

Culturally Contested Pedagogy



Battles of Literacy and Schooling
between Mainstream Teachers
and Asian Immigrant Parents

Guofang Li

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SUNY series, Power, Social Identity, and Education
Lois Weis, editor

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Guofang Li

With a Foreword by Lee Gunderson

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*To the loving memory of my brother, Li You-guo,
who always lived with big dreams*

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Foreword

Guofang Li presents a fascinating study in this book, one that describes and analyzes the interactions, communications, and difficulties occurring among teachers, immigrant students, and their parents. It is not, however, a typical immigrant study that explores the plight of poor families interacting with schools and teachers. Li's study includes white middle-class teachers in the school who are a racial minority in the community and Chinese immigrants who are a racial majority and who are not poor but middle-class or higher socioeconomically than the teachers. The Chinese families have economic power and they are enthusiastic about using it to improve their children's chances for success. The difficulty is that there are significant cultural differences between teachers' and parents' views of what students should learn and how they should be taught (J. Anderson, 1995a; J. Anderson & Gunderson, 1997; Gunderson & J. Anderson, 2003; Gunderson, 2000). Teachers, parents, and other interested individuals all seem to want the best for children. The difficulty is agreeing on what constitutes the best. This is as true for literacy teachers and researchers as it is for parents and other community groups. Over the years what is considered the best in reading instruction has varied dramatically.

Gunderson (2001) writes, "Schools and teachers are in many respects the instruments by which governments both national and local inculcate in their citizens the set of beliefs deemed correct and appropriate" (p. 264). Dick and Jane in the United States and in Canada represented mainstream societal views of family, gender, work ethic, and family structures to students, regardless of their backgrounds. In the 1960s the civil rights movement and the immigration of hundreds of thousands of Spanish-speaking students helped to

focus attention on the needs, abilities, and backgrounds of students who differed from the individuals found in reading textbooks. Considerable efforts were made to include minority students in reading materials and through busing in the United States to assure that they were distributed equally across schools in ways that were representative of the diversity of the overall community. Basal reading programs were designed to systematize the teaching and learning of reading involving materials that represented the diversity of students. Basal reading series were based on the notion that students should learn discrete, separate reading skills in a systematic and orderly fashion. In the 1960s and 1970s, basal reading series were used widely across North America to teach students to read. They were considered to be essential and, even better, to be based on scientific principles (Shannon, 1989).

A number of revolutions in the way educators view the teaching and learning of reading began in the 1960s. Meaning, many such as Goodman (1967) argued, does not occur in any transcendental sense in text, but is a result of the interaction of a human being and a text. These and other researchers argued strongly that “real literature” was essential to learning, not the artificially constructed and stilted discourse found in basal readers. Others, like Read (1971), showed that reading and writing are not separate processes, but that they occur naturally in an integrated and interactive way. The educational approach referred to as “whole language” was in large part a result of these views. Whole language educators were convinced that children should be encouraged to explore language in meaningful ways, to read authentic literature, and to invent spellings. Delpit (1988, 1991) argued that whole language involves a focus on process, one that benefits students from the middle class but denies minority students access to the “power” code. Whole language as an early instructional approach became the focus of criticism in the 1990s from individuals who believed that early reading instruction should focus on systematic phonics instruction since phonemic awareness was found to be a predictor of reading achievement. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) mandated the teaching of phonics and phonics-based reading programs. It represents a politically conservative or traditional view of reading and reading instruction.

The literacy research community has interestingly different views and approaches. Individuals such as Pressley (1998) have proposed “balanced” approaches, while others have developed views of

literacy that situate it more broadly as comprising ways of thinking that are tied to different sets of values, cultural norms, and literacies (Gee, 1996). Some speak of multiliteracies or critical literacies existing within a multilayered context varying from the reading and writing of icons to the reading and writing of hypertext. The "New London" group met in 1994 "to consider the future of literacy teaching: to discuss what would need to be taught in a rapidly changing near future, and how this should be taught" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 3). They speak of "mere literacy" centered on language only and argue, "A pedagogy of Multiliteracies, by contrast, focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone" (p. 5). Teachers in Li's study appear to be theoretically situated within a whole-language orientation, while parents are firmly focused on "mere literacy" and on the teaching and learning of the skills they believe constitute literacy and its promise of success in a broad sense in society. Their view is a conservative or traditional view of the teaching and learning of literacy.

