:

To begin with, because a grade must first be given, the reader must get a general impression. This reduces the possibility of undue influence by any particular factor in the essay. Of course, subjective factors sometimes do surface, so we have a series of steps to recheck the readings. If a rechecker comes up with a different grade, he approaches the original reader and discusses it with him. In case of disagreement, more people will be involved in the discussions. Finally, a generally accepted conclusion is arrived at. In practice, this rarely occurs. Second, the one hundred-mark system offers a better quantitative differentiation of essays. One can easily compare the quality of papers which have been assigned the same grade; the grade alone would not permit this differentiation. Last, a final score in one hundred-mark form can be easily included in the total score of the examinee as all parts of the NUEE are scored in this way.

A comparison between the original four-grade system and the 1985 five-grade system is illustrated in Appendix B.

MJL

This method combines what we in the United States call holistic and analytic scoring. The Chinese method is in keeping with the newest trend in writing assessment in the United States. This trend, referred to as “post-holistic breakouts,” has resulted from a recognition of the limitations of holistic scoring. While holistic scoring has many advantages, a holistic score alone does not allow for description of the component elements which contribute to that score. Many English teachers here see a combination of both holistic and analytic scoring as an improvement because it gives diagnostic information which can help in writing instruction. Certainly, for examinations which seek to rank candidates, such a combination of methods differentiates among candidates far more than a holistic score alone.

GJ

As you can see, the 1985 modifications allow us in China to distinguish more easily among the essays. Grades I and II differentiate the excellent essays from the good ones. Grade III essays, basically good essays, form the largest “subset” of our population. Grades IV and V allow us to make distinctions between low and very low quality essays.

MJL

On a five-point scale, we in the United States have also found that the scores tend to cluster around the middle. When we assess student writing with the purpose of placing students accurately in writing classes, such a scale may be a problem. However, if the purpose is ranking candidates, this is less important.

GJ

Using both the 1984 and the 1985 criteria, the reader first decides on a grade and then on a basic score, which usually falls in the middle of the range of numerical marks for the grade. However, in 1985 far more detailed instructions were given concerning the conditions for raising or lowering the basic score. Three specific areas were to be considered: (1) *content*, (2) *language*, and (3) *structure*.

The most important change in 1985 was the emphasis placed on the use of *language*. Any Grade I or II essay must meet two requirements, of which the language requirement must be one. If language is a strong point in a Grade III essay, it will get a score higher than the basic score. This is remarkable when we consider the historical background of China. Traditionally, the most important feature of writing was its political content, and stylistic or artistic considerations came second. It was natural that ideological content was overstressed and language was undervalued in writing assessments as well. This was diametrically opposed to the goals of the Chinese language course, which was to train students in the ability to use language as a means of communication. Inevitably, it led to a neglect in teaching writing skills. That the 1985 criteria stresses the importance of language, without paying less attention to the content of essays, is a great step forward.

MJL

Based on conversations with Chinese colleagues, I assume that the change reported by Professor Gao resulted from a general perception that the writing of students coming from the middle schools was not as good as it should have been. The focus on language in the NUEE, then, ought to improve writing instruction in the middle schools. It is an example, of course, of examinations driving curricula. Many of us involved in writing assessments at the college level hope that assessments will also focus elementary and high schools on the importance of writing. The larger question, however, of why there has been a decrease in writing skills of students in both cultures—and, it seems, throughout most of the world—is a more provocative one, but one which should be the subject of another paper.

GJ

The NUEE is the largest-scale examination held in China. No other examination involves so many young people or is as important both to the young and their parents. It gives the successful candidates the opportunity of receiving higher education—something that the younger generation longs for more than anything else. Because it is so important to the lives of so many, continuous efforts are made to improve assessment methodology and techniques, including those for writing assessment. Prior to 1984, the NUEE criteria for writing assessment were similar. In 1985 great progress was made, and the 1986 criteria were similar to those of 1985. Will new criteria for writing assessment be worked out which are better than those of 1985—more scientific, more accurate, more sensitive? The answer is undoubtedly “yes.” We hope so.

