

INTERVIEW

A Conversation with Guofang Li on the Past, Present, and Future of Literacies Research with Immigrant Communities

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Abstract

As junior scholars in the field of language and literacy education working with immigrant communities in different contexts, Shuang Fu and Tairan Qiu conversed with Guofang Li to learn about the genealogy of her transnational literacies research. Considering her decades-long research experience, these junior scholars wanted to understand her perceptions of the trends in literacies research with immigrant communities. In this interview, Guofang Li reflects on her experiences as a transnational migrant and explains how this has shaped her perspectives and commitment to the field. She shares stories about her journey, from her early days as a doctoral student grappling with her racialized and gendered identities across contexts, to her extensive research involving immigrant children and families from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in homes, communities, and schools. Guofang Li highlights the importance of understanding and incorporating students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into educational practices and policies, and she emphasizes the need for national/international collaboration in future research endeavors. She also underscores the importance of helping immigrant children become biliterate/multiliterate, in addition to being bilingual/multilingual.

Keywords

education policy; family and community engagement; migration, multilingualism and multiliteracy; transnational literacies

Shuang: Thank you so much for making yourself available for this interview. Having this conversation with you is an incredibly special moment for me and for Tairan, and we look forward to it.

Guofang: Thank you for the opportunity.

Tairan: How have your lived experiences as a transnational migrant shaped your perspectives and commitment to the field of language and literacy education in the past, present, and for the future?

Guofang: This transnational identity has always been a part of me. The place where I am from and my previous transnational experiences in China, both as a teacher and a student, really shaped my outlook on life in North America. Over the years, I have become very acclimatized to North American ways of teaching and learning. The two have always been

present in my research, influencing how differently I may look at things. As an immigrant scholar, doing research gives me a different frame of reference. Therefore, many of my research projects are about immigrant families and children. My transnational experiences always help me understand the fact that immigrant children and families have a way of life, experiences, languages, and literacy before they come to North America. In the meantime, I am also very aware that we need to acquire a new language and a new set of literacy skills to be able to function transnationally. Transnationality has very much shaped my work; in fact, it is a core aspect of my work.

Shuang: You mentioned that your identity as a transnational woman in the North American context has deeply informed your research. As you have spent a considerable amount of time in North America, how has your research evolved over the years?

Guofang: Let me share just a little bit of my research history: When I first started my doctoral program in the mid-1990s, it was more about my own identity search. At that time, not many Asian students were in our department. Before I came, there was one international doctoral student, and another one was a master's degree student who was a second generation Asian-Canadian; overall, very few students of Asian heritage in the whole college.

I realized that I was an English language learner in a Western university as my language practices were shifted from predominantly using Chinese before I came to North America to using mostly English. I experienced an identity change all of a sudden: I was a visible minority, and racially different in a predominantly white institution, an identity I have never really experienced before. Due to these language and identity shifts, I had to function differently in a totally different culture.

Then, I went to some Chinese Students Association gatherings. Some Chinese students brought their children, and I noticed that the children's speaking patterns were very different. Parents would speak to them in Chinese, and they would reply in English, and then they would speak to other children in English. It intrigued me because this kind of interactive pattern was a little bit similar to what I was going through in many ways. That is how I started my research questions: What were the language and literacy practices like for immigrant children growing up in a bilingual and bicultural environment? How did they negotiate different languages and literacies? What were their parents' beliefs and practices? I combined my own identity search and my research interest. That was how I started. Then my research evolved. It started in the home setting and then transitioned to the school context.

For my dissertation research, I visited some of the community schools where some of the children were attending. But due to different circumstances, I was not able to get into schools to do research. For example, one of the schools was undergoing some kind of renovation. It was just a situation that did not allow me to be there to observe the children during that timeframe. I decided to focus solely on the family aspect.

At that time, very few Chinese scholars in North America had really looked at the family practices; most research paid attention to schools, but there was not much awareness of what literacy practices took place in the homes of multilingual children. At the time, Guadeloupe Valdes' book, *Con respeto: Bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools: An ethnographic portrait* (1996), had just come out, which was very influential to my work, along with Denny Taylor's *Family literacy: Young children learning to read and write* (1998), and of course, Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms* (1983). Researchers had some knowledge about literacy in diverse families such as Latino and African American families, but not much was known about Asian families.

