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Introduction

It was a chilly September morning in Cornville,¹ a small, quintessential US Midwestern college town home to approximately ten thousand international students who build their lives and dreams on the campus of Wabash University. The campus had just regained its hustle and bustle after a long, tranquil summer, as a new academic year began to unfold. As usual, I came to my office early in the morning to catch the first shaft of sunlight and get some grading done. A few weeks into the new semester, students in my writing classes, most of whom were from China, had not failed to regale me with their thoughtfully crafted literacy autobiographies that showcased the apotheosis of their rich, multifaceted literacy history. One student writer recounted how the hundreds of instructor-mandated weekly journal entries that she produced in high school led to a love-hate relationship with narrative writing, yet in the meantime cultivated in her an appreciation for the power of self-reflection. Another student writer reflected on how his experience with writing for a school newspaper helped him build confidence in writing papers for different courses in US high schools. Yet my eyes were locked on one piece, in which Yang, the writer, analyzed the lyrics of a Japanese song that was especially meaningful to her multilingual literacy.

In her literacy autobiography, Yang, coming from China, presented to her reader—me, her first-year writing instructor, also coming from China—the gateway to her then literacy world that revolved around Japanese pop culture. As I was appreciating her evolving understanding of the aesthetics of Japanese pop culture, as seen in the sentence “although [she] was never trained to understand what the definition of ‘beauty’ in Japanese culture is, [she] feels the resonance coming from this masterpiece [referring to lyrics by NaturaLe]” an email notification on my phone abruptly interrupted me. It was *Wabash Today*, a digital newsletter sent to Wabash University employees every workday morning. The headline in Wabash University’s signature color read, “Rogers [pseudonym] Tapped to Communicate Wabash’s Promise.” Rogers, the former secretary of commerce for the state of Indiana and chief executive officer of the Indiana Economic Development Corporation, was named Wabash’s executive vice president for communication and took on the responsibility of “enhancing Wabash University’s visibility and growing reputation at home and around the world” (“Hasler Tapped,” 2018). Specifically, Rogers would be in charge of brand marketing for the institution, strategic communications, media relations, and advertising.

This executive-level move didn’t come as a surprise; as a matter of fact, it was in line with the university leadership’s entrepreneurial vision of growing Wabash into a globally reputable brand that’s capable of attracting qualified students, scholars, and sources of funding from around the world. Over the previous two years, several bold strategic moves have been carried out at Wabash toward the ultimate goal of global branding; some of them invited controversies, if not resistance. For example, in the spring of 2018, Wabash officially launched Wabash Global—Wabash’s acquisition of the for-profit online college Lawson University. However, the marriage between the land-grant research university and the profit-driven corporation, unfortunately, was not a blessed one initially. The administrative rationale behind the deal, according to Wabash’s president, was to position Wabash as a leader in the evolving online higher education (Douglas-Gabriel, 2017). Yet, before the Higher Learning Commission was scheduled to approve the deal in October 2017, more than 300 Wabash faculty members signed a petition opposing the deal. In the petition, faculty voiced their concerns with the administration’s lack of transparency in negotiating the deal, the lack of faculty input in the decision-making process, and Lawson University’s poor track record, which could potentially damage the university’s reputation. Despite faculty

pushback, the acquisition was greenlighted and the new Wabash-branded online university, Wabash Global, was up and running.

The university's ambition to increase the visibility and impact of its brand continues to yield inspiration for innovative marketing strategies. During its spring 2018 commencement ceremony, Wabash connected live to the International Space Station to award NASA astronaut and alumnus Andrew J. Feustel an honorary doctorate, which became a trendy topic on social media where tens of thousands of people circulated and reacted to the story. The story also endowed Chinese international students at Wabash with tremendous bragging rights on WeChat, the social media platform virtually all Chinese international students rely on to connect with each other and their family back home. More interestingly, Wabash has also become the birthplace of two Guinness World Records—one for the most train whistles blowing at the same time (more than 5,000 students participated) and the other for assembling the periodic table in 8 minutes 36 seconds (set by a chemical engineering professor).

