

Identities in an ESL Poetry Book: A Case Study of One Chinese Student

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Abstract

This study aims to explore how one Chinese ESL undergraduate student, Jia-Hao, constructed his multiple identities through his English-language poetry and how he code-mixes in his translingual creative writing practice within a studying abroad context in the U.S. The collected data are one interview with Jia-Hao and a poetry book created by him, containing an introduction, ten poems and reflective writings as the conclusion. Through examining the theme of father-son relationship in his poetry book, the results indicated that Jia-Hao showed multiple and fluid identities. These multifaceted representations of his poetic identity reinforce the concept that identity is socially, culturally, and historically constructed. Moreover, by examining his identity construction, the study also explores how this Chinese ESL student code-mixes in translingual poetry writing practice, where he presents the ownership of his multilingual competence. Finally, this study proposes a translingual poetic literacy pedagogy in language classrooms.

Introduction

There is increased discussion on the use of creative writing in ESL/EFL contexts (see Dai, 2010, 2011; Garvin, 2013; Hanauer, 2010, 2011, 2015; Iida, 2012a, 2012b; Nicholes, 2015; Tin, 2010; Smith, 2013). However, few studies have examined ESL/EFL students' poetry written in their second language from the perspective of identity. As many scholars have illustrated, there is strong relation between identity and writing because identities and voices are constructed through language forms, such as speech and writings (Cox, Jordan, Ortmeier-Hooper, & Schwartz. 2010; Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Schiffrin, 2006). This implies the presence of identity in poetry writing as well.

The notion of identity is defined by Mendoza-Denton (2008) as an “active negotiation of an individual’s relationship with larger social constructs, in so far as this negotiation is signaled

through language and other semiotic means” (p. 475). Then, in order to examine one’s identity construction, it is important to explore one’s relationship to self-generated writing and social context. Hanauer (2010) extended the exploration of identity in poems written by second language students. According to him, poetic identity is “participants’ [student writer’s] subject position on autobiographical events and experiences expressed through the focusing potential of literary language resulting from a specific physical and discursive content of writing” (p. 62). In other words, poetic identity focuses on the self-positioned experiences and self-referential language expressions instead of being bound by grammar rules or traditional poetic features. This concept of poetic identity reinforces the association of writing, experiences, social contexts, and self-positionality with identity. Using this notion of poetic identity, Hanauer’s presented a case study that looked at a Japanese female student’s poetic identity construction through her 10 poems on parental divorce. The data showed that the student was able to present several discursive identities and showcase a self-developmental process throughout the parental divorce event. Hanauer’s study provides insights on L2 students’ poetic identity construction, but as stated earlier there are few studies that examined their poetry written in a second language from the standpoint of identity. Therefore, in this study, I will explore how one Chinese ESL student, Jia-Hao (pseudonym), constructed multiple identities through an English-language poetry book of his creation. Besides that, I will also analyze how Jia-Hao code-mixes in his translingual creative writing practice as a Chinese ESL student while studying abroad.

Methodology

Conducted through qualitative methods, this paper aims to “take a holistic perspective which preserves the complexities of human behavior” (Black, 1994, p. 425) of one participant. Participants were from an ESL college writing class in the U.S. The researcher asked permission from the instructor of the class to make an announcement regarding the research topic and protocols. At that time, students were asked if they would like to participate in the research study. The collected data are presented as followed: (1) Poetry books students wrote as the assignment of the class and (2) One 30-minute interview. The poetry books contain an introduction, ten poems and reflective writing as the conclusion. The interview data were digitally recorded and transcribed. Pavlenko (2007) indicated the importance of choosing language used between the interviewer and interviewee. The first language of this particular participant is shared with the researcher, the focus of this paper, Jia-Hao was given autonomy to choose the language of the interview: English,

Mandarin, or code-mixing. The interviewee's preference was mainly Mandarin.

