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Wan Shun Eva Lam

School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University,
2120 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208-0001, USA

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Literacy and capital in immigrant youths’ online networks across countries

Wan Shun Eva Lam*

School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, 2120 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208-0001, USA

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Communication technologies are playing an increasingly prominent role in facilitating immigrants’ social networks across countries and the transnational positioning of immigrant youth in their online language and literacy practices. Drawing from a comparative case study of the digital literacy practices of immigrant youth of Chinese descent, this paper examines the cross-border social relationships that are fostered between the youth and their peers in their natal country through the use of instant messaging and other online media. Using Pierre Bourdieu’s capital and field theory, and the concept of social capital, this paper considers how literacy development in transnational contexts constitutes the production of social and cultural capital. It argues that the youths’ online literacy practices need to be understood within the particular social fields in which they are situated and how they allow the youth to navigate and take up position within social fields that cross national boundaries.

Keywords: digital literacy; migration; transnationalism; social capital; adolescent literacy

Introduction

In the study of culture and diversity in literacy education, a significant body of research has documented the cultural and linguistic resources that young people of immigrant backgrounds derive from their home and community experiences, especially experiences that have historically been devalued in the classroom, with the aim to develop ways to leverage these resources for school-based learning (Gonzáles, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Gutiérrez, Morales, and Martinez 2009; Moje 2007; Pacheco 2012). Many of these studies have highlighted the importance of social networks, and the transnational nature of these networks, for the exchange of resources in the households and providing the diversity of knowledge to which children are exposed (Gonzáles, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Lam and Warriner 2012; Moje et al. 2004). Some recent studies have begun to

*Email: evalam@northwestern.edu

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explore the role of communication technologies in facilitating immigrants’ social networks across countries by showing the transnational positioning of immigrant youth in their online language and literacy practices.

For example, some studies provided case analyses of how individual immigrant adolescents (Mainsah 2011; McGinnis, Goodstein-Stolzenberg, and Costa Saliani 2007; McLean 2010) use their personal profiles and narratives in online journals and social networking sites to signify their identifications with multiple communities across borders. These signifying practices include the use of written texts, images, and music by the youth to reference the national symbols and popular culture of their home countries, a visual ‘gallery’ of friends displaying social networks with peers locally and abroad, and narrative texts that target different audiences and contain references to the youth’s social relations and schooling experiences in both the host and home countries. Other studies have found the expression of transnational affiliations and experiences on websites developed or participated by immigrant youth who share a common ethnic heritage (Brouwer 2006; Lam 2004; Lee 2006; Yi 2009). Such collective online spaces serve as venues where youth reference and sometimes contest the cultural practices coming from their home and host societies.

However, there is as yet a lack of development of analytic frameworks for examining the relation of literacy to the cross-border social relationships that are fostered through online media and conceptualizing the potential resources that may be developed through participation in these transnational exchanges. In our previous work based on interviews and case studies, we have examined the communicative practices within local and translocal networks that adolescents of migrant backgrounds develop by using online media (Lam 2009a, 2009b; Lam and Rosario-Ramos 2009). These analyses show the use and development of diverse linguistic practices to index affiliation and negotiate relationships with different cultural communities across geographical spaces. In this paper, I focus on the cross-border social relationships that are fostered between immigrant youth and their peers in their natal country through the use of instant messaging (IM) and other online media. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s capital and field theory, and the concept of social capital, this paper considers how literacy development in transnational contexts constitutes the production of social and cultural capital. I argue that these online literacy practices need to be understood within the particular social fields in which they are situated and how they allow immigrant youth to navigate and take up position within social fields that cross national boundaries.

**Bourdieuian perspective on literacy and capital**

A tradition of research in the social and cultural studies of literacy has examined literacy as ideological constructions produced within social and institutional settings rather than as a universal or neutral set of skills related to individual cognition (Baynham and Prinsloo 2009; Gee 2011; Mills 2010). The term
literacies, in the plural, is used to refer to various culturally organized practices that make use of language and other semiotic codes (e.g., images, sounds) and technological media for constructing and representing meaning. A theoretical extension of this work is the uptake by educational researchers of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theory as a conceptual template for considering how literacy, as a form of cultural capital, takes on different values across differing social fields (Albright and Luke 2007; Carrington and Luke 1997; Compton-Lilly 2007; Grenfell 2011; Grenfell et al. 2011). One of the central ideas of Bourdieu’s work is that human activities are recognized and given meaning within structured social spaces that he termed fields (Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). By field or social field, Bourdieu refers to a relational, multidimensional space of activity in which people take up positions in relation to one another according to how much resources or capital they have. Forms of capital include economic capital (money and assets), cultural capital (e.g., knowledge, skills, dispositions; educational and professional credentials; cultural goods and portfolio), and social capital (e.g., affiliations and networks). All forms of capital attain their particular value with respect to the ideological dynamics or logic of practice of a social field (Bourdieu 1991, 1992).

