As with many such institutions, in the last decade, the international student body at the researched university has increased 300% to a total of 8902 students in academic year 2018-2019. The academic success of international students requires that university professionals gain an understanding of the unique needs these students bring to classrooms, especially in first year composition (FYC) courses—a required course for entering most majors. While many studies on international students in FYC tend to address students’ issues and challenges, little attention has been paid to their “incoming” knowledge—what they bring with them into writing classrooms. Moreover, the field of second language (L2) writing has traditionally focused on writing itself. Not until recently has interest in L2 writer identities begun to draw attention from scholars (See Cox, et. al, 2010). This dissertation undertakes to understand what resources, needs, and writer identities international students bring to FYC and to trace how their writing and writer identities evolve over the course of their FYC classes.

Drawing on theories including prior knowledge in FYC (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Robertson, Taczak, & Yancey, 2012), life reality and text reality (Pavlenko, 2007), and international student identities (Hsieh, 2006; Shen,1989), this research focused on four female Chinese international students’ FYC experience in winter quarter 2015. I interviewed them one-on-one at the beginning, during, and after their FYC classes, and observed them in classes and other locations such as the university’s writing center. Adopting a social constructivist view of interview and discourse analysis methods, this study paints two intertwined trajectories of each participant: one for writing development and the other for writer identity evolvement. It is observed that for some participants (similar to findings of Caiqin, Sucheng, & Lufang), as their writing improved, their confidence in writing increased, and consequently, their writer identities evolved (e.g., from “writing as an assignment” to “writing as a way to enter scholarly conversation”). However, for one participant, though there were observed improvements in her writing, she reported an unchanged relationship with writing. In other words, writing remained a challenging task to her.

This study observes some common challenges during the first half of FYC classes, including experiencing anxiety when encountering new genres, as well as heavily focusing on grammar errors and language authenticity. By the end of FYC, participants reported gaining critical thinking and independent thinking skills. Several common identity themes emerged: each study participant created an imagined juxtaposition against American peers, noted a “hero” (someone they could always trust and rely on) at home, asserted a strong sense of resilience, and renewed their relationship with writing. Significance of these discoveries are presented along with implications for students and instructors. In the end, this study calls for an inclusive FYC class that takes international students’ “incoming” knowledge into consideration and values their potential to enrich the class towards a more global university.