MJL

We echo that hope here. During the six years that I directed the minimum-competency testing program at CUNY, I was comforted by what I learned about the history of writing assessment in China. We in the United States are so impatient to discover all of the answers that it is important for us to remember that the problems with which we are now struggling are ancient. No one, during the more than thirteen hundred-year history of the ancient Imperial Examination System, discovered perfect resolutions. It is especially interesting to learn about what those who invented examinations are doing today in assessing student writing. Like their colleagues in the United States, administrators and teachers in China are struggling with ways to improve teaching and learning. The changes in writing instruction in Chinese schools as well as writing assessment on the NUEE are examples of that struggle. We can all learn from each other; certainly, Utopia is equidistant from both of our countries.

A final word about language and languages. Professor Gao is multi-lingual. Of the languages he knows, he once said that English is his weakest. Yet he is a fluent translator and conversationalist in English, and I have done only the most minor editing of his writing. We reach

each other as friends and colleagues across vast distances only because he has mastered my language. He can, therefore, enter into my culture in a way in which I cannot enter his. I am grateful to him for allowing me a glimpse into that culture through its teaching and assessing of student writing. That we can all share Professor Gao's knowledge, experience, and hopes proves the importance not only of mastering our own language but also the languages of others.

Appendix A

Example of an Examinee's Composition of 1985

A Letter to the Editorial Department of Guangming Daily

Dear Sir,

We are writing to you with great concern to reflect a situation, i.e., near our middle school (Chengxi Middle School) there is a chemical plant, "Qianjin" Chemical Plant by name, which eliminates harmful waste water and gas to the surrounding area every day. Because of the pollution of the environment, the health of our teachers and students and the people living in the vicinity is impaired and our work and study influenced. Although our school has more than once made proposals on how to solve the problem satisfactorily, the leaders of the plant have been dragging their feet on the pretext of heavy production tasks at the plant, insufficiency of its technical force, and also the very high cost for doing this. Therefore the problem remains unsolved. We think, such a case may not be a unique one. In our vast country there may be many similar cases like this one which may make a serious social problem worth paying attention to.

Our country used to be a beautiful one, which was described by our ancient writers as a paradise full of singing birds and fragrant flowers, where "autumn water and the vast sky show the same charming color and a lonely crane is flying alongside rosy sunset clouds; where two orioles are singing amidst green willows and a row of white egrets are flying into the sky." How comfortable it would be to work and study in such a nice environment! Unfortunately, with the rapid development of industry, more and more factories are eliminating waste water and waste gas, which contain a lot of harmful substances, such as hydrogen sulfide, hydrogen cyanide, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide, etc. These substances are not only threatening to crops but are also harmful to human health. Take sulphur dioxide for example. When breathed in, it will do great harm to the human body while when falling with rain it may destroy the crops. If we imagine Nature as a human body, then the atmosphere would be its internal environment, and man nothing but a tiny cell. Just as a man will become sick or even die when toxins exist in the internal environment of the human body, so human health will be in danger if the atmosphere is polluted.

For these reasons, we strongly appeal for the spread of ecology education —let it be covered through the whole period of school, from the course of “common knowledge” in primary schools through the course of “Biology” in senior middle schools. We also appeal to you to propagate to the whole society the meanings of beautification of the environment, laying stress on the hygiene and the beauty of the environment.

We would like to appeal to the directors and managers of factories to take “serving the people” as their guiding ideology and make efforts to learn the knowledge of ecology and to train qualified technical personnel in this field so as to solve the problem of the control and reuse of the waste gas and water. Now that many directors and managers are complaining that their production tasks are heavy, we would like to ask: Is it correct to exclude the treatment of the harmful wastes from the production tasks?

We would also like to appeal to all the society to mobilize to take part in the activity of planting trees and making forests. Many kinds of trees such as lilac and plane trees, by absorbing the toxins in the atmosphere, can help to neutralize the harmful substances and purify the air.