Wabash University is certainly not the only institution that's caught up in the sweeping current of global expansion and a neoliberal political climate in higher education. Universities across North America, private and public alike, rushed to launch their marketing campaigns to earn a favorable position in fierce competitions for student enrollment, funding from the private and public sectors, and overall international reputation. According to the 2020 *Open Doors Report*, published annually by the Institute of International Education, the total enrollment of international students in US universities has well exceeded one million since the 2015/16 academic year. To attract more prospective international students from China, for example, around 50 prestigious universities, the majority of which are public institutions, participated in an annual college fair located in several major cities in China before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. A major contributing factor to this competition for international enrollment is an ongoing decline of state fiscal support for higher education. According to the *Grapevine Report* published by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), the year 2018, when the present study was conceived, witnessed the lowest annual percent increase in the 5 years preceding it in terms of state fiscal support, and almost all of the increase was accounted for by appropriations in only three relatively large states: California, Florida, and Georgia (Center for the Study of Education Policy, 2018). Worse yet, 19 states reported a decrease between 2017 and 2018 ranging from -0.1% in Ohio to -14.6% in North Dakota (2018).

Consequently, public institutions became increasingly dependent upon tuition instead of public funding for financial sustainability. International students are prioritized as the most valuable customer (and derogatorily dubbed “cash cows”), as their tuition is double or even triple that of their in-state counterparts, not to mention the job opportunities and commercial vibrancy they bring to the local service industry.

Another prevailing justification for universities’ investments in the internationalization of their campuses comes into play, which lies in a discourse of cultural diversity. Over the past several decades since the Supreme Court recognized race inclusive admissions in its 1978 decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, “diversity” as a term of art has gained prominence in university admissions. More recently, in the age of multiculturalism, “diversity” has been appropriated and institutionalized as a compelling argument to enroll students of various gender, racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual, and socioeconomic identities. Divisions of diversity and inclusion became ubiquitous in higher education institutions, and the term “diversity” has packed on a load of meanings; it has been subtly tied to notions of not only social justice but also student experience, excellence and success (Wang, 2022). For example, Wabash University’s Division of Diversity and Inclusion (n.d.) claims that “a diverse, inclusive community is an integral part of the Wabash experience” and that “it is vital that we create and sustain a welcoming campus where all students can excel, and prepare all students to thrive in our diverse, global environment.” In the same vein, a line goes as follows in another flagship public institution’s statement of diversity and inclusion entitled “Inclusive Excellence: The *Relentless* Pursuit of Excellence through Diversity”: “At the center of IE (inclusive excellence) is the recognition and acceptance of the talents, worldviews, perceptions, cultures and skills that diverse communities bring to the educational enterprise that can be *harnessed* [emphasis added] to prepare students for leading, living and working in a diverse world.” These manifestations of the institutional discourse of cultural diversity are well aligned with, if not inspired by, the American Council on Education’s and American Association of University Professors’ claim that “diversity on campus provides educational benefits for all students” (2000, p. 3), which has been substantiated by statistical evidence (Gurin et al., 2002).

Revisiting Yang’s rhetorical analysis of Japanese lyrics in her literacy autobiography, I couldn’t help but wonder, Does this institutional discourse of cultural diversity² *really* represent the “differences” that international students embody and experience through their literacy practices every day? How might

such discourse reduce and flatten our international students' "differences" that seem to only index institutionalized identity labels? What are the material consequences of a misalignment between institutional identity labels and students' situated and distributed practices of difference? Together, these questions suggest that we as a community of writing scholars have not done enough to complicate the notion of difference entangled with international students' multiliteracies and that we are readily receptive to the institutionalized discourse of cultural diversity that reifies and stabilizes differences.³ Admittedly, many scholars in language, writing, and literacy studies have investigated how various institutional discourses of diversity mediate international students' practices of difference. In addition, there is an abundance of empirical accounts that shed light on how international and multilingual students who are institutionally labeled as "different" navigate the literate worlds that they deem different (see, for example, Canagarajah, 2013a, 2013b; De Costa et al., 2022; Fraiberg et al., 2017; Leki, 2007; Lorimer Leonard, 2013; You, 2016, 2018). However, we have yet to fully explore how these writers' literate worlds—networked ecologies a writer inhabits and makes meaning of—afford or constrain their practices of difference.

