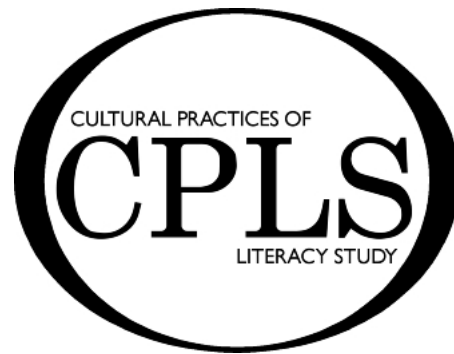


**Multiple Border Crossings:
Literacy Practices of Chinese-American Bilingual Families**

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Introduction

This research examined the literacy activities, beliefs and values in two Chinese-American bilingual families. The families were chosen from a community of families involved in a weekend Chinese school. I was a teacher at this school and the position gave me access to families with children who could provide valuable insights into the complex relationships of influences among different life and sociocultural domains on literacy development.

The data I collected addressed three research questions: (a) What are the relationships between in school and out of school literacies? (b) How are different languages used across and within sociocultural domains? (c) What roles do these Chinese-American bilingual parents play in shaping literacy practices of children? I used a case study methodology to examine these issues for a seven-month period of study. A case methodology was employed, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, collecting artifacts, triangulation and participant checks. Results of the analysis revealed that the formal schooling for the children in both English-based public school, and their Chinese-based weekend school impacted their practices of literacy outside of school as did the nature of their families' involvements in their literacy activities.

The Research Context

According to the United States Census 2000, analyzed by the Social Science Data Analysis Network (SSDAN), Asians represent 11.9 million, or 4.2 percent, of the nation's total 281.4 million population. Among the Asian Americans, 39 percent hold professional jobs,

compared with 31 percent of native-born or 25 percent of foreign-born ethnic workers. And 84 percent of Asian Americans have a high school diploma, or a higher degree, compared with 67 percent of all foreign-born residents.

According to Census 2000, about 12 percent of Asians reported that they lived in the Midwest, compared with 18.8 percent in the South, 20.7 percent in the Northeast and 48.8 percent in the West. Michigan, where the study was conducted, is one of the Midwest states. Though the Midwest is lowest in the percentage of Asian residents, the population of this ethnic group in this area increased from 1.54 percent to 3.60 percent in the last two decades, becoming the second fast growing population in Michigan.¹

The Community

This study was conducted in the Chinese-American bilingual community close to Michigan State University, located near the Michigan capitol city of Lansing. Many Chinese-American parents have come to the U.S and to Michigan State University for higher education purposes. Families in the community are at different stages of their graduate study. Some have even settled in with employment after receiving their degrees. The native language for most parents in the community is Chinese and most can speak English fairly well. The children in the community were either born in China, the United States, or some other country. However, these children for the most part speak native-like English, and many are taking courses in one of the weekend Chinese schools in the area.



Figure 1. A local Chinese store.

Although the community is located in a typical nonurban Midwest setting, Chinese-language texts abound. There are a number of Chinese stores in the area. Among them, the Great China (See Figure 1) is a popular one where most Chinese-American bilingual families regularly shop every week for Chinese vegetables, Chinese snacks, and other Chinese food. It is located very near to the university campus. On the window can be found traditional Chinese paper cut², posters for Chinese movies and a few handwritten advertisements in Chinese. Videos for TV series and movies from China, Korea and other Asian countries are available in the store. Customers can also pick up a free weekly Chinese newspaper from the store. There is another

daily Chinese newspaper in the store charged at \$0.80 and it comes with a free magazine during the weekend. Figure 2 portrays a sample of a few of the Chinese-language texts available in the community.



Figure 2. The front page of a daily Chinese newspaper from a local Chinese store. The newspaper is circulated in all the areas in the U.S.

The Weekend Chinese School

Starting as a school for Chinese language instruction only about 11 years ago, the school has been developed into a comprehensive school as the population of Chinese and Chinese-

Americans in the area has grown. At the time of the data collection, three classes were offered, Chinese, math, and drawing. The instruction for math was in English. The instruction for drawing was basically in Chinese and might have some clarification in English. The grade levels ranged from the first to the ninth. The children in the school were either born in the U.S. or came to the U.S. while they were very young. They learned integrated Chinese language skills in the school, including listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is the school's tradition to hold a Christmas party and a picnic respectively at the end of the fall semester and spring semester. As a member of the Association of Michigan Chinese Schools, the school participated in the annual Chinese contest for Children in Michigan and the teachers' training program in the summer.

Researcher Location

I have worked as a teacher of Chinese in the weekend school for a year and a half. I am also visiting the U.S. to attend graduate school, as is my husband, and my home is in South China. Thus, I am a member of this community and in a good position to know it from the inside. I felt a strong connection with the people in the community. I knew from the experiences of my acquaintances and myself what it is like to study in an English speaking country. My acquaintances in the community also shared with me their experience of having English-speaking children at home.