Li's goal in this book is to describe and analyze the cultural conflicts occurring between teachers and parents. She wants to develop a careful description of teacher and parental views, not to empower one over the other, but to discover ways to resolve them. The immigrant families in this study were part of the influx of immigrants from Hong Kong just prior to its return to the People's Republic of China. Unlike many immigrants they are economically affluent and have strong educational aspirations for their children. Li carefully describes the many ways in which this disparity in views creates conflict: views about homework, worksheets, "down time," skills instruction, meaning as centered in a book rather than as a feature of top-down processing, rote learning, special education, phonics instruction, student-centered learning, teacher-parent communication and respect, discipline, class work time, personal responsibility, individual choice, and the roles and responsibilities of teachers and their students. Parents use their economic power to compensate for the shortcomings they perceive in their children's classrooms. Li describes in detail the many ways in which the teachers' educational beliefs and practices are in direct conflict with parents' views. She also describes what she calls the "dark side" of parental involvement.

Li considers the role of critical pedagogy, or how teachers and education in general can provide students with the tools to better themselves and to strengthen democracy. The basic notion behind critical pedagogy is that it should result in progressive social change.

In most studies the school is seen as a conservative force that attempts to maintain the privileged status of the mainstream majority, and the purpose of critical pedagogy is to privilege all students. Li's study has interesting implications for understanding the dynamics of the struggles between homes and schools. In the case of Li's study the Chinese families are the majority in the community and their views of teaching and learning are conservative views normally associated with the mainstream. On the other hand, the white teachers are from the minority group in the community, and their views are uncomfortably nonconservative in the eyes of the majority group. The political struggles and their outcomes that Li observes help us understand more about the complexity and relativity of the notions of minority and majority.

Li concludes the book with recommendations for ways to resolve what seem like irreconcilable differences. I believe you will find this to be an interesting study, one that will challenge many mainstream views of teaching and learning. It will provoke both conversations and arguments about teaching and learning and about multicultural education. It will challenge teachers to evaluate their views of inclusion in significant ways. With no further comment, I invite you to begin your journey to meet the teachers, students, and parents of Richmond's Taylor elementary school as chronicled by Guofang Li.

Lee Gunderson

The University of British Columbia

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Introduction

Literacy Learning and Teaching in a New Socioeconomic Context

[Mainstream] educators are being tested by [the Chinese] parents' views, different views about education. And [the Chinese] parents are being tested because our educational systems are different and it's hard not to be judgmental. Both groups come from different backgrounds, different beliefs.

—Ms. Dawson, Taylor Elementary School

In 2000, upon the completion of my doctoral research on Chinese immigrant families' bicultural literacy practices and socialization in Saskatoon, a small city in Western Canada, I moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, to continue my research on Chinese immigrant children's school-home literacy connections at the University of British Columbia. When I landed in Vancouver, I found myself in a state of cultural shock. In Saskatoon, there were only about 4,000 Chinese residents; they were mostly manual laborers and were often scattered in the city without forming a solid ethnic community. The Asians were at the periphery of the heated racial and educational tensions between whites and native peoples. I was a member of an "invisible minority." However, in Vancouver where Asians had become the majority, numerically surpassing the whites, I became part of a "visible majority." Since more than one-third of its population is Chinese, Vancouver has been nicknamed "Hongcouver," and the University of British Columbia (UBC) is called "University of Billion Chinese." I was

surprised that local media such as the *Vancouver Sun* and *Vancouver Courier* were flooded with news about new middle-class Chinese immigrants and communities, especially issues such as their campaign for the legitimacy of the Chinese language in university admissions, their critical attitudes toward K-12 public school education, and their push for traditional teacher-centered schools.