The years leading to 2020 can be characterized as a golden age for Generation Z⁴ Chinese international students who sought higher education in western countries, particularly North America, as evidenced in the soaring enrollment statistics. They benefited from a booming Chinese domestic economy, a harmonious Sino-American diplomatic relation, relatively open international borders, a genuine interest in cultural exchange, and ever-greater transnational mobility. However, Chinese students enrolled in US colleges during the 2010s often ended up in a superdiverse cultural contact zone that was intertwined with a neoliberal institutional climate (Pratt, 1991; Vertovec, 2007). It has become increasingly challenging and sometimes confounding to navigate the complex material and discursive installations that purportedly embrace this group. Their "literacy practices of difference," the term I use to refer to the construction and negotiation of idiosyncratic positionality through activities that involve semiotic resources, are further complicated and afforded by their increasingly intimate relationship with the digitally networked environment and a heightened sense of bodies and social connections. Worse still, in recent years, Chinese international students are caught up in politically precarious situations thanks to the pervasive anti-Asian, anti-Chinese policies, rhetorics, and sentiments in relation to the deteriorating trade and diplomatic relations with China since before the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

The globalizing force along with the ubiquitous institutional discourse of cultural diversity finds its local iteration at Wabash University—a large public research university in the US state of Indiana. Wabash's internationally renowned engineering programs, echoing the current of globalization, helped the university to attract nearly one hundred thousand international students over the past decade. As a major contribution to campus diversity, international students comprised, at its peak in 2017, 21.9% of the total number of enrolled students (Office of International Students and Scholars [ISS], 2019). The total enrollment in 2017, sitting at 9,133, almost doubled compared with only a decade ago. International undergraduate students comprised 16% (4,964 in total in 2017) of the undergraduate body (ISS, 2019), a number large enough to characterize how the discourse of cultural diversity gets interpreted within this particular institutional context. Among the international undergraduate students enrolled at Wabash, the great majority (45.4% or 2,254) come from the People's Republic of China (ISS, 2019). These Chinese undergraduate students can be found in virtually all disciplinary majors.

Yet it is precisely the massive flow of bodies and financial and cultural capital that endorse the institutional discourse of cultural diversity, which in turn render individual voices muffled or marginalized. These Chinese international students are discursively profiled as profoundly different in toto from domestic white middle-class English-speaking families. The discursive profiling of the very identity category of international students, on the one hand, allows this evolving group to be seen and heard, yet on the other, conditions not only the public perception of the group but also each individual's social, bodily, and material experiences. For example, as the largest group identified by nationality within the international student body, students from China are highly visible on campus. They appear in small bands or individually in the libraries, dining halls, study and recreational areas, and classrooms across campus. They have assembled two large student/scholar organizations—the Wabash University Chinese Students and Scholars Association (WUCSSA), representing the entire Chinese community, and the Undergraduate Chinese Association (UCA), representing undergraduate students from China. Yet their dispersed presence on campus doesn't translate to their recognition as an integral and indispensable part of the “mainstream” college experience. These Chinese international students' individual struggles and efforts, achievements and failures, pains and happiness, talents and weaknesses often go unnoticed and, worse still, are characterized by the institutional discourse of cultural diversity simply as diverse cultural resources. In addition, their identity

labels seem conveniently all-encompassing whenever the notion of difference appears in the official narrative. Their literate activities and experiences are reduced to those that only reflect their nationality or citizenship in the scholarship and public discourse (Canagarajah, 2017). Research in mobility studies, translanguing practices, and cosmopolitan English suggests that literate activities can hardly be identified as bound to any particular language or modality that is solely attributed to a certain nationality or ethnicity. Rather, one's literate activities are always translanguing and transmodal and are not always tied to static linguistic, cultural attributes in a modernist sense (Canagarajah, 2013a, 2019; Silva & Wang, 2021; You, 2016). Nonetheless, deafened by the tropes of resources and deficits, we have also been desensitized to differences other than nationality and citizenship, let alone students' own narratives and histories.