According to Hanauer (2010), there are three categories for examining poetic identity: (1) context of writing analysis, (2) content analysis, and (3) stylistic analysis of literary and linguistic choices. In the case of Jia-Hao, the context of writing was an ESL college writing class in the U.S. He was a study abroad student from China and he was an Accounting major in his twenties. The topic of Jia-Hao's poetry is the relationship between his father and himself, which prompted the researcher to conduct a content analysis of his identities constructed in his poetry book focusing on his relationship with his father. In addition, the interview with Jia-Hao was analyzed to explore how he perceived his own identity constructions in his poetry. Last, the analysis on Jia-Hao's poems will also focus on his representation of his poems in terms of style and literary choices. Through these analyses, the researcher was able to address the following research question: How does one Chinese ESL student, Jia-Hao, construct his identities in his poetry book within a studying board context?

Analysis of Poetic Identity: Exploring Father-Son Relationship in Jia-Hao's Poetry Book

In the introduction of his poetry book, Jia-Hao wrote the following to express his own inner feelings toward his relationship with his father:

I feel myself like a kite, I pursuit freedom and I enjoy the way of flying in sky, but sometimes ups and downs will under my dad's control. Now, I guess he releases the rope, because he thinks that this is the time he should make a decision to let me have a wider sky and fly higher. As for me, I guess it is time to let he see how higher I can fly and how many views I can scan by myself. I always feel sorry about what I did before to my father. But as an adult, I just cannot say those things to him, because I do not know how to start and how to express all my emotions.

As clearly expressed in the excerpt, Jia-Hao's poetry book is centered on the relationship with his father. He revealed his reluctance or hesitance to disclose his inner feelings to his father. However, he took a step further to share his emotions toward his father through his poetry book. The title of the poems and the content outline of each poem in Jia-Hao's poetry book are as follows:

1. *My own life* – on the mindsets of having personal space from the parents.
2. *The gap between our two* – on the sense of fear to be intimate with his father.
3. *A view of his back* – on the moment of worrying about his father.

4. *At the moment* – on the moment of departing his father to America for studying.
5. *Brotherhood* – on a lesson learnt from his father about brotherhood.
6. *Key* – on his thought to repair the relationship with his father.
7. *My future* – on his realization of what his father has done for him.
8. *My friend* – on his first attempt to break the ice with his father.
9. *Lesson* – on the lessons that his father taught him.
10. *Am I wrong* – on questioning whether he himself is the one who is mistaken the whole time.

As seen from the order of the poetry book, the poems showcase a transition from distancing himself from his father and being afraid to be close to the realization of his father's love and life lessons. In the following, from a content analysis, the poems are divided into five stages to explore Jia-Hao's identity construction: (1) the gap, (2) the epiphany, (3) the recognition, (4) the change, and (5) self-examination.

First Stage: The Gap

1. My own life

An own place is what I needed.
 I can release my feelings and encourage myself.
 I'm the person who wants his privacy space.
 I can study and enjoy my spare time.
 So, please do not entry my room without my permission.

The first poem sets up an opening tone for Jia-Hao's need to be distanced from his parents. The poem is composed in five lines and among them, three lines start with the pronoun *I*. This adds a greater sense of wanting empowerment and privacy. It is interesting to see how Jia-Hao associates his own room as a place that he can release his feelings or enjoy. This entails a wall against to the interaction with his family.

2. The gap between our two

The longest distance between my father and me is not how far we have been separated.
 But the inner gap in our mind.
 We have different personalities.

We have different outlooks.
I'm kind of nasty,
He is kind of mature.
We cannot find something in common.

The second poem continues the theme of being distanced from his father. However, this time, the distance is not just a physical gap; instead, it is inner thoughts. The pronoun *we* is usually used as a collective term to represent a close and connective group of people. In this poem, the three usages of pronoun *we* showcase a strong sense of dichotomy between Jia-Hao and his father. In these two poems, his poetic identity is strong for being himself and different from his father while still maintaining a connection. However, if Jia-Hao had used *he* or *I*, the separation would have been magnified.

Second Stage: The Epiphany

3. A view of his back
He is getting older, I'm growing up.
So does my little brother.
He has a busy job, but after work,
He has to worry about our homework.
Every time, I saw the view of his back,
I asked myself,
What can I do for him?