I was quite intrigued by the power the Chinese community exhibited and even shocked to learn that in several school districts traditional schools had been established due to the Chinese parents' efforts. Later in my interviews with the Chinese parents in the Vancouver suburb of Richmond, all of them responded that if they had a choice in their district, they would send their children to such schools. Their critique of Canadian schools, however, was perceived as their unwillingness to make efforts to adapt to the new world. Later when I discussed this issue with a white female colleague, a professor of education, she commented, "I'm sorry. This is Canada, not Hong Kong. If [the Chinese] don't like the schools here, they should not have come here." This view (though not necessarily shared among the faculty at UBC), as I learned, was unfortunately the common sentiment of the mainstream. In return, the Chinese perceived that the Canadians simply refused to face reality and accept change.

"To change" or "not to change" became the on-going battle between the Chinese and the mainstream Canadians. As a Chinese immigrant to Canada, educated both in Canada and in China, I found myself puzzled by the two competing paradigms, unable to take sides. The question to me is not whether we should change, but more changing *to what and how much*. If we believe in multiculturalism and in building a democratic society, then we should respect ethnic groups' and parents' choices regarding their children's education. After all, the Chinese, as a historically marginalized group, seem to be fighting against the dominance of the Eurocentric hegemonic practices by demanding that their ways of knowing be legitimized. However, if we believe that the Chinese should change and accept mainstream practices, then we endorse the dominance of the mainstream and the marginalization of the minority. The responsibility of schools, as I understand it, is to serve the needs of the students and their community, rather than vice versa. These battles between the two parties, therefore, have gone beyond an educational and pedagogical debate to become social and political.

Is it possible that both camps can learn from each other and a middle ground can be achieved between the two orientations? How

are the two dichotomous orientations played out in school settings? In order to better understand the dynamics and complexities of teaching and learning in an increasingly complex situation in which literacy, culture, race, and social class intertwine to make an impact on teachers, students, and parents, in this book I provide a descriptive account of cultural clashes and symbolic struggles between Canadian teachers and Chinese immigrant parents and the experiences of their children who live through these cultural conflicts in their intersecting worlds of school, home, and community. I explore the experiences and perspectives of the teachers, parents, and students who were at the heart of these cultural conflicts and contradictions, and I examine the inter-institutional linkages between school and home and how pedagogy was culturally and politically contested between mainstream teachers and Chinese parents.

Teaching and Learning in a New Time

The recent mass immigration has resulted in the emergence of many middle-class immigrant and ethnic enclaves in many cities in North America. Although they have enriched the cultural diversity of the society, these ethnic enclaves at the same time have also created a sense of cultural separateness. This perceived separateness often leads to social and cultural conflicts that are inherent within a multicultural society with a range of discordant values and beliefs. Schooling and education often become sites of embodiment of such social and cultural conflicts. Ms. Dawson's words quoted at the beginning of this chapter, for example, are an example of such embodiment. Indeed, as Ms. Dawson's words suggest, diversity and differences have put educators to the test. This test is not simply about understanding cultural differences, but about reconceptualizing the power differences and the changing structural relations between mainstream schools and immigrant families.

Since the focus of minority education has been concerned with students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the education of children of these new middle-class immigrant minority communities remains unexamined. The emerging voice of a middle-class immigrant group, rising from their historically marginalized position to challenge mainstream schooling practices, has added yet another dimension of challenge to the education of minority children in the current post-modern reality. As countries such as Canada and the United States

become increasingly multicultural and multilingual, more and more mainstream classroom teachers, like Ms. Dawson, are facing the challenge of dealing with cultural and social conflicts between immigrant families' and schools' values and beliefs.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2001 population survey, the U.S. population grew by 33 million during the 1990s; about one-third of new residents were immigrants. The survey projected that in 2050, the total U.S. population will exceed 400 million, and the greatest increase in population will be Hispanic (from 12.6% in 2000 to 24.3% in 2050), and Asian/Pacific Islander (from 3.7% in 2000 to 8.9% in 2050). In Canada, Asia and the Pacific region have been the leading source of immigrants since the 1990s (53.01% in 2001), with China (including Hong Kong) being the number one source country (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2002). In the Province of British Columbia alone, immigrants accounted for 87.2% of its population growth from 1993 to 2000. According to British Columbia Statistics 2002, 81% of the immigrant population came from Asia (mostly Hong Kong and mainland China).