For example, the bilingual skills that children of immigrant families develop through serving as interpreters for their families in dealing with official or commercial texts in the dominant societal language are skills that are highly valued within the immigrant community (the ethnic community field), but these skills are seldom recognized in American classrooms that are constrained by monolingual norms and educational policies (the official education field) (Orellana 2009; Valdés 2003). Yet, these bilingual skills or the ability to move across languages and cultures constitutes a highly valuable asset when combined with other professional qualifications in a globalizing and transnational economy (specific economic fields). Hence, working from a Bourdieusian perspective in the study of literacy prompts us to examine reading and writing as forms of capital production and exchange through which people are variously able to attain particular positions within and across diverse social fields. Indeed, Bourdieu’s work had emphasized how social hierarchy in society is reproduced through the privileging of particular forms of social and cultural capital of the dominant groups across institutional arenas. Yet, studies in literacy education have drawn on Bourdieuian analysis to illuminate how ethnic solidarity, social networks, and linguistic practices in minority communities are vital sources of resilience that, in some cases, also allow students to successfully navigate the dominant academic culture (Compton-Lilly 2007; Goldstein 2003). Similarly, Luke (2007) argues that a Bourdieusian analysis of communities as social fields offers an approach to educational policy as part of a broader social and economic strategy that seeks to optimize the mobility and exchange of capital for marginalized students and communities. I would argue that Bourdieu’s concept of social field as a site of struggle among value standards and the agentic activities of the individuals...
operating within it allows for reconstruction and new practices to emerge within and across fields (Bourdieu 1991; Carrington and Luke 1997; Collins 2000).

In this study, I draw on the concepts of capital and field to analyze the literacy practices of two immigrant youth in their online communication with their peers in China. Here I define literacy as the engagement in specific communication and representational practices to generate capital. The forms of capital generated could not only be linguistic and representational skills but also other forms of social, cultural, and material resources. I examine how different forms of social and cultural capital are developed through the youths’ communicative exchanges and how these forms of capital take on value in the particular social fields in which their relationships are situated. In doing this analysis, I consider two aspects of the social organization of a field: (1) the kinds of social roles, agent positions, and the structures they fit into and (2) the process in which those positions are taken up by actors through discourse and social activity (Hanks 2005). I consider how different kinds of social structures (e.g., academic exchange; digital art design; transnational ethnic affiliation) organize the positions that are taken up by the youth. Because an integral part of the youths’ transnational exchanges involves the development and maintenance of social networks and the possible generation of resources through these networks, I discuss further the concept of social capital in the following.

Social capital and transnational online networks

Bourdieu described social capital as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition.’ (Bourdieu 1986, 248) Social capital is made up of social connections or obligations, although the expectation of reciprocity is usually unstated and informal rather than explicit and contractual. Bourdieu noted that the volume of social capital possessed by a person depends on the size of the network of connections that the person can mobilize and on the amount and quality of resources possessed by their associates. Important to the Bourdieusian view (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) is that the nature of the social network and the social field in which the network is located affects the types of resources that are accessible through the relationship.

In considering how different kinds of social capital may result from different relational networks, political scientist Putnam (2001) has distinguished between ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ capital. Whereas Bourdieu focused on class inequality in the kinds of kinship and institutional connections and resources to which people have access, Putnam was concerned with the role of relational ties and resources in civic engagement. Putnam’s bonding social capital describes benefits from close personal relationships or ‘strong ties’ (Granovetter 1973), which might include emotional support, access to material assistance or help
in solving personal problems, and the ability to mobilize solidarity. Bridging social capital describes benefits that are derived from casual acquaintances and connections or ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973), which might include exposure to diverse ideas, access to non-redundant information, and broader world-views. Putnam (2001) argued that bonding capital, because of its basis in shared social backgrounds, tends to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups, whereas bridging capital tends to be more outward looking and encompass people of diverse social strata. Yet, he also noted that bonding and bridging are not ‘either-or’ categories, and many groups simultaneously include both bonding and bridging elements in their social relationships. An example he gave is the black church that brings together people of the same race and religion across class lines.