As shown in the poem, Jia-Hao started to understand his father's hard work. Compared to the first poem, where he used the pronoun *I* more to indicate a stronger sense of self, now the pronoun *he* is used. This shows Jia-Hao is beginning to see his father's perspective. However, his understandings remain behind the scene just like the view of his father's back means he has not yet revealed his feelings towards his father. He only looks at his father from behind silently and wonders what he can do for his father. The poem ends in a question, "What can I do for him?" This depicts Jia-Hao's uncertainty toward his role as a son.

4. At the moment

They decided to let me get out of there.

I'll go to America.

The place where is full of challenge and opportunity.

At the moment, I can clearly see his uneasy.

I'll flight to America in 10 minutes.

I'm going to check in.

At the moment, I look back my dad,

I will never forget his face.

I secretly make a decision.

I would not come back until me getting along well in my career.

This poem captures the moment when Jia-Hao is departing in the airport from China to America. As described in the poem, readers can see the father's facial expressions from Jia-Hao's eyes: uneasy. This sense of uneasiness revealed subtly a father's love to a son without words, which is understood by Jia-Hao at that moment of looking into his father's face. Connected to Jia-Hao's uncertainty as a son from the previous poem, he constructs a more definite statement of what he perceives he should do as a son despite the fact that it is still hidden from his father. This continues the theme that Jia-Hao is reluctant or hesitant to disclose his inner feelings to his father.

Third Stage: The Recognition

5. Brotherhood

I'm nasty, so does my brother.

We fight each other.

My father used his way to let me understand that my younger brother is the one who needs me to protect in my lifetime.

I rejoice I know this before being an adult.

This poem demonstrates a lesson learnt from Jia-Hao's father that he needs to take care of his little brother. Jia-Hao acknowledges his immaturity for being unruly. The idea of being im-

mature connected to the second poem, *The Gap Between Our Two*. In the second poem, Jia-Hao indicates the gap between his father and himself (i.e., I'm kind of nasty. He is kind of mature). Different from the second poem that emphasizes the differences between them, Jia-Hao in this fifth poem recognizes it is this difference of his father and him that teaches him a life lesson before he can become mature as an adult.

6. *Key*

If there is a key can open our minds,
We need to talk and solve some spiritual problems.
Also, we need to find some common themes between our two.
I need your support about what I'm doing right now.
I will always get you back absolutely, too.
Maybe this is a long progress to find the key.
But I'm ready to go.

As shown in this poem, Jia-Hao constructs a more rational and convinced tone. Again, he acknowledges the differences between his father and himself. Unlike in the previous poem where he recognizes the importance of his father's life lesson despite the fact that they are different, Jia-Hao moves a step forward in this poem to being willing to bridge the gap. Also, this is the first time in his poems that he addresses his father as "you." This creates a sense of closeness that he could not reach as presented in the early poems. At the same, there are few communications between Jia-Hao and his father, and this poem showcases the first conversation that is initiated by himself as a son to his father. Moreover, it is interesting to see the use of "our two." This is a translingual way of using English that is developed from Mandarin (i.e., 我們兩), his first language.

7. *My future*

My father has ever said that he wanted me to be a successful person.
Now, he never says that again.
But at the mean time, I start to keep those words in my mind.
I know that achieving the goal will cost me a long time period.
But I'd like to take that challenge.

In this poem Jia-Hao's describes his strong and certain voice toward recognizing the need to change the relationship with his father. The poem also hints at his regret for not listening to his father when he was younger, but now he starts to keep his father's words in mind because his father stops trying. One can interpret that Jia-Hao realizes his father's expectations toward him as a son. So once his father no longer says anything, Jia-Hao then becomes eager to achieve his goal in order to prove his worthiness. Although it is still hidden by Jia-Hao from his father, this shows a sense of attachment and affection towards his father.

Fourth Stage: The Change

8. My friend

The only relationship between my father and I is father-son stuff.

Now, I'd like to change it.

I did not like him because I did not understand him.

But now, the circumstance has changed.

So it is time for me breaking the ice.

I want to make friends with my father.