Participants

Two Chinese-American bilingual families were recruited from the weekend Chinese school. When I chose them, I considered their family backgrounds, interests, literacy levels in both Chinese and English, and whether their varied in- and out-of-school experiences would provide a rich understanding of the literacy activities and interaction of other Chinese-American

bilingual families in the socio-cultural context. My decision to conduct an in-depth investigation with Cindy and Jerry³ was also based on some practical considerations, such as their willingness to let me visit for different lengths of time and their parents' interest and support.

Cindy

Cindy, an eighth-grade school girl, often wore her long hair down to her waist, and colorful sweaters and low-waist jeans were her favorite clothes. She was born in China and immigrated to the States three years ago when her mother married an American. Her stepfather worked as a technician, and her mother was one of my colleagues in the weekend Chinese school.

A variety of written texts, attesting to a variety of literacy practices were highly visible in her house. A large bookshelf stood in the living room of the house. Half of the books on this bookshelf were her father's collection of cooking books and newsletters from his company. These were all in English. Cindy's father explained that he used to be an editor of the quarterly newsletter. That was why he kept a collection of the newsletters. The other books were brought from China by her mother. Most of these were historical novels and bibliographies in Chinese. Some of them were English textbooks.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator surfaces held several written texts that reflected the family's bilingual, bicultural status. These included a health insurance card number, an emergency call list, a schedule of Cindy's math class in the weekend Chinese school, a coupon for pizza, a notice of an appointment, and the phone number of computer services. On the left side of the refrigerator, a Chinese calendar for 2003 was posted, with the location and phone

number of a local Chinese store. Next to this, the directory of parents, teachers and board members in the weekend Chinese school was displayed.

The first time I went into Cindy's room, I encountered a plethora of posters on the wall (See Figure 3). The posters reflected the singers, actors, bands, and movies that she liked. She



Figure 3. Posters on the wall in Cindy's room.

told me that some posters were cut from the magazines to which she subscribed. Other posters were purchased separately. On the wall, behind a 13-inch television in her bedroom, there was a list of Direct TV channels with some channels highlighted. Next to her single bed was a shelf

with two photo albums, two collections of stickers and a collection titled Pop Star Book. A collection of the *Harry Potter* and the *Lord of the Rings* books also occupied the bedside shelf. A small desk sat by the other side of the bed. Over this desk, on the wall, was a certificate of education for babysitting. A large variety of labeled videotapes filled the bottom drawer of a desk.

Jerry

Jerry was four years younger than Cindy. He was in his fourth grade while the research was conducted. The first time I saw Jerry, he was playing basketball with his younger brother in front of his house. My first impression was that he was energetic, moving fast and excited at sports. He lived with his father and younger brother. His grandparents lived right next to his father's house. His father was the owner of a computer store. Jerry's grandmother worked in the same store while his grandfather went to a continuing education program for seniors. Everyday after Jerry came home from school, he and his younger brother would do their homework from their American school at his grandparents' house. After finishing the homework from American school, Jerry spent around half an hour to forty minutes learning Chinese. He might read aloud the text he had just learned, or do the homework on his own. Usually his grandfather supervised Jerry's work in Chinese. He corrected Jerry's Chinese pronunciation and checked his Chinese homework. When Jerry's father came back from work around seven o'clock, the two brothers ran into his father's house, playing on their own computer.

Literacy Practices in a Bilingual/Bicultural World

Literacy for School and Social Purposes

Cindy and Jerry both read and wrote a variety of texts for a variety of social and school purposes. A wide range of literacy activities were found in both families. Cindy read on-sale

flyers that were sent to her home on Sundays and, from these, was the family member who made the weekly shopping list. Both Cindy and Jerry read the packages in grocery stores and toy stores. Cindy also purchased books from Scholastic frequently. Usually Cindy and her mom would read the catalogs together and discuss which books were worth purchasing. Then, Cindy would fill in the order form and send it out.

Both Cindy and Jerry read and wrote as they did their homework from both American and Chinese schools. These texts included self-chosen chapter books such as the *Harry Potter* books, and assignments from math or Chinese classes from the weekend Chinese school.

They both wrote for purposes of recording and documentation. Several times, I observed Cindy writing notes and posting them on the bulletin board in her room or writing in her personal planner, reminding herself of important dates or assignments. Cindy also wrote in her photo album to record contextual information for her pictures. She even maintained a checkout book to keep the record of her books, videotapes and DVDs that she loaned to others. Both Cindy and Jerry wrote phone messages whenever they answered the phone for their parents.