The distinction between bonding and bridging capital has been drawn upon as a key framework in recent studies of immigrants’ use of media and communication technologies in the European context. (Codagnone and Kluzer 2011; d’Haenens, Koeman, and Saeys 2007; Peeters and d’Haenens 2005) In these studies that are often concerned with the role of media technologies in the integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities in European societies, there is keen interest in how the use of media enables these populations to build ties with the local ‘mainstream’ population or to maintain contacts with co-ethnics locally and in the homeland. Here, the notion of bonding capital is assigned to the intra-community level for enhancing intra-ethnic stabilization and strengthening relations within the group. Bridging capital, on the other hand, is assigned to benefits that come from interactions between immigrants and other groups in the host society, and immigrants’ interest in and understanding of the cultural norms of the host society (note that what are considered cultural norms are often those of the dominant group in society).

Even though these studies generally found that media technologies are used for both connecting within and across communities, and there need not be conflict between these purposes, the dichotomizing of bonding and bridging characteristics as intra- and inter-group relationships is problematic, as it overrides forms of diversity within an ethnic group. Moreover, the wholesale classification of relationships with the homeland as bonding capital is even more problematic as it erases any consideration of the different kinds of social relationships that migrants may wish to maintain or develop in different fields of activity or with different groups of people in their natal country. Even in the case that the relationship involves shared personal or family history, or ethnicity and nationality, the geographical distance between the participants and their diverse experiences in the context of changing societies may afford the sharing of novel information and new perspectives.

In examining how the communicative exchanges of the focal youth in this study serve to promote particular social relationships with their peers in China and generate forms of social and cultural capital, I consider how their relationships may constitute a sort of ‘strong weak ties’ (Gee and Hayes 2011) that
take on the characteristics of both bridging and bonding capital. Gee and Hayes (2011) have noted that some relationships that are developed online, for example, in gaming communities, may involve participants who come from diverse backgrounds and share different kinds of knowledge and experience with each other to achieve their goals within the environment. Yet, the frequent interactions among the participants may allow for close relationships and bonding to occur. In this study, I am interested in how the shared ethnicity or geographical origin of the youth may foster a sense of solidarity while at the same time their different positions or backgrounds in particular social fields may promote other kinds of learning and bridging resources to facilitate the youths’ movements in these fields. The bridging characteristics of the youths’ transnational social ties lie in the fact that they are located in ‘distant parts of the social system’ or a different societal context and are likely to have experiences and access to information and contacts beyond the youths’ immediate social circles (Granovetter 1983, 202). The bonding characteristics lie in the claim of collective identity or ethnic affiliation among the youth and their peers in China, and the development of friendship through regular contact. While the assertion or fostering of ethnic affinity may not lead to the sharing of substantive or material resources, it can help to strengthen the relationship and be a motivating factor in sustaining their online exchanges.

**Study design**

Data for this paper are taken from a comparative case study of the digital literacy practices of immigrant youth of Chinese descent across transnational contexts. A case study approach is adopted for this project with the aim to develop contextualized understanding and grounded concepts of the nature and purpose of these digital practices (Dyson and Genishi 2005; Yin 2009). Cases developed from this project examine how the focal adolescents use the internet to organize social relationships, use and produce information and media content across countries, and develop cross-cultural orientation in their language and literacy learning.

Recruitment of the youth participants was carried out through a survey on transnational communication and interviews at a comprehensive high school in the USA with a large immigrant population from Latin America and Asia. Based on the survey responses, we invited 20 students of Chinese descent who indicated engagement in different forms of transnational communication to participate in one-time focus group interviews. From these interviews, we recruited seven youths who showed both similar and diverse patterns of media use and received formal consent for their participation in this research. The primary data sources for the study were gathered in 2007–2008 and include: (1) Activity-based observations of the youths’ computer and internet use in their homes; each home visit was videotaped and screen recording was made of the youths’ online activities. A total of 7–10 observations were
conducted with each youth over the course of the study. (2) We identified the major interpersonal networks that each of the youth had developed and maintained through online media and collected real-time and recorded textual exchanges between the youth and their key interlocutors in their networks. (3) We arranged several observation sessions where we asked the youth to verbalize their thoughts as they navigated across websites, interacted with others, and composed texts and other media online. These think-aloud interviews (Coiro and Dobler 2007; Lewis and Fabos 2005) were supplemented by post-observation interviews where we followed up on specific questions that had arisen during the observation and our ongoing analysis. Follow-up interviews were also conducted with some of the participants in 2009 and 2010 as they entered college.