Critical applied linguists have long critiqued the neoliberal marketization of the notion of diversity and multilingualism by emphasizing the number of separate linguistic entities (Canagarajah, 2017; Makoni & Pennycook, 2006). The "exotic" cultures and languages that international students bring with them are seen as human capital linked directly to material profit. However, the institutional discourse of cultural diversity has yet to truly empower international students outside and beyond the more liberal educational sphere of first-year writing, as it puts students in a situation where they constantly juggle the resistance to prescribed labels of difference with their negotiated and performed difference. In other words, international students may feel valued and dismissed simultaneously as they navigate the discursive as well as physical space of a US university. Neglected or made invisible here are students' self-sponsored literate activities that may directly or indirectly shape the ways in which they perceive their differences and the ways in which they navigate literate worlds. This conflicting view is evidenced across most of our programmatic and pedagogical practices (Costino & Hyon, 2007; Matsuda et al., 2013; Silva, 1997). Students' agentic appropriation of their perceived differences remains in the blind spot of the institutional discourse of cultural diversity. As Chinese international students' literacy sponsors, we may be naively optimistic about our institutionally granted authority to intervene. Worse still, we may inadvertently contribute to reinforcing the myths about this cultural group that Qianqian Zhang-Wu identified in her ethnographic study. The most insidious ones are "(1) English is responsible for all the challenges facing Chinese international students, and (2) Chinese international students are well supported in American higher education, both linguistically and academically" (Zhang-Wu, 2022, p. 150).

To understand how Chinese international students inhabit their literate worlds and make meaning of their differences, I adopt an ethnographic case study approach and recount stories and counterstories of four individuals' (Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan) ecologically situated and distributed literacy practices on and off the campus of Wabash University. Through analyzing extensive ethnographic data collected during the period from 2017 to 2019, including observations, semistructured and nondirective interviews, artifacts, and video recordings, I reconstruct the rich literate activities that the four students participate in—activities that are nonetheless consistently reduced to the myth of linguistic and cultural difference reified in institutional discourses of diversity.

Two questions guided me as I listened to the four individuals' stories and attempted to recount them:

1. How do Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan, the four Generation Z Chinese international students in the study, *do difference* as they engage in everyday literacy practices?
2. How do Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan leverage, resist, or counter the ecological forces that mediate their literacy practices of difference?

Granted, I did not expect to fully answer the guiding questions through my participation in the four students' literacy lives. The students' idiosyncratic orientations toward their own literacy practices of difference drove what I focused on. However, the two guiding questions inevitably prescribed a particular analytical lens through which I interpreted and made sense of the students' practices. While consciously aware of my privileged position as a researcher, I embraced this dynamic negotiation of our positionalities, knowing this is what we all engage in as we practice our differences.

I approached the protagonists of the book—Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan—in the summer of 2018. Adopting a “typical case” approach to recruiting participants (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994), I invited a total of 17 Chinese international students who had enrolled in the first-year writing course that I had taught between 2016 and 2018. Among them, four participants generously agreed to participate in my study. The four students, whose self-chosen pseudonyms for my study are Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan, are all mainland Chinese in nationality and citizenship, and they speak and write Mandarin Chinese as their first or primary language.

Manna enrolled in my class in 2018. She would normally sit quietly in the back corner of the classroom, burying her head behind her laptop most of

the time and occasionally raising her head to make eye contact with me. The writings she performed in class, however, revealed her otherwise-concealed personality traits—introspective, expressive, and adventurous. Born, raised, and educated in Beijing, the capital city and the political and educational hub of China, Manna appeared to be a free spirit with confidence and an open mind. Yet she rarely exuded an air of superiority—quite the opposite; she was down-to-earth, amiable, jovial, and always ready to connect with people and things around her.