If only we can do this, why can't we expect birds to come back and flowers to restore their beauty? We have every reason to believe that our country will become a beautiful garden full of flowers, that we ourselves and our sons and grandsons will enjoy healthy and happy long lives, that our agricultural production will be further developed, and that the physique of our nation will be further improved.

Dear Sir, your paper has a high reputation. That is why we ask you for some space in your paper to make our appeal and propagate our ideas. Thank you very much.

Best wishes to you.

The Students' Union Chengxi Middle School

Comments on the Example

As can be seen from the composition, the examinee has made a serious study of the materials. The fact provided is that the elimination of wastes by a factory has been polluting the environment, and the problem has remained unsolved for a long time. The examinee is required to write a letter to the Editorial Department of *Guangming Daily* on behalf of the Students' Union of the Chengxi Middle School “to reflect the situation appealing for a prompt solution of the problem.” The composition is developed strictly according to this basic demand and around this basic fact.

The composition is well organized, having a complete and compact structure. The whole composition contains four parts. The first part consists of the first paragraph, which is devoted to “reflect the situation” and describes the basic fact of the pollution of the environment. The second part includes the second paragraph, in which the writer gives the

reasons for the necessity of the control of the pollution. The third part contains the third, fourth, and fifth paragraphs, in which the writer appeals for a prompt solution of the problem and suggests some measures for the control of the pollution. The fourth part, composed of the sixth and seventh paragraphs, looks into the future. The structure of the composition is quite natural. Sound logical connections exist between different parts.

The writer shows certain skills for arranging materials and reasoning. In the first part, the writer starts with describing the condition of the pollution near the Chengxi Middle School and immediately after that he associates the situation in the whole country. By enhancing a particular problem to a general situation and the pollution in a particular place to a social problem, the writer will surely be able to draw the readers' attention to the problem. In the second part the writer first uses the method of contrast, comparing the beautiful scenes of nature of the past with today's polluted environment. He also uses illustrative examples to support his ideas, explaining in detail the harms which sulphur dioxide may do. This endows the problem with a sense of urgency. In the third part the writer does not merely make a general appeal for the control of the pollution, but he also proposes some practical measures and methods. The composition is substantial in content because each of its parts has some concrete content and because the writer uses various methods of reasoning to support his opinions.

The language of the composition is concise and lively. Appropriate words and phrases are used. In the second part, the writer cites two lines by Wang Bo* and two lines by Du Fu** thus adding some literary grace to the article. At the end of this part the writer compares Nature to the human body and man—a tiny cell, the polluting substances—existing in the human body, the metaphors being original and understandable.

Some words and phrases are used incorrectly. In addition, there are some mistakes in punctuation and some miswritten or wrong Chinese characters.

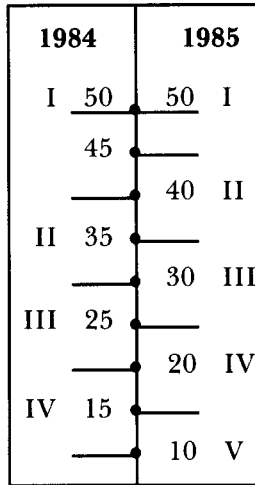
*Wang Bo (649-676 A.D.) Famous poet of early Tang Dynasty

**Du Fu (712-770 A.D.) Great Chinese poet living and writing in the Tang Dynasty

(Continued)

Appendix B

Comparison of 1984 and 1985 Scoring in China



1984

- Grade I* Compositions good in all aspects
- Grade II* Good compositions with some shortcomings
- Grade III* Compositions with serious shortcomings
- Grade IV* Very bad compositions

1985

- Grade I* Compositions good in all aspects
- Grade II* Good compositions
- Grade III* Compositions with good content and structure but some shortcomings in language
- Grade IV* Compositions with serious shortcomings in any of the three areas of content, language, or structure
- Grade V* Compositions which are very bad in one aspect

Note

¹I use *man* intentionally. Women were excluded from the examination system.