At that time in Canada, not many people had done this kind of research on family literacy. That is how, coincidentally, my research filled a gap in the field; however, I felt like I only had one side of the story. I wanted to know more about the children in the mainstream school context: How did the families interact with schools and vice versa? What was it like for multilingual children in mainstream classrooms? How did they negotiate their different identities and languages? These questions naturally led me to my post-doc research, which was federally funded.

When I came to The University of British Columbia (UBC) to do my post-doc research, it was also a different demographic context. My doctorate research included families who were from lower socioeconomic status or middle-class in the making. On the other hand, in Vancouver, the participating families in my post-doc research were all from more middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds. The Chinese community was also much bigger and stronger, which was perfect for me to explore how Chinese children negotiated identities, languages, and literacies between their home and school. I conducted the majority of my field work in schools. My findings pointed to a lot of cultural clashes between the school and home, which held very different ideologies about language and literacy teaching and learning, as well as beliefs about parenting and education. These themes came in my book, *Battles of*

literacy and schooling between mainstream teachers and Asian immigrant parents (Li, 2005), which won the Ed Fry Book award from Literacy Research Association (LRA).

After Vancouver, I went to SUNY at Buffalo as an assistant professor in 2001. Buffalo presented a completely different socioeconomic scene, characterized by its inner-city concept, which contrasted sharply with the meaning of ‘urban centers’ that I was familiar with in China. While ‘inner-city’ in North America is often associated with low socioeconomic status and social problems, in the Chinese context, it symbolizes progress and higher socioeconomic status. This contrast urged me to attend to different social classes in my research. One of my new projects there examined how newcomer families who were inserted into the most impoverished neighborhood negotiated these different educational contexts and their relationships with urban schools. I reported my findings in my 2007 book, *Culturally contested literacies: America’s “rainbow underclass” and urban schools* (Li, 2007), which was the Winner of the Ed Fry Book Award in 2013.

My extensive research with the families and schools helped me realize that teachers play a very important role in this kind of negotiation. When I moved to Michigan State University in 2006, I started to conduct research on teacher preparation and in-service teachers’ practices for multilingual learners and families. This was my research trajectory. You can see how I started with my own transnational experiences and then evolved to study children, parents, in-service teachers, and preservice teachers in my research.

Tairan: Do you know, or have you thought of where your transnational identities and your past transnational research will take your research in the future? Do you have a rough idea for a potential future direction for your research?

Guofang: I think the nature of transnational research involves multiple places and facets, and collaboration is the future direction to pursue. Now a lot of the research I am doing is collaborative across the country, and internationally, with researchers from all over the world.

Shuang: That was such a compelling journey. Thank you so much for sharing it. What you said resonates with me so much because in our small college town, I go to suburban schools to observe teachers’ instructional practices and how these teachers navigate different kinds of situations. I also go to a rural school district, where a lot of families work on farms. Because of their different socioeconomic status, the educational trajectories in each location look completely different. My second question is based on your research experience. Can you

share specific strategies or practices that teachers can implement to better incorporate students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into their literacy instruction?

Guofang: It is really hard to tell teachers, “This is the strategy you have to use.” Strategies have to be adapted to a particular teaching context. You have to contextualize instruction, and you have to know your students. You also have to consider content—what is the topic of study or subject area that students need to learn? You must have intentional pedagogical design to incorporate students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds into the lessons.

Unfortunately, with the ideological push for monolingualism coming from the schools, a lot of the focus has been on supporting multilingual learners' transition to English-only. There is still skepticism among some teachers about the role of first language and students' cultural backgrounds. Most teachers in my research, for example, believe in the benefits of multiculturalism and multilingualism. However, when it comes to knowing how to capitalize on these benefits in the classroom, it becomes a different story.