Unlike the previous stage where Jia-Hao shows a willingness to change the relationship with his father, this time he proposes a plan: to make friends with him. The line, *I did not like him because I did not understand him*, captures his recognition of the misunderstanding. The gerund, *breaking*, emphasizes the act that is present and continuing. However, he might have chosen *breaking on purpose*, but maybe not. Also, the proposed friendship with his father invites a more conversational and casual relationship that they have failed to have as presented in the first poems.

9. Lesson

I have learned many lessons from my father.

He told me that if you want to get something,

You have to give something up.

That is called opportunity cost.

Before you make a decision,

You should compare the margin benefits and margin costs.

He encourages me to be a rational person.

The opening line of the poem indicates an attitudinal change toward his father because he realizes that his father has taught him many lessons. As shown in the poem, his new tone when referring to his father is delighted and honored. The use of pronoun *you* shows an interaction between the father and the son for the first time from the father's perspective. This creates a sense of acceptance and approval of his father's wisdom and life lessons.

Fifth Stage: Self-Examination

10. Am I wrong

I was doing the thing that I thought was right.

But the truth is that I messed up all the time.

I ignored my father's advice.

I insisted my initial thought.

.....

I do not want to be a loser anymore.

So I guess something should be changed.

Many aspects of doing one thing should be taken into consideration.

That is what in my mind right now.

But, I'm still wondering that if I am wrong about doing my own business with my own thoughts?

Unlike all the other poems in the collection, this last poem focuses on Jia-Hao's self-reflection. This is his first time to critically examine his relationship with his father. Also, this is his first time admitting his mistake of being stubborn and ignoring his father's advice. Jia-Hao finally agrees to take the different opinions into consideration, which can be seen as a big shift from the initial poem. It is also interesting to see Jia-Hao posts a question. The question form of the line softens his agreement to the idea of being wrong.

Jacob and Ochs (1995) define the concept of co-construction as "the joint creation of a form, interpretation, stance, action, activity, identity, institution, skill, ideology, emotion, or other culturally meaningful reality" (p. 171). In line with the notion of co-construction, Jia-Hao constructs fluid and multifaceted representations of poetic identity that cover a wide range of interactions, emotions, transition, and negotiations, and this coincides with the results from

Hanauer's (2010) case study that a Japanese ESL student transformed from her parental divorce experience. Moreover, many other scholars have reiterated the concept that identities are socially constructed and a self could not exist without interaction with others (Block, 2006; Kramsch, 2000; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Norton, 1997). Jia-Hao's ten poems also reinforce the concept that identities are socially, culturally, and historically constructed.

In the case of Jia-Hao's poems on his father-son relationship, there are five stages that he underwent: (1) the gap, (2) the epiphany, (3) the recognition, (4) the change, and (5) self-examination. Jia-Hao had transitioned from being reluctant to being more comfortable in sharing inner feelings towards his father. Jia-Hao had transformed from a son who was eager to distance himself from his father to a son who was able to appreciate his father's advices. He had even further developed to a more matured person who was capable of critically examining himself in the relationship with his father. Through these negotiations and transitions, readers can interpret that Jia-Hao's poetry writing assignment invites him to broaden his worldview from an exclusive sense of self to a more interactive and social individual.

Jia-Hao's Poetry Book Within a Studying Abroad Context

As Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) illustrated, the process of learning a second language is a participation in different communities in which learners re-construct and construct their identities. Brouwer and Wagner (2004) wrote that in the second language community, "learning is situated; learning is social; and knowledge is located in communities of practice" (p. 33). Moreover, a person's identity is shaped not only by the community s/he participates in, but also by the community s/he does not take part in (Norton, 2001; Wenger, 1998). Therefore, in order to examine Jia-Hao's identity further, there is a need to explore the idea of the different communities in which he may or may not participate.

The idea of examining identity associated with being inside or outside different communities relates to Bhatt (2008)'s the concept of "third space." According to Bhatt (2008), the definition of "third space" is "linguistic hybridity," which "gives rise to possibilities for new meanings and, at the same time, presents a mechanism to negotiate and navigate between a global identity and local practices" (p. 182). This notion of third space entails using code-mixing in speech or writings, it creates the situation where ownership of the languages is gained by its users. This concept coincides with growing translingual studies that highlight hybrid literacy negotiations and interactions among all individuals (see Canagarajah, 2013; Hanson, 2013; Krall-Lanoue, 2013;

Lu & Horner, 2013).

