Weaving Relationship Webs: Tracing how IMing Practices Mediate the Trajectories of Chinese International Students

Steven Fraiberg *, Xiaowei Cui

Michigan State University

Available online 2 February 2016

Abstract

Over the past decade has been a dramatic increase in the international student population at U.S. universities with the total enrollments at many colleges having doubled or quadrupled within the span of a few years. Despite the size and scale of these transformations, there remains little situated research attending to how this population's home languages or grassroots literacies mediate their transitions into the university. To understand this process, this study attends to ways an online chat room called QQ mediates the students' transition into a large Midwestern public university. In performing this work, the present study contributes to current scholarship on IMing and to what Haas, Carr, and Takayoshi (2011) characterize as interactive networked writing (INW). Given the centrality of INWs in students' everyday lives, attention to this area is key for understanding how their out-of-school literacies afford and constrain their academic socialization and learning. This exigency is particularly critical in relation to transnational students, as the extant INW scholarship has focused primarily on English with limited attention to practices in other languages beyond North American borders.
© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. The shifting global educational landscape in the 21st century

Higher education is increasingly becoming part of a globalized network or eduscape (Luke, 2006), as characterized by record increases in the numbers of international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities. Central to this growth have been steadily rising numbers of students from China who now comprise nearly 29 percent of the entire international student population (Institute of National Education, 2013). These shifts have resulted in a rapidly shifting social landscape with the total international enrollments at many public and state institutions having doubled or quadrupled within the span of a few years. These transformations have further introduced numerous challenges as institutes of higher learning struggle to integrate a population who possesses a set of world views, values, and attitudes and beliefs about education that generally differs from western norms. While there have been various local initiatives to bridge these divides, educators remain relatively unprepared to accommodate these students or to fully respond to the various pressures being placed on institutional, social, and curricular structures. The need to close this gap is particularly important given the nature of the debate surrounding these issues (budget shortfalls, privatization, and

---

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail address: sfraibe2@gmail.com (S. Fraiberg).

shifts away from state-based missions) and the fact that the student population as a whole has remained relatively slow to integrate (Gareis, 2012). Partially due to the large concentration of students that has enabled the population to isolate itself within a relatively bounded group (a college within a college), this dynamic is compounded by a strong sense of national and collective identity and a general sense that many within the local campus community remain indifferent to learning about their culture(s) or initiating interactions. This sense of indifference (Redden, 2015) has been similarly voiced by many local students about their international counterparts. Moreover, while the majority of Chinese international students in the past were graduate students, this current wave is more heavily comprised of undergraduates who are being asked to contribute and participate in more writing and humanities-based courses with student-centered approaches that may not align with their previous cultural experiences and levels of English proficiency. Despite this divide, however, there remains little research into ways to better integrate this population, their strategies and tactics for navigating new academic environments, or ways to design culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive (Au, 1993) pedagogies. Focusing on the influx of Asians into the Canadian educational system, scholar of education Guofang Li (2006) argued that it is necessary to "find effective ways to collect [Chinese] student social and cultural data outside school, as we cannot teach when we do not know who we are teaching" (p. 211). The need for this data is similarly critical within higher educational spheres, as the broader Chinese intentional student community continues to remain a relative "black box."

To perform this work, this study attends to these issues at a large land grant institution, Michigan State University (MSU), where the Chinese international student population has increased from 2 percent of the population in 2007 to nearly 10 percent in 2014 (MSU Registrar, 2014). In particular, it focuses on the ways that a popular online forum sponsored by the Chinese Student and Scholar Association (CSSA) called "QQ groups" complexly mediates the wider cultural frames, processes, and practices bound up in the students' integration into the university. Broadly, QQ groups is one of the most popular instant messaging (IM) applications in China, with currently 829 million active accounts ("Tencent QQ", n.d., para. 2), which allows people to participate in real-time multiparty chats. As such, it serves as a key resource for social networking as well as for leveraging resources that facilitate students' transitions into U.S. colleges and universities. Offering fine grained attention to this process, the present study contributes to current scholarship on IMing and to what Haas, Carr, and Takayoshi (2011) characterized as interactive networked writing (INW). This term refers to deep social and real-time writing exchanges mediated by network technologies. Core to these practices is the blurring of boundaries between writers and readers (Haas, Takayoshi, Carr, Hudson, & Pollock, 2011; Luke, 2003) and the breakdown of distinctions between the production, distribution, and reception of texts. Given the centrality of INWs in students' everyday lives, attention to this area is key for understanding how their out-of-school literacies afford and constrain their academic socialization and learning. This exigency is particularly critical in relation to transnational students, as the extant INW scholarship has focused primarily on English with limited attention to practices in other languages beyond North American borders. Min Zahn Lu (2004) has defined composition as boundary work, and this scholarship attends to the reweaving of semiotic, geographic, and institutional boundaries.

To map out these issues, this research specifically attends to three key questions in relation to the Chinese international student population.

- How do the students form new communities and networks when they enter the university?
- What is the role of interactive networked writing (INW) in this process?
- What are the intersections between these activities and students' academic practices?

2. Literature review of IMing and INWs

In the area of INW scholarship, there has been growing attention to the ways that INWs and IMing are used both for establishing and maintaining close relationships as well as casual ties. Dovetailing with this area, another documented function of online networks is the cultivation and maintenance of offline social relationships (Jones, 2005; Leander, 2008; Leander & McKim, 2003). Rather than displacing face-to-face interactions, in many situations these technologies play a strong role in maintaining and sustaining them. This conceptualization is part of a more integrated framework that shifts from a view of digital technologies as a domain of "cyberian apartness" (Miller & Slater, 2000). In this area, scholarship in computer mediated communication (CMC) and social psychology (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014; Lewis & Fabos, 2005) has attended to the ways that students engaged in bridging (loose relationships across groups) and bonding (closer connections) ties to accumulate and leverage social capital. Derived primarily from large