The increased immigration of families of Asian and Pacific Islander and Hispanic backgrounds has also changed the landscape of communities in many cities such as Vancouver, Toronto, San Francisco, and New York. The new Chinese immigrants since the 1980s have often come with resources—financial capital, training, and education. Unlike Asian immigrants prior to the 1980s, who settled in urban ethnic enclaves (Chinatown), the majority of these new immigrants settled in concentrated suburban areas and established new middle-class ethnic communities. In Vancouver and Toronto, for example, many new Asian immigrants settled mostly in ethnically concentrated areas in the suburbs (e.g., Richmond, British Columbia and Richmond Hill, Ontario), and changed the originally white middle-class neighborhoods into predominantly Asian middle-class communities (P. S. Li, 1998). In the United States, Asian-born populations are concentrated in a handful of metropolitan areas. Close to half (45%) of the nation's new Asian-born population live in Los Angeles, New York, or San Francisco. Within the San Francisco area, Asians make up more than half of the foreign born population (U. S. Census Bureau, 2001).

The shifted landscapes in these communities have also changed the landscapes of the classrooms in the public schools. Many regular classroom teachers used to teach in a setting in which subject matter and literacy skills were taught entirely in English and the majority of

the students were native speakers of English; and they often had no training in how to deal with ESL students (Penfield, 1987; Valenzuela, 1999). These teachers are now teaching students with limited English proficiency who are primarily from one ethnic background such as the Chinese. Since language and literacy practices—their functions, meanings, and methods of transmission, shaped by different social and cultural norms—vary from one cultural group to another (Au, 1998; Langer, 1987), this classroom landscape shift has added unprecedented challenges to mainstream classroom teachers' pedagogical practices. These mainstream teachers, who are naturally transformed into immigrant teachers due to the dramatic demographic change, need to deal with not only linguistic barriers, content, and interaction around instruction, but also different sociocultural values of the immigrant students' ethnic community, as well as different types of parental involvement within the particular ethnic community (Huss-Keeler, 1997; G. Li, 2002; Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999).

To overcome these linguistic and sociocultural barriers and maximize the learning experience of the minority students, teachers not only have to learn about students' cultures and backgrounds, but also need the ability to interpret and make pedagogical decisions based on the socialcultural data collected (Davidman & Davidman, 1997; G. Li 1998). Researchers on minority education suggest that pedagogical models that make teaching relevant to students' diverse backgrounds can help mainstream teachers overcome the barriers. For example, Ladson-Billings' (1990, 1994) "culturally relevant teaching" and Au's (1993) "culturally responsive teaching" maintain that teachers should include students' cultures and adapt instruction to the interactional, linguistic, and cognitive styles of the minority students (e.g., African Americans and native Hawaiian children) so as to transcend the negative effects (cultural assimilation, loss of ethnic culture and language, low self-esteem) and empower students intellectually, emotionally, and politically.

These pedagogical approaches are problematic for this study. First, these models assume that classroom teachers are familiar with minority students' cultures and their interactional, linguistic, and cognitive styles. In reality, with the sudden influx of ESL students, many teachers were not prepared to take on the role of teaching these students, and many did not have much contact with the minority students' culture outside school (Clair, 1995; Huss-Keeler, 1997). Although there is much talk about building teacher-parent partnerships, there has been very limited implementation of a true partnership (Fine, 1993; Epstein,

2001). Also, many of the practices involving parents have been geared toward resocializing immigrant and minority parents into mainstream parenting styles rather than understanding their own practices as a source of knowledge.