Both Cindy and Jerry subscribed to *Disney Adventures*. They, as did many of their classmates, read the magazine issues to obtain updated information about movies/DVDs that were coming soon or had been released recently.

Many of Cindy and Jerry's literacy activities mediated the social domain of entertainment. When planning to attend a movie, Cindy would read updated information for movies and write down on a notepad the number of the electronic ticket that she had booked online. From time to time, Jerry read Magic cards that he had collected. The cards were used to play the game Magic. He told me that he needed to understand the strength and weakness of the

warriors on the cards so that he was able to use them strategically while playing with others. Besides, it also helped him to make a good deal when he traded cards with friends. Both Cindy and Jerry played a number of videogames for fun. While playing, they were reading instructions, conversations between the characters if applicable, and typing information as requested in the game.

The Internet was another source of entertainment for Cindy and Jerry. Both of them wished to change their wallpaper for their desktops frequently. To accomplish this, they went to websites and downloaded newly released wallpaper designs. Cindy also read a lot of online information while she was searching for her favorite songs online.

English and Chinese Literacies for Different Domains

Both families enlisted English and Chinese literacy for different areas of their lives. For the children, most Chinese language literacy activities were oral. In both families, the children communicated in Chinese with their parents, siblings (they may also speak in English to siblings, though), grandparents, and other family members who spoke Chinese. They were encouraged to speak Chinese in their Chinese language class in the weekend Chinese school. They spoke Chinese in their American school only when they preferred to keep the conversation to themselves.

For the children, Chinese print literacy practices mainly emanated from the Chinese language school. As I mentioned before, they each received weekly homework assignments from the weekend Chinese school. These involved writing a number of short essays during the semester, the complexity of which depended on their grade level. They also wrote Chinese for purposes other than homework, but most of these writings were connected to the weekend

Chinese school in some way. Jerry and Cindy signed their Chinese names on the pictures they drew for their drawing class in the Chinese school. Jerry also wrote Chinese when he helped his younger brother with his homework assignments from the school. Cindy typed in Chinese the directory for the Chinese school since her mother was in charge of that.

All these writings were derived from the context of the Chinese school. However, they had a few opportunities to write in Chinese for some other purposes. One of these was revealed when Cindy used Chinese words in her drawing. She said Chinese characters look cool and would be a good element in art design. In one of her prize-winning pictures, she wrote the Chinese word “Peace”, which was also the theme of that picture. She also began writing Chinese poetry for her own purposes, as described in the following section. Compared with limited Chinese language practices, English language practices in oral and written forms crossed a range of domains in both families as described above.

School Literacies Imported and Transformed into Home Practices

One of the exceptions to this revealed one of the ways that school literacy practices were imported into home practices. This resulted from Cindy's love of writing poetry. She first learned about poetry in her American school, and thus in English. Cindy read poetry for her language arts class in American school. She was required to read a number of poems, and summarize them to enhance her comprehension of the poems. Then, she was instructed to write several poems as homework assignment. It was while doing this that she became extremely interested in poetry. She tried to write more poetry by her own, writing one to each of her parents and one to herself. She even tried a few in Chinese. Thus, she transferred what she had learned about poetry in English to the writing of English and Chinese poems at home for 'fun.

Cindy's experience of learning how to make polyhedrons reflects a similar importation of school literacy practice into home. In her American school, Cindy learned the basic procedures of making a polyhedron. Fascinated, she decided to further her study of them on her own. At home, she tried different shapes, different colors, sizes and connection strategies. She thoroughly enjoyed this activity and considered it both entertainment and an activity that produced decoration for her room. Figure 4 portrays a few of the polyhedrons that she made and hung in her bedroom.



Figure 4. Polyhedrons in Cindy's bedroom.

In both of these cases, school literacy was transferred to self-motivated learning. What was learned in school was supplemented and applied to after-school, self-motivated activities.

Parents Play Roles in Children's Literacy Activities

The role played by parents in their children's constructions of literacy practice was clearly demonstrated in this case study. In both families, parents and other family members played active and important roles in their children's literacy activities. They gave dictations to the children as recommended by the teachers in both the American and Chinese schools; they double-checked their children's homework assignments; and they purchased books or materials required or recommended by teachers. Each family had at least one computer at home that children could use to access the Internet. Parents subscribed to the magazines that children liked; children were sent to enrichment programs; they were also encouraged to participate in all kinds of contests or championship events.

Research has shown that parents' beliefs about involvement in their children's education can positively affect educational outcomes (Seefeldt, Denton, Galper & Younoszai, 1998). In this case study, parents in both families expressed their beliefs that independence and problem solving were vital skills for their children to attain. Through their interviews, the parents reported their habits of encouraging their children to develop these skills whenever the opportunity arose. For example, during a family moving sale, Jerry was completely responsible for his own used items. He was told by his father and grandparents to decide what to sell, how much to sell and how to negotiate with potential customers. He was also told that he could keep the money and decide how to spend it. This encouragement of independent competence is similar to the time when, during a trip to another state, Jerry's father asked him to check out online information

about available hotels in the area. As part of this particular activity, Jerry compared the price, the location and the vacancy before he made the decision.

