

All Are Connected: From Traditional Chinese Medicine to Students' Literacy Practices

Review of *Doing Difference Differently: Chinese International Students' Literacy Practices and Affordances*
by Zhaozhe Wang

Carina Jiaxing Shi University Of Maryland, College Park

In Summer 2024, I visited Uncle Qingjie in China, a long-time family friend, chiropractor and acupuncturist, whose family specialized in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) since the Qing Dynasty. Hearing that I was bothered by a chronic pain on my left shoulder, Uncle Qingjie pulled out two acupuncture needles, gently pushed each needle into two specific acupuncture points of my right palm. Within seconds, I sensed subtle alleviation from the pain on my left shoulder. Within minutes, the pain was completely gone. I have long heard how 博大精深 TCM is, but it was not until that visit that I was fully convinced of its miraculous ability to heal. “How do the two tiny pressure points on my right palm have anything to do with my left shoulder?” I asked. Uncle Qingjie simply answered: “All are connected.” I witnessed a lot of Uncle Qingjie’s practices that summer: how he treated someone’s cough by inserting the needles into the patient’s upper back; how he alleviated someone’s toothache by inserting the needles into their legs and massaging their ears. Compared to Western medicine practices where everything is compartmentalized, Uncle Qingjie convinced me through his needles and hands that the answer to the problem may not always center around the problem. All are connected.

Upon reaching the last sentence of the book under review, *Doing Difference Differently: Chinese International Students' Literacy Practices and Affordances* by Zhaozhe Wang, I thought of my visit to Uncle Qingjie and realized how everything indeed is connected, including what we do with literacy practices, to which I return in a few paragraphs.

In *Doing Difference Differently*, author Zhaozhe Wang uncovers the complex and diverse literacy practices of four Chinese international students to problematize and critique the “institutional discourse of cultural diversity” (23) that often inevitably limits our understanding towards this marginalized cultural group. Through a pragmatic ethnographic case study, Wang builds rapport and participates in the four students’ literate and cultural activities across contexts and modalities. Through an ecological affordance analytical framework, Wang analyzes each of the students’ literacy practices using six dimensions of affordance: structural, semiotic, experiential, social, bodily, and material. On one level, the four in-depth case studies uncover the rich, multimodal, diverse literacy

practices of the Chinese international students and showcased how they experienced, resisted, and negotiated their differences differently from how they were characterized by the institutional discourse. The case studies also reveal the power of the six ecological affordances in their conditioning of individual's literacy practices. On another level, this book (essentially) unpacks a question—who the Chinese international students actually are—contributing to the ongoing scholarly efforts taken up in recent years by North American-based language, writing, and literacy scholars of Chinese descent.

The exigence of Wang's book, as presented in Chapter 1, arises from the problematic "institutional discourse of cultural diversity" promoted by US higher education institutions, which Wang defines as "a set of typified tropes associated with and often used to characterize socially and institutionally constructed identity attributes" (24). According to Wang, "rights and resources" are two widely circulated tropes undergirding such discourse, with the trope of rights appealing to historically underprivileged minority groups and assuring them of inclusive educational experiences, and the trope of resources being "reflective of the current neoliberal political climate that conditions the operation of institutions" (25). Wang explains in detail how universities in the US resemble corporations for profit who use the discourse of diversity as a way to market and achieve a neoliberal political agenda. Under this agenda, the institutional discourse of cultural diversity becomes a marketing strategy that does not necessarily provide service to its student consumers but serves as a tertiary marketing strategy to make the university itself competitive on the global market. As a consequence, being an international student in a US university means being caught up in a "confounding and contentious space between the institutional discourse of cultural diversity and discourse of deficit" (27), pushing a student to "develop a heightened sensitivity to conflicting representations and asymmetrical power dynamics resulting from such representations" (27). Under such contexts, Wang conducts ethnographic case studies of four Chinese international students' literacy activities at Wabash University to uncover how they complicated and problematized their oversimplified institutional label of Chinese international student, and how they performed their difference differently from the institutional discourse to reveal more accurate and nuanced images of their complex identities.

The rest of the book (Chapter 2 through Chapter 5) devotes one chapter to each student—Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan—to document their literacy practices. Using the data collected from autobiographies, interviews, and on-site observations, Wang analyzes each set of literacy activities using the six ecological affordance frameworks I mentioned earlier. In Chapter 2, "Manna: From the Dance Floor to Writing Tutor's Table," we see how Manna made connections between her dance choreographing practices to writing an argument essay; we see how she challenged herself in becoming a writing center tutor and overcame her insecurity in a traditionally native-speaker role. In Chapter 3, "Wentao: A Structuralist Poet in Disguise," we see Wentao's rich lexical and metaphorical resources, which gained him the reputation of "People's Poet" among his Chinese friends. We see how he experienced a lack of recognition and understanding when collaborating with his American peers in class; we also see how he grappled with the sense of "belonging" through volunteering to be the secretary of a performing arts club. In Chapter 4, "Yang: A Translingual Gothic Musician in the

Making,” we peek into Yang’s creative translingual creativity in music composition using Japanese, Chinese, and English; we also see how she struggled with a written exam on Western rhetorical concepts sponsored by institutionalized rhetorical education, despite her demonstrated rhetorical versatility and sensitivity in her literacy practices. In Chapter 5, “Bohan: A Cosmopolitan “Robot Master,” we see a “self-proclaimed pragmatist” (120) embracing cultural differences from a young age given his Shanghai upbringing; we also see his skepticism towards an Intercultural Communication course on campus targeting international students. We see Bohan deliberately demonstrating rhetorical absence—“making a strong case by dodging the main argument and allowing it to emerge through the rhetorical exigency within which an audience is involved”(126) as he negotiated his skepticism and pragmatism.