In a current project we are conducting in one of the most diverse schools here, not a single teacher said that it is not important to connect to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, in practice, it is a different story. We found that many teachers are adopting a transitional approach to bilingualism, employing students' first language as a tool to help students transition to English; however, after that is achieved, it is of no use. A typical strategy is translation. One teacher said, “I will allow students to use their first language for translation to help the newcomers bridge into English.” This is simply translation. Now, with technology, they can use Google or AI to get work translated, but does that count as culturally or linguistically relevant teaching or as a strategy to incorporate students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds as assets? No.

I always share this story about my experience connecting with students. Once, when I visited an ESL teacher in a school with a lot of newcomers, the teacher told me that one of her students from Cameroon did not want to speak much, and the teacher did not know what to do. Then, both of us went online to check out Cameroon, looking at very general facts, such as demographics, spoken language, for about 5 minutes. When the student came to class, I used what we had just read about Cameroon to start a conversation. Then magic happened—the student started talking nonstop, and the teacher was totally shocked. It was like “What? He can speak that much?” The student was telling me all about his culture, the coconut trees in his backyard, and his pet monkey.

He also shared that he thought the tooth fairy tradition in North America totally did not make sense, because in Cameroon, kids must throw their baby teeth onto a roof to avoid getting crooked teeth, so they do not put them under the pillow. The point of this story is that because we spent some time getting to know his country and culture, this student became really engaged and was eager to share his experiences with us. This was not a fancy strategy; it merely involved getting to know the student and finding a point of connection. After that, the student's language poured out, and the teacher was like, "Oh, wow! I had never known that he was so capable!" That was a learning moment.

Of course, doing that was not enough, but a good connection is a good beginning. More examples of what the teacher could do may include reading tooth fairy stories from diverse cultures, using multicultural/multilingual books, and maybe books from other cultures that have a different interpretation or different practices for baby teeth. Even for three of us, the tooth fairy tradition was never a Chinese thing, right? We do not really do that in the Chinese culture. In this case, how can we help students connect to a story that contains many cultural aspects they may not know? This is where pedagogical design comes in. When teachers design a lesson focused on reading, they should consider students' backgrounds, and there may be a need to integrate multicultural and multilingual components into it.

One question that challenges many teachers is, "If I do not know my students' languages, how do I use them?" Another layer of this challenge is that many multilingual students may not be able to read and write in their home language. We are encountering this challenge in one of our research projects here now. We are trying to bring more multilingualism into the school space, using all kinds of strategies to encourage students to use their native languages. We found that many students did not really do this. We realized that some children are very fluent in speaking their home language, but some are learning to read in the language, and others do not have that opportunity to learn.

To support multilingualism, we are trying to experiment with multiple modalities and technologies. You can see that teaching and pedagogical design is not really a fixed thing. We have to know our students: Are they able to translanguage in writing? Are they able to read in their own language? And what is the strength of their linguistic background? While there is no specific strategy that will work in all classrooms, there are some key principles: First, know our students. Then, once we know our students, we do some intentional pedagogical design.

Shuang: I love that so much. Thank you! Currently, I have one Karen¹ student in one of the classrooms I have been observing, and she is one of the only Karen students in the whole school. During AAPI Month, the teacher and I co-designed a unit to support students to explore the Karen history. This student's joy was noticeable. She even brought traditional Karen clothes and food to share with others. One compelling moment happened when the classroom teacher was printing materials in the staff office. Another teacher saw the materials and said, "Oh, we have Karen students in the school?" That teacher was not aware of that.

Guofang: By doing this kind of co-design, you build on what the student knows, you are affirming to the student that it is good to be different. It is important to note that there is no single strategy that will work for all different classrooms. For example, in your school, you have one Karen student. But then in our classroom, we have students from maybe 17 different cultures and languages. How do we do culturally and linguistically relevant teaching in this context? We will need to think about a pedagogical approach that affirms different diversities.

Tairan: I am currently working on a paper that is practitioner oriented. It is mainly for English teachers, about the translingual writing process of a high school student.