We focus on two youths in this study, Suying and Kaiyee (all names are pseudonyms), with whom we were able to gather data on their IM exchanges and other forms of interaction with some of their peers in China. These online interactions were gathered through screen recording during observation and recorded messages on the youths’ IM program that the youth shared with us during the study. Formal consent was also obtained from the youths’ online interlocutors in China for the use of these recorded messages. Both of the youths’ parents were employed as service workers in food and garment industries in the local immigrant community.

Data analysis involved using qualitative procedures of inductive and interpretive coding, and cross-comparison and categorizing of codes across data (Charmaz 2006; Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Our theoretical perspectives of capital and social field, and the bridging and bonding functions of capital provided an interpretive frame for the development of coding categories. These analytic categories were developed and refined through triangulating across the interview data (i.e., how the youth perceived their transnational social relationships) and online interactional data (i.e., how particular relational characteristics and resources are manifested in the online exchanges between the youth and their peers in China).

Findings

Suying: renewing transnational connections and envisioning future career

Suying was a Grade 12 student in a high school who moved to the USA from China with her parents when she was 7 years old. When we began our research with Suying in the fall of 2007, she had several online contacts with people in China that were developed through her participation in a Chinese language and culture immersion trip to Shanghai. The trip was sponsored by her school district in collaboration with East China Normal University in Shanghai. Suying had taken three years of Mandarin before applying and was selected as 1 of 20 students in the city to participate in a 6-week language and cultural exchange
program during the summer prior to the commencement of this research study. Since returning from the trip, Suying had continued to maintain contact with four students (three first-year students in a college and one student in a high school) and one instructor from East China Normal University. In describing her relationship with these young people, Suying related it to her migration experience:

Now that I’ve met these friends, I don’t want to just let go of them. I don’t want to go through the same experience when I came here as a new immigrant. I was too young at that time, and I had lost touch with some friends that I could have maintained contact with for a lifetime… (Friend’s name) came here two or three years after I came… She was bilingual like me in grade 5 or 6, but she didn’t start monolingual classes till grade 8… She also has friends in China, so she could practice her Chinese with them… If I came at her age, I think I would have friends in China like her. (Interview in Cantonese, November 2007; words in italics spoken in English)

Here we see Suying describing her relationship with the young people in Shanghai as a reclaiming of social and cultural connection with her natal country and comparing it to the kind of transnational relationships that her peers who migrated later in their childhood were able to maintain online. Whereas her local peers’ history of social connections in China were maintained informally in everyday use of online media, Suying had leveraged a formal academic exchange program to recreate a set of social and cultural relationships in her natal country. The positioning of Suying’s relationship with her friends in Shanghai within the everyday lifeworld of fellow compatriots is reflected, for example, in her assertion of binational belonging in an IM exchange with Ming, a first-year student at East China Normal University. In this excerpt, the airports in Shanghai became a topic of conversation when Ming mentioned that he would stop over at the Chicago International Airport on his way to Minnesota to study abroad in the coming spring (the English translation of all IM dialogs is indicated in italics).

Ming: 上海的机场好
   The airports in Shanghai are good
Suying: 嗯好。。。  
   Yeah good…
Ming: Chicago-O’Hare International
Ming: 我爱国嘛
   I love my country
   (four lines omitted of affirmatives between Ming and Ying such as ‘haha’, ‘mhm’, and ‘this is a nice thing’ noted by Suying)
Ming: 但是只有上海好
   But only Shanghai is good
Ming: 中国其他地方不行啊
   Other parts of China are not doing that great
Suying: 对, 你是上海人嘛
Of course, you’re Shanghainese (person from Shanghai)

Ming: 是啊
That’s right

Ming: 但是也是事实啊
But it’s also the fact

Suying: 那你比我清楚
You probably know more than me

Ming: 你是美国人嘛, 嘿嘿
Well, you’re American … haha

Suying: 我们做小的不敢多说
We the younger ones don’t dare to speak too much

Suying: 嘿嘿
Haha

Ming: 嘿嘿, 小美国佬
Haha, little American

Suying: 我的Passport是美国人拉
I’m American on my Passport

Suying: 可是我也很爱国的阿
But I also love my country a lot

(four lines omitted of the mention of Ming’s cousin who lives in the United States)

Ming: 你是好小孩嘛
You’re a good kid

Suying: 嘿嘿, 谢谢!
Haha, thanks!