Second, these models operate on the premise of middle-class educators teaching and responding to lower-class students from minority backgrounds. These models do not address the challenges teachers face when class status between teachers and students' communities is reversed (that is, middle-class teachers of minority children from upper-middle-class homes). Researchers in sociology and anthropology of education (Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2000; P. E. Willis, 1977; Weis, 1990) have concluded that social class affects minority schooling in many ways. It shapes the resources parents can have at their disposal to comply with teachers' requests for assistance, and influences their expectations, strategies, and investment in their children's education (Lareau, 2000; Louie, 2001). More importantly, social class determines who controls what is taught, who has access to what, and whose literacy is legitimized in schools. Since mainstream schooling has been dominated by Eurocentric practices (Giroux, 1991; Corson, 1992b), a change of class structure will affect immigrant minority's social positioning in society, and therefore their interactions with mainstream society. Immigrant minorities, such as the Chinese in this study, may challenge the mainstream status quo, resist and reject the mainstream practices, and demand the legitimization of their own literacy practices.

Third, these models are teacher centered; they neglect the autonomy of students and their families regarding what they can contribute to instruction and curriculum. Minority children bring to school a repository of knowledge from their homes and communities. However, this knowledge is often not recognized in the school milieu (Moll, 1994). Research on minority family literacy practices has shown that minority families have very different cultural beliefs and practices of literacy and different ways of parental involvement from mainstream practices (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Heath, 1983; G. Li, 2002; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Valdés, 1996). Yet current models assume that the teachers' own cultural and literacy beliefs are not in conflict with those of the minority students. Furthermore, these models assume that the minority community welcomes and accepts the teachers' pedagogical approaches. What happens when teachers hold fundamentally different beliefs from those of students' cultures and when the minority parents challenge the teachers'

practices and demand that teachers teach in ways they do not believe in? How responsive should teachers be to the minority culture? Can they teach what they do not know or do not believe in? What about the parents? Should they accept practices that they do not believe in? Who decides what is the best for the children?

To answer these questions, we need to take a closer look at the linkages between school and home. We need to understand not only classroom practices, school structures, and practices in children's homes and wider communities, but also the interactions and relationships between school and home/community (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lareau, 2000). We also need to understand teachers' own cultural beliefs and pedagogical practices and how minority communities actually respond to their beliefs and practices. As McCarthy (1997) documents, although many teachers have employed a variety of methods to welcome diversity, their efforts may inadvertently reinforce oppressive practices and ignore or even devalue home literacy practices. Therefore, it is imperative not only to uncover the "hidden literacies" (Voss, 1996) in the homes and communities of immigrant children in order to provide insights into their education in the schools, but also to examine teachers' cultural beliefs and their pedagogical approaches to minority children's home/community and school connections, as well as minority perspectives on their beliefs and instruction. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine the interplay of power relationships between teachers' and minority discourses to shed light on minority students' education in a changing sociocultural climate.

This book is such a critical examination of teachers' beliefs and pedagogical practices and the minority community's response to their beliefs and practices. It is based on the findings of my year-long ethnographic research on Chinese immigrant children's home and school literacy connections at Taylor Elementary School (pseudonym) in Richmond, a predominantly middle-class Chinese neighborhood in the greater Vancouver area. It documents two Euro-Canadian teachers' beliefs and pedagogical approaches and eight Chinese families' beliefs and uses of literacy, their reaction to school practices, and their children's home-school literacy connections (and disconnections). These are examined in a new socioeconomic context in which the Chinese surpass the white community numerically and socioeconomically, but not politically.

Prior to this research, I had conducted an ethnographic study that focused on the home literacy practices of Chinese immigrant children

and had learned much about the Chinese cultural beliefs about literacy and education and how their beliefs shape their literacy practices and parental involvement in the home milieu (G. Li, 2002). My intent for this study, then, was to move beyond the home milieu to examine how Chinese immigrant children bring their families' cultural values to the school setting and make connections between home, community, and school literacy practices, and how teachers foster such connections. I was interested in understanding the Chinese families' cultural beliefs and the students' literacy experiences in and out of school and how they translated school and home differences. I was also interested in the teachers' cultural beliefs and pedagogical practices and how they perceived and accommodated the students' cultural differences.

During the course of the research I learned more about the teachers, the students, and the parents, and discovered that disconnections and miscommunications were evident in their lived reality of teaching, learning, and parenting in a cross-cultural context. Instead of finding harmonious and happy pictures of school and home connections, I uncovered disturbing collisions of discourses and silent power struggles between school and home. These cultural collisions and symbolic struggles are the focus of this book. Thus, this book is not about home-school cultural connections, but about cultural disconnections, disagreements, and disarticulations. It is about the battles of literacy and culture between Euro-Canadian teachers and middle-class Chinese immigrant parents regarding their children's education. It is about the battles "between home language and school language, home values and school values, home discourses and school discourses" (Lopez, 1999, p. 4).

