

## Commentary

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# “Not a bad thing”: a commentary on translanguaging among Chinese bilinguals

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A long time ago, Danling Fu worked with teachers in New York’s Chinatown to develop the English writing of young Chinese emergent bilinguals by allowing them access to their full repertoire. She didn’t call it translanguaging then, but in her practice and scholarship she went beyond the conventional thinking behind the traditional bilingual education practice of always separating languages (Fu 2003). Years later, after many of us had started understanding what her experience had taught us, and after the concept of translanguaging had taken root in sociolinguistic scholarship, she also adopted the term translanguaging. In her 2019 book with Xenia Hadjioannou and Xiaodi Zhou, Danling invited teachers into what they called a multifunctional translanguaging room, where students had access to all their language repertoire in order to learn (Fu et al. 2019). In this issue, co-edited with Hadjioannou, Danling Fu extends translanguaging even further, now going beyond the potential of translanguaging to support learning and to its role in helping all of us, including very experienced bilingual professionals and scholars, to create and think. Indeed, this collection of articles shows that in the lives of these bilinguals, translanguaging is definitely, as the editors’ introduction says, “not a bad thing.”

The bilingual children and adults that populate these pages are mostly of Chinese background and presently study or work in the United States, although not just in the U.S., for they *straddle* national contexts, cultures, languages. Some are learning English, whereas others are learning Chinese. Some are living in the U.S. temporarily, whereas others have been in the U.S. for generations. But all of them act in what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “borderlands” (Anzaldúa 1987). Together,

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the articles show how Chinese bilinguals engage in translanguaging as they learn and work – young or old, new to Chinese or to English, or comfortable in their performance of bilingualism.

The focus on Chinese/English bilinguals and translanguaging in this issue is most important. In U.S. translanguaging scholarship, the attention has been on Latinx bilinguals. The shift in gaze to Chinese bilinguals is important for two reasons. On the one hand, Chinese philosophy on language, as well as language use, differs significantly from that of the West and of English, leading some to think that translanguaging is of no concern to Chinese bilinguals. On the other hand, Chinese bilinguals in the U.S. are an important group historically and in the present, and yet their lives in borderlands remain understudied.

The language philosophy of Chinese people is not that of Westerners. First of all, because of the shared writing system, Chinese is often named as being one language, a macrolanguage. But the name “Chinese” encompasses what Westerners would call many languages, which Chinese people call dialects even when there is often no mutual intelligibility. With the growth of Putonghua and its adoption as the language of education in China, many Chinese people are indeed bilingual, and yet their bilingual use remains little explored. Heterogeneous language practices in China are often hidden at home and in private spaces, getting little recognition in public discourse. Understanding Chinese as one language has resulted in Chinese speakers in the U.S. always being viewed through a monolingual lens, even when their language differences are the same as those of Westerners who are said to speak different named languages.

This view of Chinese as monolinguals and the Chinese language as monoglossic, coupled with the linguistic differences between Chinese and English, have led many to pose that Chinese bilinguals do not engage in translanguaging. Chinese-English bilinguals perform their lives with languages that are said to belong to two different families – a Sino-Tibetan tonal language and an Indo-European one. Chinese uses a logographic system of writing that differs greatly from the Latin script of English or Spanish. Given these differences, it is no wonder that some assume that Chinese-English bilinguals do not translanguage. Here, Danling Fu, Xenia Hadjiioannou and their colleagues dismantle this myth, showing how Chinese-English bilinguals leverage their translanguaging to communicate, to conceptualize, and to create meaning in their lives not only orally, but also in writing, and not only in private, but also in public. The scholars in this collection definitively show how Chinese-English bilinguals engage in translanguaging not simply by moving between two languages, but by going *beyond* the monolingual monoglossic conceptions of two languages. This shift in understandings occurs because the authors look deeply at the speakers themselves, and not at the languages, showing how these bilinguals make use

of what Fu and Hadjioannou refer to as the “bilingual tools [that] are standing by, ready to jump in, even when conforming to one language-only zones.”

In centering the speakers, this collection brings to our attention Chinese-English bilingual bodies, and how they have been differently positioned throughout U.S. history. Often lauded as the “model minority,” this trope has often served to turn Chinese people into a “silent minority,” perpetuating for them unrealistic expectations, and serving the White majority as a tool of control. Referred to as “the Yellow Peril” in the late 19th Century, Chinese were subjected to a process of racialization that included all immigrants designated as “non-white.” Although Chinese men were welcomed before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to work in the railroad, gold mines, and agriculture, Chinese women had been banned since 1872, a measure to control the growth of the population. Furthermore, Chinese people were not accepted as U.S. citizens until 1898, 30 years after enslaved African Americans were given the same privilege. The domination of Chinese people in the U.S. relied on a process of racialization that marked them as “yellow,” and thus perpetual foreigners.