Here Suying seems to be reacting teasingly to Ming’s praises for the airports in Shanghai with tongue-in-cheek comments such as ‘you’re Shanghainese … you probably know more than me.’ This leads to a short banter in which Ming casts Suying in her institutional (educational exchange) and national position as an American. Suying responded by asserting with added emphasis that, like Ming, she ‘also love my country a lot.’ The bonding language of this exchange is seen not only in the co-construction of cultural identity and affiliation, but also in the joking and bantering tone of the exchange that is typical of other IM exchanges recorded between Suying and Ming that involved communication about family and peer relations. In the same IM dialog, Ming mentioned that his cousin who was living in the USA ‘is so snobby … he doesn’t say he is Chinese’, to which Suying replied ‘don’t bother about him … at least I won’t’. (All utterances translated from Chinese.) By commenting on the cousin disapprovingly, the youth are asserting their ethnic affinity in a positive light.

In addition, Suying’s interactions with her peers in China were framed by an academic orientation of language learning and exchange that was influenced by the institutional setting in which they encountered each other as students. Suying remarked:

For my Shanghainese friends, I use Chinese more often, but they want me to use English just so they can practice. I try to use Chinese more often because there isn’t much chance for me to use it. This is America after all. The boy … asks
me about translation and I try to do my best. Sometimes their Chinese is very specific and technical, I can’t really translate without a dictionary. (Interview in Cantonese, November 2007)

The intention to use the online interactions with her Shanghainese peers to practice Chinese expressed here by Suying seems to be a carryover of the young people’s former roles as language partners in the academic program. These young people were positioned in the academic field to offer bridging resources for each other in language learning and use, and such resources seemed to be leveraged by both parties in the relationship. In the IM exchanges recorded between Suying and Ming, there were instances in which Ming requested help with translation from Suying. One example is seen below:

Ming: 我要你帮忙的
I need your help
Suying: ？
Ming: 翻译
with translating
(four lines omitted of clarification and affirmatives)
Ming: 寝室什么时候开放? (sentence to translate)
Suying: when is the dormitory open for visit? (translation)
Ming: 怎么支付学费? 汇票还是拉卡? (sentence to translate)
Suying: how do I pay for tuition? check or credit card? (translation)
Ming: 没了
That’s it
Ming: 不是 visiting? the dorms?
Suying: 什么‘第一次要带多少钱’?
What is ‘第一次要带多少钱’? (Suying asking for clarification of Ming’s sentence ‘how much money do I need to bring the first time?’)
Ming: 不是 visiting 是住啊
Not visiting, I’m going to stay there.

The excerpt shows Ming seeking help from Suying in communicating on issues of dormitory arrangement and tuition payment for his study abroad at a university in the USA. In negotiating the right words to use and leveraging the linguistic resources in his transnational social network, Ming also seems to be drawing from such bridging capital in navigating his educational pathway.

The language skills that Suying was practicing with her peers and her social relationship with them were envisioned by Suying as assets in her future career. In other words, the social and linguistic capitals that she was cultivating in the intersecting social fields of transnational lifeworld and educational institution were projected as having leverage in a future career that is part of a global economy.
Now that I know how to keep in touch with them, and I have the opportunity, I don’t want to miss it. In the future, I want to work in China, not really in China, but work for some company that would send me to China to work because I know Chinese. And if I go there I would have some personal contact already. (Interview in Cantonese, November 2007; words in italics spoken in English)

Our follow-up interviews with Suying in the summer of 2009 and 2010 after her first and second years in university show that she was still in contact with her peers in Shanghai. She was also participating in a college extracurricular club that was set up to promote exchanges with university students and companies in China. Suying was serving as University Relations officer in the club and noted that the relationships she had established previously in the language exchange program in Shanghai was an important credential that she used in running for this office. In this position, she helped to establish communications with universities in China that included an ‘online buddy program’ started by the club with the purpose to ‘find students who are interested to pair up with one of our students to exchange cultural difference, to understand how we think about China and how they think about America’. (Interview in English, June 2009) As one of the participants in the program, Suying described her communication with her online buddy at Tsinghua University as follows:

Because I wouldn’t normally see the news to see what is happening in China and some of the deeper issues that are politically related or socially related. Because he has direct influence, because he’s living in the country, so how he feels about things differs from the way I feel. When he presents these issues, sometimes I would have same kind of feeling toward the same subjects … I feel like when I was talking to him, I learned more about their lives, what’s happening around them … He told me once he was going to Sichuan to do some volunteering. He and his friends were doing fundraising to rebuild a school. They helped them to rebuild a basketball court. That was last summer. I was thinking if I had the chance, I would definitely go with you. (Interviews in English, June 2009, 2010)