While introducing the four students’ literacy experiences, Wang analyzes how each of the literacy activities were mediated and conditioned by a complex network of ecological affordances—structural, semiotic, experiential, social, bodily, and how each affordance is simultaneously conditioned by one another. While reading each student’s experiences, I found myself questioning things, such as what do Manna’s dance practice, Yang’s lyrical composing process and her disposition towards the Chinese music industry in China, Wentao’s involvement in a student club, or Bohan’s early experience with tourists visiting Shanghai have anything to do with literacy practices or the teaching of literacy? Why account for all the ecological affordances that are not directly associated with the act of reading or writing? In the last two chapters of the book, Wang made me reexamine my questions by synthesizing how these four students embraced, leveraged, resisted, negotiated, and redefined their differences. He revisits the six ecological affordances in explaining how attending to these ecological forces help us unpack the four students’ literacy practices of doing difference: “only through accounting for the ecological forces that condition and mediate their everyday literate lives can we critically appreciate their “will to difference” and call into question the institutional discourse of difference” (166).

As Wang references in the book, scholars have long argued that “literate activity as social practices are situated, embodied, mediated and dispersed” (166). His ethnographic study using an ecological analytical framework confirms this performative nature of literacy practices. Analyzing an expansive range of literacy practices by Chinese international students in particular, Wang uncovers a rich repertoire and rhetorical sensitivity that we would not necessarily discover in the classroom under an institutional discourse of diversity. Knowing that these four students cannot account for all Chinese international students’ experiences, Wang asks that the least we can do is “to be a little better prepared or show a little bit more compassion as we discover our students’ emerging differences” (149). Oftentimes, the author’s positionality has a direct impact on the scope of the study. I think only another researcher like Wang, who is himself Chinese and personally experienced studying and living in the US, could deliver such a thorough and honest account of these students’ voices, which would otherwise go unheard.

As someone who researches translingual theories, I cannot help but see this book as a timely contribution to what many US translingual scholars (particularly in composition studies) called for: an empirical account of students’ translingual reality and how students themselves benefit from

translingual acts (Lee); testifying that difference is the norm instead of a deviation from the norm (Lu and Horner); uncovering the labor involved in producing differences and what the differences can do (Horner and Alvarez). This book strengthens the theorization of translingualism by focusing on first-hand empirical data from the students, which is a collective effort translingual scholars should continue in support of the theorizing of translinguality.

On reaching the last note of the book, I cannot help but think back to my visit to Uncle Qingjie. How two tiny pressure points connect to the pain in my left shoulder, I still do not know. Yet, the body is a whole, and everything is in relation to one another. Wang's study makes me realize how literacy practice, too, is connected to and conditioned by all ecological forces, leading us all to read, write, think, and perform in our unique, individual ways that no institutionalized discourse should erase. We need to look beyond institutionalized frameworks and attend to the inherently heterogeneous, particular, and complex identities we encounter every day. Finally, I hope my readers understand that my brief review of the book is unable to account for all the details of these students' experiences as documented in the book. As a graduate student, I was advised early in my career to learn to skim while reading. While skimming may come in handy as we accommodate the heavy reading tasks, it takes a toll on knowledge retention and costs us: we miss out on the subtle yet important details that come with close reading. Through close-reading, readers will learn that this book is not only about literacy activities by Chinese international students, and how they do difference; it is also about embodied rhetoric, rhetorical absence, transnational identity, comparative rhetoric, professional writing process, linguistic justice issues, translingual dexterity, cosmopolitan sensitivity, multimodal creativity, constructed identity, othering, and so on. With that being said, I hope my book review will serve not as a substitute for the book but an invitation for readers to actually close read the book—to embody the students' experiences along the way, to feel what they felt, hope what they hoped, and struggle with what they struggled with as they shuttled among the multiple contact zones on a daily basis. For a book that intends to delineate this marginalized populations' true identities and differences, such close reading is necessary.

WORKS CITED

- Horner, Bruce, and Sara Alvarez. "Defining Translinguality." *Literacy in Composition Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2019, pp. 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.21623/1.7.2.2>.
- Lee, Jerry Won. "Beyond Translingual Writing." *College English*, vol. 79, no. 2, 2016, pp. 174–95.
- Lu, Min-Zhan, and Bruce Horner. "Translingual Literacy, Language Difference, and Matters of Agency." *College English*, vol. 75, no. 6, 2013, pp. 582–607.
- Wang, Zhaozhe. *Doing Difference Differently: Chinese International Students' Literacy Practices and Affordances*. Utah State UP, 2024, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/125402/>.