To talk about cultural conflicts and battles of literacy and schooling concerning the Chinese in North America is a novel concept as they are often associated with the image of "model minority" who can (and willingly do) assimilate into the mainstream society, and who can "make it" within socioeconomic constraints without much support or questioning the status quo (Lee, 1996; Suzuki, 1995). These model minority images have become a destructive myth for those Chinese children whom the schools are failing. They have led attention away from the problems many Chinese children face in and out of school (sociocultural barriers, language differences, and socioeconomic factors), and have prevented us from unraveling the social realities of those who are facing problems in our educational system, for

example, schools' misconceptions and negligence to immigrant families' pleas for help, insensitivity to parental expectations, and insufficient resources (G. Li, 2003; Olsen, 1997).

As the stories of the students will demonstrate, contrary to the popular model minority myth that all Asian students are high academic achievers who are joyfully initiated into North American life and English literacy practices (Lee, 1996; Townsend and Fu, 1998), many of the Chinese students at Taylor Elementary experienced difficulties not only in learning English, but also in achieving academic success. For example, the 2001 results of the British Columbia Foundations Skills Assessment indicated that nearly 37% of the fourth graders (in addition to the 21% of students who were excused from taking the test due to their limited English proficiency) in the school had not yet reached the provincial standards in reading comprehension (BC Ministry of Education, 2001). Unlike the model minority image that Chinese parents are docile and nonconfrontational to the mainstream society (Chun, 1995), the middle-class Chinese families reported here not only actively challenged Canadian school practices, but also demanded that Canadian schools follow pedagogical practices similar to the traditional practices in their home country. When their demands were not met, the Chinese parents took action at home to remedy what they considered to be lacking in the mainstream schools.

The raising of the Chinese voice concerning their children's education in Canadian public schools has posed unprecedented challenges to the Euro-Canadian teachers who hold different beliefs about literacy practices and education in general. Cultural conflicts and educational dissensions have often arisen between the teachers and the Chinese parents. The teachers of Taylor Elementary faced not only the challenge of dealing with cultural differences, but also the challenge of adjusting to a changing socioeconomic structure in which the Chinese middle class is challenging the status quo of the dominant white society (P. S. Li, 1998).

This study examines the cultural conflicts and clashes in literacy beliefs and pedagogical practices of two mainstream teachers and eight Chinese parents within this new power structure, and the meaning of these clashes for the students who were at the heart of these cultural conflicts and educational dissensions. By offering a rich, descriptive account of the challenges and difficulties faced by the teachers as well as the Chinese parents and students, I hope to provide:

1. understandings of mainstream teachers' experiences and perspectives on teaching middle-class minority children in a concentrated ethnic community to inform teacher professional development and teacher education;
2. understandings of minority parents and students' experiences and perspectives of learning in a cross-cultural context to suggest recommendations for successful accommodation and adaptation to the cultural differences in schooling;
3. understandings of the extent to which cultural differences between teachers and parents/communities play a role in the education of minority children in order to build effective school-community partnerships within a new socio-cultural and socioeconomic context.

This Study

The study on which this book is based took place over a one-year period during 2000–2001, and was funded by a postdoctoral grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). It involved one elementary school (Taylor Elementary), two combined classes (grade 1/2 and grade 4/5), and their respective teachers (Mrs. Haines* and Ms. Dawson), eight focal Chinese children from these four grades (Anthony Chan, Alana Tang, Sandy Chung, and Kevin Ma in grade 1/2, and Andy Lou, Billy Chung, Jake Wong, and Tina Wei in grade 4/5), and the students' parents. It also involved interviews with one teacher assistant (Mrs. Yep) and one ESL/resource teacher (Mrs. Smith), and informal discussions with school personnel and administrators such as the principal. All the Chinese parents were first-generation immigrants. Among the eight focal children, Alana Tang and Tina Wei were foreign born, and all other children were born in Canada.