It seems that Suying was again developing within the university setting the kinds of social capital that she had started to cultivate in high school. What was meant to serve a bridging purpose in the intercultural exchanges is described here also with the bonding language of ‘same kind of feeling’ and concerning experiences that are situated in the everyday lifeworld of her peer. Moreover, the social relationships, cultural affinity, and language skills that she was cultivating had, according to Suying, supported her attainment of a formal position in a student business organization and, hence, her movement in the professional educational field. In brief, what we see in Suying’s case is that the particular academic experiences and literacy practices with online media that she had as an adolescent and young adult had allowed her to recreate a set of social and cultural connections to her natal country. These
connections serve both bonding and bridging functions as they were embedded in the intersecting social fields of transnational lifeworld and educational institution. The fact that these resources were constructed within a formal educational setting had made them recognizable and transferable across institutional contexts as she moved from high school to university.

Kaiyee: learning in interest-based networks

Kaiyee was a Grade 11 student who had been living in the USA with her family for slightly over two years before the research commenced. Kaiyee noted that she communicated with about 10 people in China on IM every week. These people included her friends, former schoolmates and cousins in Shanghai, and online friends she had met on Chinese discussion forums. We have previously studied the communication practices in which Kaiyee engaged with her social networks in the USA and China through the use of IM (Lam 2009a). In that work, we discussed how, among Kaiyee and her friends and former schoolmates in Shanghai, their IM exchanges positioned Kaiyee in the everyday lifeworld of her peers and enabled her to generate knowledge of their educational and career trajectory. Here we focus on another significant social network that Kaiyee maintained online that included people whom she had met on social networking websites and forums in China that were focused on digital art.

Kaiyee developed an interest in designing forms of digital art such as computer wallpaper and graphical interfaces soon after she came to the USA. To develop her skills in this area, she began to network with people on a China-based website called Xianfeng Wang. Among more than 15 contacts on IM whom she had first met on such digital art networking sites, some involved short-term and occasional exchanges of design knowledge and skills while a few had evolved into long-term mentorship and friendship. For example, in describing the people on her contact list on QQ (a popular IM and social networking program in China) in an interview, Kaiyee pointed out close to 10 people with whom she had shared design artifacts and solicited each other’s help in troubleshooting particular design problems.

He taught me a little bit about … modify the QQ login (interface) … she put a logo on the pictures … I want the original one I just add her … This one is from BBS (online bulletin board) … he asked me to make a picture for him. (Interview July 2007; all interviews with Kaiyee were conducted in English)

Among several sustained relationships that Kaiyee had developed through networking on digital design sites was one with Wei, whom Kaiyee considered a mentor. Wei was a recent college graduate living in Shanghai and was the moderator of an online discussion forum. Kaiyee noted the following about Wei:

‘I saw his work, and its nice, so I give him judgments … and I ask him can you teach me how to do this, too, I want to do one by myself, and then he adds my
As Kaiyee was in regular communication with Wei during the entire period of our study, we were able to record a number of their IM exchanges that involved discussions of each other’s design work. For example, below Wei provided feedback to her on the Photoshop techniques that she used in editing an image:

Wei: 不错的，不过颜色太接近
pretty good, but the colors are too similar
Wei: 还有就是粉过头了
and they are too pastel
Kaiyee: - (emoticon)
Kaiyee: 那张原来底色就是粉額-
the base color of the image was pastel
Kaiyee: 哎～
argh~ (two lines omitted)
Wei: 稍微透彻点, 颜色再偏差大点
make it a bit more translucent, and the color contrast a bit stronger
Wei: 黄的再黄点, 红的再偏紫点
the yellow tone a bit deeper, and the red tone a bit closer to purple
Wei: 不过基调是暖色调, 所以偏的时候不要偏错了
but the basic tonal quality is a soft one, so be careful of that when you adjust the colors
Kaiyee: 我弄了透明度。不然很顯眼。也就是更難看了。。。
I’ve set it to be more translucent, or else it’d be even worse …