For every round of revisions, the editors were asking questions such as, "What can monolingual teachers do?" and "What are the strategies?" You know, I cannot give them generic strategies. I am writing about this from my experience as a person who shares cultural and linguistic backgrounds with my research partners.

Guofang: There is no single strategy that works for everybody. I will just add that there are some common principles that all teachers can follow; for example, providing multilingual texts, designing assignments that have space for first language, modeling, and then differentiating assignments. If we think about the instructional materials, we also need to incorporate texts that are culturally relevant and linguistically relevant or sustaining.

Tairan: Also, teachers need to change their paradigm first. They cannot just say, "Oh, I am monolingual. I do not speak my students' languages, so I cannot do this." You can do it by changing your ideology, you know. After your language ideology is changed, you will naturally change your ways of teaching, such as using AI and using all these multimodal tools.

¹ The Karen people come from the country of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. The Karen are an ethnic group who have resided in Burma for over two thousand years and were one of the first inhabitants of the region. Many of the Karen have fled Burma due to religious and ethnic persecution by the government.

Guofang: I think teachers are overloaded already, and to do extra things is really a lot to ask. So that is another challenge.

Shuang: Now let us switch gears from the school context to community settings. What are some trends or themes you have noticed in the rich body of language and literacy research in community settings?

Guofang: There is a growing body of work that builds on the community cultural wealth perspectives (Yosso, 2005). A lot of the research studies in language and literacy really use community spaces to connect parents, classrooms, and schools, and to engage in grassroots activism for equity and inclusion. In our newly released *International Handbook on Equity and Education in Inclusive Systems* (Downes et al., 2024), we included several chapters that focused on community settings as agentic, dialogic, and powerful spaces to dismantle system barriers and reconfigure those spaces as safe, inclusive spaces for social and educational change. I think this is a good trend. And again, this community cultural wealth concept is really important in this body of work.

Tairan: I am wondering how schools and teachers can foster stronger partnerships with culturally and linguistically minoritized families and communities to sustain students' literacy development? How can we boost the community wealth in classrooms?

Guofang: This question has been asked many times, in research and practice settings, but it is still not resolved. I think the issue comes from both sides, based on my own research experience. Mainstream schools function in certain ways, often utilizing Eurocentric strategies to engage in parental involvement in a superficial manner; for example, by translating newsletters and documents into different languages. These attempts have not been very successful as they do not remove any structural barriers or address inequity issues such as the curricular exclusion of minoritized groups. On the other hand, for minoritized families, there are also some practical and sociocultural constraints. One is that when you are a newcomer to the country, you bring the relationship between home and school from your own country to the new environment. That is what we call *habitus*, which will shape what and how we behave; this may be very different from the habitus of mainstream schools (i.e., assimilative, monolingual orientation).

In some cases, parents may internalize some of the schools' ideologies. For example, some may not want their children to learn their first language so that they can focus on English. They may internalize this monolingual ideology. In their view, being an English

monolingual is desirable for their children. They may not necessarily know about what harm that would bring to their children, because their goal is to support their children in being mainstreamed into the language, which will be beneficial in the future job market. For parents, this is a very legitimate concern.

That means that both sides may have different cultural understandings of what education is about. For example, in terms of language, my research showed that mainstream teachers here thought that the Chinese way involved a lot of rote learning, and it did not really work. On the other hand, Chinese parents in my study said that if teachers did not assign homework or ask students to study and practice, then they were not teaching or doing their job. Therefore, there are many layers of complexity involved in the home-school relationship. I think more dialogue and professional development for both parents and teachers would help.

Tairan: That is a really good point. I am developing a new project with some colleagues to do the exact same thing. That is, to bring parents and teachers into the same space, and read together and talk together. There are some things like race and racism that Asian parents do not really know about. You know, I had to learn about race personally and socially. As a follow-up to your response, I am wondering... in addition to dialogue, what are some things educators or researchers can do to educate parents and families and encourage them to become more involved by changing their ideologies?