Wentao didn't quite catch my attention until I read his literacy autobiography two weeks into the fall 2016 semester. Decorated with ornate expressions, his literacy autobiography took on the style of a seasoned columnist for *The New Yorker* as opposed to a recent transfer student from China. Born in southern China, Wentao spent most of his formative years in northeast China and one year of undergraduate studies at a prestigious university in Beijing before landing in the United States.

Rarely smiling, Yang didn't seem readily approachable. Peers around her easily noticed an unusual air of composure that meshed maturity and melancholy. Her composure rendered her emotional or cognitive engagement at any particular moment obscure and elusive. In a sense, most of the time, Yang appeared to be immersed in her own ironclad contemplation and indifferent to the happenings in her immediate surroundings. However, when I invited students to perform group activities or respond to my questions, Yang would instantly withdraw from her contemplation and engage with others. It was not until our first individual conference that she apologetically revealed to me that her train of thought would sometimes go off on a tangent when the class discussions seemed easy to grasp. And it was not until I read her writer's literacy autobiography that I learned that her train of thought went off on a tangent to brainstorm the theme of her next lyrical project.

At first sight, Bohan seemed reserved, collected, and somewhat nerdy. Growing up in Shanghai, the financial capital of China and a megacity with a population of almost 25 million, Bohan did not carry with him the cynicism, frivolousness, and condescension that urban citizens from metropolitan areas in China are stereotypically associated with. Rather, Bohan would put on his signature laid-back smile whenever I saw him and cheerfully greet me in English: "How are you, Mr. Wang?" As the conversation went on, Bohan would gradually retreat to his comfort zone and answer most of the questions with a simple yes or no and only occasionally a brief elaboration. Though brief, Bohan's responses never failed to put me, and perhaps anyone who interacted with him, at ease.

My observation of and interview conversations with these four individuals took place in multiple spaces across and around the Wabash campus: class buildings, residential halls, dining halls, student union, libraries, theaters, cafés and bubble tea shops, among others. Importantly, the notion of a research site here is both a geographical and a discursive formation, as often-times a mere description of the site's geographic formation fails to account for the meaningful interaction between the participants and the physical space. For example, Wentao ritualized an on-campus tea shop as his prewriting warmup place, which, according to him, offered him inspirations and motivation. Data collection assumes not only a holistic (Fetterman, 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Spradley, 1980) but also a dynamic approach; that is, documenting indiscriminately every observable occurrence as it emerges and doing so on the move without precategorizing the documented. My participants' literate activities are not always accessible. For example, Wentao and Bohan usually compose papers for course assignments in their dormitory rooms. In such cases, I needed to be adaptable and employ a variety of methods to trace meaningful literacy practices without the intrusive presence of the researcher. For example, with their permission, I asked the four participants to tape-record moments of their writing processes and then-ecologies through their own lenses with the aid of a digital camera. In short, the data-collection process was purposefully unstructured so that it could be maximally generative and unobtrusive.

For observations, I assumed different roles at different stages: during the semester when they were enrolled in the writing course I was teaching, I assumed the role of a participant observer; after I recruited them back as my research participants, I assumed the role of a nonparticipant observer or nonpresent observer (or I would like to call asynchronous observer, as I was observing through their self-recorded video clips). I conducted observations at a range of strictly or loosely bounded sites, including classrooms, libraries, milk tea shops, an auditorium, the recreation center, and restaurants. I participated in some of their activities, but more often I observed the activities from a distance.