In developing such mentoring and knowledge exchange networks with people with diverse backgrounds and expertise, Kaiyee was capitalizing on the media and social resources in her natal country and more fluent language to learn in a specialized domain while she was a new immigrant in the USA. The resources derived from these relationships serve a bridging function by linking people to external assets outside of their immediate environment, and facilitating information sharing and contact with a broader range of people. Indeed, by creating bridging ties in an online interest-based community, Kaiyee was extending beyond the limitations that she might be experiencing as she was learning a new language in a new land. Additionally, the transnational flow of media resources in many online interest-based communities (Black 2008) is also demonstrated in the way that Kaiyee was introduced by her peers in China to deviantART, a prominent online art community in the English language. Kaiyee first learned about deviantART through the participants in the Chinese discussion forums who hosted their artwork on deviantART because of the limited space to post graphics on the forums. The English site also served as a destination for the forum participants in China to access different forms of art design and information. In this respect, Kaiyee described how she offered help in translating the English language to support Wei’s use of the deviantART website:
There is a lot of resource on the deviantART site, and it’s in English. And Wei can’t understand English well … Sometimes he saw a theme is really nice, but the author of the work only offers the theme but not the wallpaper … And actually there is a link under the work says here is the link to the wallpaper, but he can’t see it. So I, it’s a really easy thing to do … He gave me the preview of the other themes and asked me how to get the wallpaper. (Interview January 2008)

In turn, Kaiyee also started exploring her interests in particular designs on deviantART, as she explained how she learned a kind of graphics called ‘vector’ when she was browsing the site during an observation (July 2008):

Kaiyee: I like that style.
Interviewer: Can you say a little about the style?
Kaiyee: One good thing about Vector is that no matter how big your screen is, the wallpaper gets larger or smaller, it will still be clear.
Interviewer: How did you learn that?
Kaiyee: Wei told me.

Within the social field of online interest-based communities in digital art design, Kaiyee was drawing from the social, language, and material resources across countries to position herself as a designer. Her participation in transnational networking and communicative exchanges with people in her natal country serves to generate information and knowledge, extend her abilities in a specialized domain, and develop a new social identity for herself rather than simply reinforcing existing identities. Moreover, the particular nature of this social field, with the online circulation of resources across national boundaries, had prompted Kaiyee and her fellow participants to move across languages and to some extent serve as language mediators for each other in the domain of digital design.

Yet, we also see indications of the merging of bridging and bonding characteristics in Kaiyee’s relationships with some of her online peers as she described how they shared other aspects of their everyday life, such as family relationships, living situation, school, and work. For instance, in a recorded IM dialog between Kaiyee and Wei as shown below, the topic of conversation shifted from the use of Photoshop to Wei’s experience of his neighborhood at the moment of the conversation (reference to the late-night partying of foreign nationals living near his home) and ultimately to a discussion of the home prices, new residential constructions, and the affordability of housing in Shanghai and its neighboring city, Wuxi.

Wei: 我窗对面是别墅, 住着满多外国人
right across from my window is a villa, which has a lot of foreigners living there
Wei: 都是夜猫子
they’re all night owls
Kaiyee: 师傅家里的地段老好嘛
shifu (teacher/mentor), your neighborhood is pretty good eh

(11 lines omitted of description of partying of the foreign nationals and the types of homes in the neighborhood)
Wei: 再说搬的时候是房价最便宜的时候
also home prices were at their lowest when we moved in
Wei: 当时我们这里大概5000元，平米
at that time it was about 5000 dollars (yuan) per square foot
Wei: 现在这里起码1万5一平米
now it’s gone up to at least 15,000 dollars (yuan) per square foot
Kaiyee: 5000也很贵来
5000 was still a lot
Kaiyee: 我以前上海住额是老式工房。。柠穷呀。。。
I used to live in the old-style public house when I was in Shanghai… we were poor…
Wei: 现在5000一平米连我们在无锡的房子都买不到
now you can’t even buy the homes we build in Wuxi for 5000 dollars (yuan) per
… square foot

Here we see what may be considered bonding characteristics as these young people indicated their joint affiliation to their hometown by making reference to the lived environment and their present and past experience in the environment. This cultural affiliation is also signaled by the use of words from the Shanghai dialect that are blended into the Mandarin conversation. As we discussed in previous analysis (Lam 2009a), even though the Shanghai dialect does not have official status and is restricted from being used in institutional settings, it remains the language of everyday communication among many native residents of Shanghai and signals the assertion of collective identity. Kaiyee noted: ‘Cause people who use Shanghainese are proud of being Shanghainese. At least I am’. (Interview January 2008) Besides this shared cultural identity, these young people’s relationship was also strengthened through communication on other aspects of their personal lives. Kaiyee’s remark below about the encouragement she received from Wei indicates the friendship and emotional support that were fostered through their communication:

I think Wei is very jiji (positive). He never gets frustrated. He told me something about his story when he was younger and he was only like ten, ten points and he couldn’t get to a very good school, but he didn’t, he only ten points, but he kept working and got into a very good university. That’s very positive. And he always tries very hard, I think. (Interview July 2008)

Moreover, as indicated in the above IM dialog, Kaiyee’s written interactions with Wei also enabled her to gain a perspective of the changing economy of Shanghai from the vantage point of a working young adult. We discussed previously of Kaiyee’s case that her IM exchanges with her childhood friends and cousins in Shanghai enabled Kaiyee to learn about how these young people perceived their socioeconomic situation and career opportunities in Shanghai (Lam 2009a). Her communication with Wei, who was several years older and had graduated from college, provided another perspective from a more mature young person. Kaiyee’s involvement in an interest-based community of art design had provided her with a more diverse spectrum of social contacts
from whom she was able to gain viewpoints of the societal development in her hometown. Even though Kaiyee did not express an intention to return to live or work in China during our research study, such contacts and knowledge could contribute to how she would assess her future options. The strong weak ties reflected in Kaiyee’s online interactions with Wei illustrate the heterogeneous types of identities, information, and perspectives that may be developed through immigrants’ use of digital media in transnational contexts.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we examine how reading and writing with online media can be conceptualized as forms of capital production and exchange through which immigrant youth take up positions within particular social fields that cross national boundaries. The two cases analyzed here show a number of intersecting social fields in which these youths’ transnational communicative exchanges are situated, and how particular kinds of resources are developed through their online communication. The youths’ online practices include but also go beyond the typical notion of cultural maintenance with the homeland, and need to be understood within the particular social fields in which they are situated.

In the case of Suying, the social fields involved academic institutions that facilitated intercultural exchanges as well as the everyday lifeworld of the youths as peers and co-nationals. In her written exchanges on IM with her peers in China, Suying was renewing her cultural connections with her natal country at the same time as she was generating social and linguistic capital through her transnational relationships to envision and craft an educational and career pathway for herself. Literacy on IM is used to develop social relationships and cultural connection as well as representational resources in the form of language skills. These resources, including both bridging and bonding capital, allowed Suying to position herself in multiple fields. It is important to note the credentialing power of educational institutions in facilitating the recognition and movement of transnational forms of linguistic and social capital across institutional settings as Suying transitioned into higher education. However, such recognition of the value of ‘foreign language’ competence and cross-cultural experience is often separated from the cultural affiliations and experiences of immigrant students in the USA, as the former is considered bridging, and hence value adding for the monolingual majority population in society, while the latter is considered bonding and self-segregating for the minority population. Yet, Suying’s case defies such dichotomy and shows the overlapping bonding and bridging nature of transnational social and linguistic capital. It also indicates the potential power of educational institutions to reposition immigrants’ transnational capital as valuable resources in their educational and professional trajectory.

Indeed, the experience of Kaiyee shows an active cultivation of transnational networks to enhance learning in a specialized knowledge domain. As a new immigrant who had grown up in the digital age, Kaiyee’s informal use of online media
was heterogeneous and positioned her in multiple social fields including that of
digital art design. Within the domain of digital design, literacy on IM and other
online platforms is used to develop relationships with peers of diverse expertise,
gather information and material artifacts, and engage in discussion and critique of
design work. These transnational exchanges provided resources for Kaiyee to
develop as a designer and eventually move across languages in her engagement
in digital art. In this case, transnational social networks are cultivated and lever-
aged through literacy practices to expand the resources of a young person to
engage in learning in a particular domain at the same time as they allow her to
maintain identification with her hometown and follow its development. This
study shows the need to further our understanding of the diverse social fields in
which young immigrants may participate across national borders and, impor-
tantly, the role of new media in facilitating access to and exchange of social, cul-
tural, and material resources in these fields of activity. It points to the need for
educational research to examine how literacy counts in these transnational and
digitally mediated social fields and how such literate capital may be converted
to value in contemporary social and economic arenas.

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Notes on contributor
Wan Shun Eva Lam is an Associate Professor at the School of Education and Social
Policy at Northwestern University. She studies language development, literacies, and
socialization practices in new media environments. Her recent work has focused on
how youth of migrant backgrounds engage in multilingual and multimodal learning
with digital and transnational media.

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