When designing this research project on Asian students' home and school literacy connections at the University of British Columbia, I was looking for teachers to participate in the study. When presented with the project, Mrs. Haines and Ms. Dawson volunteered to participate in the study because they both had large numbers of Chinese

*All names used in this study are pseudonyms. English first names were chosen for the children who used English names in school.

students in their classrooms and were both frustrated by the resistance of Chinese parents to cooperating with the school, and eager to find out more about Chinese parents and their educational values. They hoped that my research would help facilitate communication and understanding between the school and the Chinese parents.

As my goal was to gain an understanding of the participants' literacy practices, values, perspectives, and meanings in their sociocultural contexts, I used educational ethnography as the research method (Spindler & Spindler, 1982). This method allowed me, the researcher, to have direct and prolonged engagement with the participants in and out of the classroom, and to explore their beliefs, actions, and interactions in these settings (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). In order to provide rich descriptive data about the contexts, activities, and beliefs of participants, I gathered data from multiple sources using a variety of methods including direct observation, participant observation, interviewing, and artifact collection. My key modes of data collection included participant observation resulting in extensive field notes; semistructured interviews with teachers, parents, and students; and focus-group discussion with students and teachers.

My fieldwork entailed weekly visits (two school days per week) to the two classes during the 2000–2001 academic year. During the school visits, I observed the students' activities and interactions with teachers and peers, as well as the teachers' instruction and their interactions with students in and outside their classrooms. I paid particular attention to the literacy activities in which the students participated, their language use and choices in different settings, their interactional patterns with teachers and peers, and the ways they used or talked about their home literacy experiences. I also collected, read, and photocopied samples of the students' written work. As a participant observer, I took part in some classroom activities and field trips. My observations and thoughts in the field were recorded in my field notes.

During my visits I also had numerous informal conversations with the teachers about language, culture, and teaching. The two teachers were interviewed twice during the research process. The first interviews took place at the beginning period of the research project. I asked the teachers about their understanding and beliefs regarding literacy and its instruction, their experiences and perceptions of teaching Chinese students, and their understanding of cultural differences. The second set of interviews occurred at the end of the fieldwork, when I followed up with some questions that emerged from my field observations. I asked the teachers to comment on the focal

students in the larger study, some specific classroom literacy activities, school policies, and their interaction with the parents and their perceptions of the parents' involvement in their children's learning. An ESL/resource teacher, Mrs. Smith, and the Chinese teacher aid, Mrs. Yep, were also interviewed on similar issues. These interviews, all semistructured, lasted one to two hours.

Semistructured interviews were also conducted with parents of the students (one parent per family, and eight parents in total). These interviews took place in the parents' homes towards the end of the research project. To understand the parents' cultural beliefs, their perspectives on their children's schooling, and their children's literacy practices at home, I asked the parents about their understanding of language learning, the children's home literacy activities, and their perceptions of and involvement with the school system.

Toward the end of the project, I also conducted three focus group discussions (in English) with the focal children. Discussions with grade 1/2 students were conducted with the whole class, while discussions with grade 4/5 students were conducted in small groups with the focal students only. For each focus group session, the students were asked to discuss their literacy experiences in and out of school; to explain their perceptions of reading, writing, and learning; and to illustrate with pictures and write a paragraph about what literacy meant to them. Each focus group discussion was half an hour long and was audio recorded. These pictures and focus-group discussions provided in-depth insight into the children's perceptions of literacy learning in both English and Chinese.

Over the course of the research, as I came to know more about the teachers, the parents, and the students in classrooms, over dinner tables, in the hallway, on the playground, and at their homes, I became more familiar with their concerns, questions, beliefs, and practices. My knowledge of these people as cultural agents, combined with the analytical and comparative analyses of the data collected, convinced me that the battles between the culturally different understandings of literacy and its instruction had become a risk factor in the Chinese children's academic learning—a wall erected between the two groups.

Researcher's Roles

A researcher's positioning and role are critical to the design, implementation, and interpretation of an ethnographic study (Goetz &