In addition to observations, I also conducted biweekly interviews with the four students. The interviews were loosely structured or completely participant-led, and typically ran from 30 minutes to 1 hour. The rapport established between Manna, Wentao, Yang, Bohan, and myself enabled participant-led interview sessions; that is, I would initiate the conversation with open-ended questions such as "Could you recall any memorable

activities that you participated in over the past two weeks?” and prompt the participants to decide where they would like to take the conversation. My rationale for doing so is that I believe only by restricting researcher interventions during interactions would I obtain responses that more truly reflect what participants care about. The interview questions revolved around participants’ literate activities and their reflections. I encouraged the four multilingual students to mesh whatever language resources were at their disposal during the interviews. Not surprisingly, they all opted for Mandarin Chinese—their native/first language—while more than occasionally meshing English phrases into the conversations. The linguistic safe (and comfort) zone that I consciously created helped us more effectively build rapport and capture expressions that were as intimately reflective of participants’ literate world as possible. I audio-recorded the sessions, selectively transcribed the recordings, and translated the transcript into English. I also participated in several extracurricular activities upon participants’ invitations, such as Manna’s dance competition, to better understand how they projected their persona in social engagements.

Multimodal artifacts include the four students’ writings for different purposes, including: class assignments such as collaborative projects, reflections, song lyrics, and email exchanges; course materials such as syllabi and assignment prompts; and social media posts such as pictures and videos of participants and their surroundings or ones posted on social media sites. My collection of these artifacts was ongoing during the research period. Some artifacts were used to help the four students create retrospective accounts of their engagement with a particular literate activity during stimulated elicitation (Prior, 2004; Prior & Shipka, 2003; Roozen, 2010).

This multifaceted and triangulated collection of Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan’s literacy practices has bestowed on me, an important sponsor and documentarian of their literacy, the privilege to coconstruct and reconstruct their meaningfully different literate worlds, bringing to the forefront their uniquely afforded meaning-making practices that shape their emerging differences. In fact, their idiosyncratic emerging differences, which altogether rewrite the institutionalized differences, are profoundly situated and distributed, so much so that only by rhetorically listening to stories recounted in their entirety and on their own terms, and by negotiating meaning with them through thick descriptions, can one begin to appreciate the four Chinese international students’ effort in doing difference differently. And only by appreciating their effort in doing difference differently can one begin to reexamine the

contradictory coupling of an institutionalized discourse of cultural diversity and a deficit discourse of international students' language performance and question the inequitable institutional structures that marginalize this cultural group.

The notion of “doing difference” finds its intellectual roots in Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman's (1987) landmark theorization of “doing gender” and subsequently, West and Sarah Fenstermaker's (1995) notion of “doing difference.” Countering the conception of gender as an innate, essentialized property of individuals, West and Zimmerman (1987) reconceptualize gender as a “doing”—an emergent, socially constructed performance through human interactions. As such, individuals “organize their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender, and they are disposed to perceive the behavior of others in a similar light” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127). In other words, West and Zimmerman argue that gender is created by individuals through everyday interactions and in accordance with socially accepted gender expectations. West and Zimmerman acknowledge, however, that “doing gender” prioritizes individual accountability for gender performance at the expense of questioning the inequitable social structures based on the gender dichotomy. The consequence of such prioritization is the neglect of acts of resistance in the face of inequitable social structures, as critics rightfully point out. Later on, West and Fenstermaker (1995) proposed a new understanding of “difference” as a “doing” by extending the notion of gender as an emergent, interactional performance into the areas of race and class, asserting that the intersection of the three social categories constitutes mechanisms for producing social inequality. “Doing difference” interrogates the idea that difference—if understood as socially constructed attributes or identity categories—can and should be used to predict an individual's behavior or aptitude and structure their experiences.

A reified “difference” that predominantly structures international students' bodily and material experiences of studying in a North American higher education institution is arguably “language,” or more precisely, their multilingual status and perceived lack of English proficiency. Relatedly, “culture” often appears alongside “language” in institutional discourses on international students' campus presence, surreptitiously dictating how their presence is viewed and valued. In the four protagonists' cases, other such reified differences intersect as well, for example, Asian or Chinese identity, or engineering major. These differences are not constructed and reified free of axiological bias: differences matter; certain differences matter more than others. The differences, once reified, aggregated, and institutionalized as

default demographic identifiers that appear in discourses about international students, possess immense constitutive power: they constitute who these group-affiliated individuals are supposed to be, what they are supposed to pursue, how they are supposed to interact with others, and ultimately, what differences are valued. As such, international students' experiences are institutionally structured through the dominant discourse's frame of reference (which is often ambiguous and contradictory in and of itself), rendering their agential "doing difference" invisible.