Guofang: I have heard some success stories from teachers who have had the agency to make changes. A teacher I worked with shared that some immigrant parents were resistant to ESL, and that teachers at the school were struggling with students' first language use in the classroom. This teacher invited me to offer workshops for both parents and teachers. With the parents, we discussed how language is learned and how mainstream schools work. For teachers, I asked them to reflect on the hidden agenda within various language policies in the school. The teachers realized that they assumed that school was English-only, and that they believed students were disrespecting them when speaking in their native language. Some teachers shared that they did not realize what they were doing had excluded parents from participation in school and from understanding their work.

Through these kinds of discussions and reflections, both parties were sharing their insights, such as, "Okay, there are different ways of doing school." I believe this is a success story because in this case, many parents changed from thinking that ESL was bad for their

kids to becoming supportive of the program, and teachers became more transparent in their communication with students and parents. These teachers changed their perspectives and practices. This kind of work made the teachers notice the problem and begin organizing teacher workshops and parental engagement activities to break the ice.

Tairan: That is true. Additionally, teachers should channel their agency so they can continuously show students that their languages and cultures are valued. They can make a difference in their students' learning experience. This should be a common practice, either hidden or clearly shown in their curriculum.

Shuang: It is indeed challenging but extremely important work. Especially for minoritized parents, the level of parental engagement tends to be low, as they do not see themselves belonging in schools. Therefore, fostering a mutual understanding really makes a significant difference.

In your response to our last question, you mentioned briefly how your research informs policy. And that is exactly what my next question is about. Language and educational policies can significantly impact the experiences of linguistically and culturally minoritized students. How does your research inform language education policies and practices? What institutional and systematic changes do you believe are necessary to better support minoritized students within educational systems?

Guofang: I think some of my work has influenced some on-the-ground policies. For example, my work with parents and teachers led some schools to make explicit policies to improve communication with parents or even improve programming. And a big part of my work has been about how families negotiate multiple languages and multiple identities. In many ways, this research has influenced family language policy making in different immigrant families.

But in terms of federal or upper-level government policy impact, unfortunately, we have not gotten there yet. However, I am now beginning to engage in larger scale studies that involve national and international collaborations. I hope some of the projects will impact upper-level policies.

Tairan: Looking ahead, what do you think are necessary topics or considerations for multilingual and multicultural research? What can researchers do to push their research toward a more critical, socially conscious, intersectional, and/or ethical direction?

Guofang: I think one aspect is how we can influence policies at upper levels. We need to continue to pursue this, even though a lot of the time, most research papers are read by peers and not by policy makers.

Another aspect is teacher education, such as teacher professional development and pre-service teacher education. The new generation of teachers is very conscious of social justice and equity issues in education. We can think about effective approaches to support these teachers' efforts to translate their beliefs and mindsets into practice. Because ultimately, these are the people who will have a direct impact on students in the classroom. Supporting teachers to do this important work is crucial. Progress has been made, but there is still a lot of work to do.

Additionally, it is important to promote genuine bilingual and biliteracy development. As I previously mentioned, many minoritized children are shifting to English, or their development in their first language lags seriously behind their English. Tairan, you will probably face a similar kind of challenge; your children's English will be more advanced compared to their Chinese language skills.

Tairan: I am already facing that, and the older one is only two and a half.

Guofang: They are really bilinguals, but in a very imbalanced way. Without literacy in reading and writing, one can be multilingual, but how can one become multiliterate? That is the direction I am pursuing in my research. I think we are too focused on multilingualism. Although this is good, it is not enough. Immigrant families also need to support multiliteracies.


Tairan: I totally agree with you about the multiliteracies direction, as opposed to solely focusing on speaking different languages.


Guofang: That will be the direction I want to pursue. In addition to a push for multilingualism, we also need to strengthen their multiliteracies potential.


Shuang: Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts, experience, and expertise.

Tairan: Thank you for sharing your knowledge. It is always an honor to be in your presence and to listen to your stories.

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Tairan Qiu  is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Education at the University of Houston. As a transnational migrant and Asian woman, Tairan's research is at the intersection of culture, race, and transnationalism, with a focus on the nuanced and fluid language and literacy practices of transnational youth and families.

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