Today, China is a global power and Mandarin is a language of global importance, accounting for the growth of Chinese language immersion programs like the one in the private school described by Xiaochen Du. But the microaggressions against Chinese people continue. Chinese competent women are called “dragon ladies,” and “tiger mothers.” Chinese businessmen are stereotyped as emasculated and asexual, and inherently good in math and science, without recognizing hard work. As with the “yellow peril” in the late 19th century, the “model minority” trope serves today to mark and segregate Chinese people, and at the same time to strike fear among White Americans – fear that Chinese Americans will have better job and educational opportunities than White Americans.

Despite being the second largest group of bilingual people in the U.S., the language practices and lives of Chinese bilinguals remain understudied. In the U.S. census, they are lumped together with other Asians, merging their bodies and practices into an Other that remains opaque, not quite visible, without heterogeneity or complexity. This massive group of approximately six million people is then multiplied by the many international students, workers and businesspeople who live, some temporarily, in the U.S. In 2018 Chinese nationals had the largest number of employer-sponsored visas, and nearly half of the investor green cards. The tension between perceiving the Chinese language as that of a racialized minoritized group and that of a global power is evident in how the teaching of Chinese is approached in the United States.

Nowhere is this tension more obvious than in Chinese-English bilingual programs, the topic of the three articles by Tian, Du, and Zhou and Fu. In the Middle School described by Zhou and Fu, the Chinese students have all recently arrived in

the U.S. and are treated as immigrants who are in need of remediation. They are enrolled in a transitional bilingual education program, and treated as a monolithic Chinese-speaking group, regardless of their language differences. Zhou and Fu show how despite the expectation that students work only through English during the Social Studies class, these Chinese emergent bilinguals negotiate the meaning of English texts by translanguaging.

As bilingualism has become the norm in the United States, educational programs have become less tolerant of students' bilingualism, even as they tout the importance of bilingualism for all. In adopting a new so-called "model" of bilingual education, often called dual language immersion, two completely different trends are manifested, trying to work simultaneously on two fronts – the promotion of Chinese as a global language for monolingual English-speakers, and the control of Chinese language practices for bilingual Chinese Americans. The language allocation policies of these programs have become stricter, demanding that students use only the language said to be of the day/week/time of day. But this strict language policy goes against the actual languaging of bilingual children and bilingual learners. In the third-grade dual language classroom studied by Tian, children fall along all points of the bilingual continuum. Some have been designated by the school system as learners of English, some as learners of Chinese. The reality, however, is much more complex, a fact not taken into account by the artificial educational model. Tian opened up translanguaging spaces where children were free to engage with their entire repertoire to make sense of written texts in Chinese. By focusing on the children and their actions, Tian shows the impossibility of the model, an educational program based on homogeneous language, racial and cultural groupings, ignoring the fact that race and language have been socio-politically constructed and have little bearing on the actual complex lives of bilingual people. In this classroom there are not only Chinese children and White children; there are also Black, Brown and biracial children – the reality of American childhood. This same complexity is evident in the immersion program, supposedly for White English-speaking children. Of the three focal students that Xiaochen Du studies, only one has no Chinese background – one has a Chinese father, the other a Chinese grandmother.

Our constructions of language and race, and the educational policies based on those categories, do not hold in reality. In New York City, for example, where many Chinese-Americans live, more than half (52 percent) of the Chinese students classified as "English Language Learners" upon entering school were born in the United States. Yet, the image is that Chinese is only spoken by foreigners, contributing to the myth of the "forever foreigner," instead of being recognized as the discursive norm of some Americans who engage in translanguaging in the ways of other bilinguals.

There is another important lesson that we glean from this collection of articles. Even when Chinese bilinguals are successful graduate students (Zhang & Hadjioannou and Rongrong Dong), well-paid engineers (Du & Zhou) or seasoned social scientists and scholars (Wang), they experience feelings of guilt, frustration, inferiority, handicap, incompetence about their language practices. By only validating the language of middle-class White monolingual English speakers or of some monolingual Chinese speakers of Putonghua, Chinese bilinguals have constructed negative perceptions of their language practices. They suffer from what Zhang and Hadjioannou call “linguistic dysmorphia,” an imagined deformity or abnormality.

These articles show the opposite. They show Chinese bilinguals assembling all their many linguistic, cultural and life resources to make sense of the worlds they straddle. The articles show how speakers harmonize and bring together their experiences and knowledge systems in collaborative engagement and without having to “mold into formal monolingual representations,” as Wang tells us. In many ways, embracing translanguaging reflects the Chinese philosophy of Yin and Yang – two named languages touted as different are interconnected and interdependent for bilingual speakers. Translanguaging represents a simultaneous unity and duality – the simultaneous unity of the bilingual repertoire alongside the sociopolitical duality of two named languages. In its totality, translanguaging forms a dynamic whole whose potential is simply greater than the additive bilingual concept of two monoglossic languages.

Translanguaging frees Chinese bilinguals from the shackles of English monolingualism in order to take their place as equal language users in educational institutions and the workplace. This collection of articles enables us to listen with different ears to the language of all Chinese speakers, to recognize in their language movements the distant and graceful flow of figurative language, poems and idioms of Chinese that enrich their English. Translanguaging moves us towards understanding that the language practices of Chinese bilinguals are simply not “a bad thing.”

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