For example, the conflicting institutional discourses of embracing international students' linguistic and cultural diversity and upholding academic excellence profoundly frame Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan's ambivalent positionality as they engage in literacy practices. On the one hand, the four individuals not only demonstrate an acute linguistic and cultural awareness but also, in their own ingenious ways, perform linguistic and cultural differences to achieve their academic, social, and rhetorical goals. They have seemingly, to different degrees, internalized the institutional discourse of cultural diversity that highlights the neoliberal value of their linguistic and cultural resources and cracked the code of leveraging the resources to their own advantage. On the other hand, however, they share a collective sense of insecurity and befuddlement about their precarious positionality in relation to the dominant structuring forces, even if these forces are most likely discursively invisible; for example, disciplinary writing conventions, standardized written English, student organizational cultures, and Western rhetorical traditions. Although the four Chinese international students tend to frame their "doing difference" through dominant discourses and traditions, they nonetheless consciously, actively, and confidently "transgress" the institutional discourses, written or unwritten linguistic, cultural, and social norms, through their everyday literate activities.

Manna does difference by defying the tacit tradition that a writing consultant position in a university writing center is a privilege reserved exclusively for English native speakers who are advanced students in the humanities; yet meanwhile, when she, as a Chinese international student from mechanical engineering, attempts to get through the training course in preparation for her active service in the writing center, Manna struggles with her self-perceived vulnerable position and a lack of legitimacy. In the competitive community of Chinese international students, academic achievements and cultural assimilation to the host country usually carry important social capital. Manna does difference by cultivating her kinesthetic capacity and choreographic creativity

and by participating in and shaping the multicultural dance community on campus. Yet she also wonders what material benefits the cultural practice of hip-hop dancing would bring to her in the “mainstream” academic community. Wentao’s approach to doing difference differs from Manna’s, as he resists the pervasive English-only cultural assumption and attitude on campus by tapping into his multilingual competence in multiple academic and organizational spaces. He takes advantage of his craftsmanship in composing English essays to assist friends in the Chinese international student community, which earns him a decent reputation and helps him to gain social capital. In turn, Wentao leverages his social capital in the community to seek reliable collaborators for his class projects. With a more nuanced and refined understanding of the creative potential of languages, Wentao channels his experiences of learning Chinese as well as English into learning how to compose a descriptive essay in Japanese and into crafting a deliberate social media persona. Yang pushes her translingual capability to a new creative level as she takes charge of composing, performing, producing, and disseminating Japanese pop songs, all the while documenting an insightful account of how the music industries operate in different sociocultural contexts. Yang’s “difference” has little to do with her institutionalized identity label of “Chinese international student”; she fuses rhetorical and poetic energies from a cosmopolitan palette of cultural elements in her music creation, far beyond what the identity label is capable of describing. Rather, Yang’s difference is an everyday doing of her translingual creativity, lyrical sensibility, business acumen, and cultural openness, an act of renegotiating the imaginary boundaries of the so-called Chinese international students’ literacy practices. Bohan, akin to Manna, Wentao, and Yang, consciously constructs a cosmopolitan public persona, albeit oftentimes with a neoliberal twist, yet unlike the other three individuals, feels subtle contempt for an institutional discourse of cultural awareness. Rhetorically sensitive as Bohan is, he employs “rhetorical absence”—strategically displaying rhetorical unavailability and disengagement in order to secure the ultimate win—in responding to the university’s intercultural competence education and in curating his social media presence. Bohan’s doing difference also manifests in pragmatically renegotiating his representation and cultural value in a robotics student organization, as he marshals social and rhetorical resources to help recruit new members from the Chinese student community.