Cindy's parents also created opportunities for Cindy to act independently as well as to engage in literacy practices. Many of these opportunities and practices intersected with her parents' professional lives. During my time with them, Cindy was encouraged to make a directory for the weekend Chinese school, a responsibility often given to adults. She also participated with her mother's professional world in other ways such as the time she prepared a handout for her mother's speech in a teachers' training program by typing and printing multiple copies on the computer. Cindy also participated in the annual calendar drawing contest sponsored by her father's company.

In all these examples, parents' values and beliefs led the children to specific literacy activities. The children in both families appeared to truly enjoy these activities. They were proud of what they could do and also expressed the beliefs that they would build their knowledge and ability at the same time. While asked about his choice about the hotel, Jerry said, "Usually my dad will approve my decision though sometimes he says that I need to give some consideration to distance."

Bilingual, Bicultural Literacy Interactions Across Generations

The impact of the families' involvement in their children's literacy is also reflected in the bilingual interactions that took place within the homes. In both families, parents or grandparents, whose first language was Chinese, instructed the children in Chinese language learning while the children helped the adults with English in some way. Cindy helped her mother to read and comprehend the financial statements sent by the college where her mother was registered as a

student. Cindy also explained to her mother the handouts she brought home from her college classes and modeled for her how to follow the instructions and complete the assignments. Jerry would communicate with English speakers for the family in public spaces if he was with his grandparents. Sometimes Jerry also volunteered to tutor his younger brother in Chinese. As shown in Figure 4, he taught his younger brother how to write “Dad” in Chinese. He also enjoyed reading Chinese stories to his younger brother.

Crossing Borders of Language, Literacy, and Domain for Chinese Immigrant Families

This case study of two Chinese-American bilingual families working toward higher education degrees in a university town provides an up-close picture of language and literacy activity in such bilingual and bicultural contexts. Through this case, we can see the ways that Chinese and English, reading and writing, were learned, appropriated, and used for social activity both in and out of formal schooling contexts. We also could see the ways that the beliefs and values of the parents in this study provided access and opportunities for their children to learn and use different literacy practices as they mediated different social practices deemed significant and relevant by the families. These findings contribute to an evolving theory of literacy development that accounts for both instructional and social influences (Luke, 2001; Ormerod & Ivanič, 2000; Pitt, 2000). It is important to point out that, as for all case studies, these findings are specific to Cindy and Jerry in their particular socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, generalization of these findings across contexts should be cautioned.

In the literacy activities in both families, different languages were used across and within a variety of domains. Some of these domains were entertainment/pleasure, news/information, interpersonal communication, personal writing, memory/record-keeping, finance, shopping,

school and enrichment programs. Throughout the case study, in order to better understand their literacy activities, it was always necessary to document the contexts of their literacy activities as well as the activities themselves. This illustrates the interpretation of literacy as social practice that literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social and cultural nature (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street 2001; Gee, 1996, 2000). Conceptions of literacy that are socially based suggest that children learn culturally appropriate ways of using language and constructing meaning from texts in their early years at home. It is found that parents (and grandparents) in both families are concerned about children's literacy activities and actively involved into the activities. This is supportive of researchers' findings that beliefs and activities regarding literacy differ across ethnic groups (Okagaki & Frensch, 1998). As a result, children who have been socialized in diverse contexts come to school differentially prepared and positioned to respond to the demands of school. Therefore, they experience school differently and formal schooling is only a part of the process if education is seen as a process of cultural transmission (Cadzen, John, & Hymes, 1972; Heath, 1982). Awareness of students' broader social-cultural backgrounds is crucial to connecting home and literacy. Therefore, educators "must understand individuals within the full context of their home and school lives" (Paratore, Melzi & Krol-Sinclair, 1999). These tenets are meant to apply across sociocultural contexts. Thus, further case studies situated within carefully described contexts are needed to begin to specify the ways in which literacy development proceeds as sociocultural practice.

Footnotes

¹The fastest growing ethnic group in the Midwest is Hispanic.

²The paper-cut is one of the traditional folk decorative arts in China. Chinese paper-cuts are brightly colorful and fine handicrafts with a long history, drawn from local customs and landscape scenery. With vivid and lifelike pictures and beautiful colors, Chinese paper-cut is an ideal craft for decoration and collection.

³Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter to ensure the anonymity of the participants. English names were chosen to reflect participants' use of English names in their real lives.

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