As the stories of Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan continue to unfold throughout the book, the theme of doing difference differently also becomes more salient and packs on more nuanced meaning. With the unintended

alliteration, “doing difference differently” seems tautological, if not meaninglessly circular; after all, “doing difference” already implies performative invention of one’s unique identities in relation to other human and nonhuman agents. The addition of the adverb “differently,” however, is intended to underline the inherent teleological uncertainty of doing difference; namely, the impossibility of negotiating the four Chinese students’ purposes for doing difference without anchoring the negotiation in their immediate literacy and rhetorical ecology. The four individuals do differences in different ecologies at different times through interactions with different agents for different purposes with different affordances; it’s unproductive to aim to generate a grand theory that accounts for their doing difference. Rather, accounting for each individual’s doing difference calls for situated thick descriptions and an openness toward divergent interpretations of such descriptions. The addition of the adverb “differently” is also intended to draw our attention to the question of “how,” that is—recalling the first question I posed—how do the four Chinese international students do difference as they engage in everyday literacy practices?

While investigating how Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan do difference assumes literacy and rhetorical agency, I’m also consciously aware of the ecological forces that condition and mediate the four individuals’ literacy and rhetorical practices: material surroundings, technological tools, literacy sponsors, social communities, prior experiences, expressive bodies, emotions, motivations, languages, social norms and conventions, institutional policies, among many others. These ecological forces motivate them to engage in various literate activities, support them with different strategies, empower them to tap into their cultural repertoires, and ultimately play a crucial role in shaping their emerging cultural identities and socioacademic communities. In a sense, doing difference is a rhetorical manifestation of the four individuals’ constant attempt to make sense of and negotiate these mediational ecological forces. As such, unpacking these ecological forces is essential to renewing our understanding of the doing of difference. To do so, I documented via research memo comprehensive key ecological data during fieldwork along with observation and interview data about the literate activities the four students were engaged in. During data analysis, I examined the ecological data that reveal the literacy affordances through six analytical lenses: structural, semiotic, experiential, social, bodily, and material. Unpacking the ecological forces through these lenses allows me to trace, document, deconstruct, and reconstruct the four Chinese students’ doing difference as a purposeful, performative, and

dynamic shift of social and material relations that is always afforded or constrained by structures, discourses, bodies, materials, and histories that constitute the students' literate worlds. Doing difference is an act of agency, yet the agency is always mediated by ecological affordances. As I recount the stories of Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan and reconstruct their literate worlds, I attempt to fully unpack their convoluted ecological affordances.

In Chapter 1, I describe the contemporary globalized neoliberal climate that conditions institutional culture in higher education and how this climate dictates our perceptions of Chinese international students and approaches to supporting them. Following the description of global and institutional cultures, I describe the ecological forces at greater length. In the next four chapters, I recount "doing difference" stories of Manna, Wentao, Yang, and Bohan, respectively, highlighting their ecological affordances. In the final chapters, I critically read the four students' stories through the lens of doing difference and affordance and explore how these stories may help educators, educational administrators, policy makers, and the public to meaningfully and ethically communicate with this growing population that we reductively call "Chinese international students."

The four stories critically engage with two broad and interconnected concepts that are essential to educators' collective understanding of not only Generation Z Chinese international students but also students brought up in cultural and educational contexts outside of the Euro-American sphere. These two concepts are difference and affordance. For example, the stories interrogate the deep-seated deficit model in writing education that flattens students' richly different literacy practices as issues to be fixed and demonstrate that students' differences as embodied in their literacy and rhetorical "doings" are emergent, relational, and material (Wang, 2019). In addition, the stories provide a microscopic view of the structural, semiotic, experiential, social, bodily, and material affordances that enable and empower the four individuals to make meaning of and leverage their differences. Storytelling in these students' own terms is a particularly valuable and effective technique in combating global COVID-induced anti-Chinese sentiments that significantly impact Chinese international students' well-being. Ultimately, a new understanding of these Generation Z Chinese international students' afforded literacy practices of difference will inform not only writing, literacy, or language teachers but also educators of all disciplines as they interact with this particular population, design curriculum for them, support them, and, most importantly, advocate for them.