As an example, Jia-Hao brought his identity as a young Chinese man into his poetry book and performed his Chinese identity by writing a phrase in Chinese characters without any explanations for the readers. This proves that Jia-Hao reached a level of “multicompetence” (Cook, 1992) and presented his poetry book as a translingual practice. He explains in the introduction of his poetry book:

When we have some special day that need celebrate, he [Jia-Hao’s father] always asks all family members to put everything in our hands down and gather together, he would like to be the first one to make a toast and propose everybody cheers. He likes that feeling and also enjoys the happiness of a family union. There is an old saying, “家和万事兴” I guess he regards this adage as his motto.

The phrase “家和万事兴” is a Chinese saying that means if the family lives in harmony, all affairs will prosper. The reason why Jia-Hao used the Chinese characters and sayings in his poetry book was discussed in the interview. A verbatim excerpt (including pauses) from the interview follows:

1: 我覺得很有趣，因為，而且我記得你那個簡體字寫完之後，你並沒有特別解釋說這句話其實是什麼意思，然後因為我可以讀得懂中文，所以我非常可以知道說你整篇想表達的含意是什麼，可是有些人沒有辦法讀中文。

I found it interesting, because, and I remember that after writing down the sentence in Chinese character, you do not explain the meaning of it. And because I can read Chinese, so I can fully understand what you are trying to say in your work, but there will be people who don't understand Mandarin.

2: Hmm

3: 所以他們可能就會比較沒有辦法理解，所以你為什麼會選擇這個方式把那些東西放在你的詩集裡面？

So they may not be able to understand, so why do you choose this way to present it in your poetry book?

4: 一方面是因為我英語不好，所以我覺得就是就用這個中文的這種話可能更能表達我的意思，因為我實在是想不出來有什麼，怎麼能讓措辭去描述這種話

On the one hand is my poor English, so I felt using this Chinese sentence might express my ideas more. Because I really can't think of any, what words to describe this.

5: Hmm

6: 然後，再一個就是說，我覺得在我這個 poetry book 裡面加一點，加入中國元素才有可能可以顯得更新穎。

And, on the other hand, I feel adding some Chinese elements in my poetry book, it might be more novel and eye catching.

As shown in line 4, Jia-Hao feels his English is not sophisticated enough to communicate his thoughts in this American community, and he also thinks that Chinese can more clearly describe his feelings. In other words, it might be said that Jia-Hao creates an “imagined community” (Norton, 2001; Wenger, 1998) between his Chinese community and the American community. In this imagined community, not only will Jia-Hao’s parents not be able to read his poetry because it is written in English, but also some of the non-Chinese-background readers may fail to understand part of his poetry book. That is to say, only those readers who have access to both English and Mandarin can understand his ideas throughout his work. Thus, Jia-Hao’s poetry book can be considered as a “third space” site to present his translingual literacy (Bhatt, 2008). This translingual literacy is important because Jia-Hai is able to use all his linguistic resources and present languages beyond a monolingual model with English-only or Mandarin-only. In this sense, the concept of writing involves code-mixing without compartmentalizing languages.

As many studies have pointed out, multilingual writing can enable students to be the agentive writers (Canagarajah, 2006; Lee & Barton, 2011; Yi, 2010). Some scholars believe that writing multilingually reveals the authentic representation of the writer’s voices and identities (see Lee & Barton, 2011; Yi, 2010). In this regard, Canagarajah (2013) proposed that the term translingual is needed. The neologism translingual can “go beyond the dichotomy mono/multi or uni/pluri” (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 2). Moreover, as Lu and Horner (2013) stated, a translingual approach places the language act as a dynamic process that looks at co-constructions among language users, languages, and contexts. Overall, the results of this study affirm the valuable use of poetry writing in ESL/EFL classrooms to invite students to write multilingually and translingually.

Toward a Translingual Poetic Literacy Pedagogy

Even though we cannot generalize that Jia-Hao's poems are the only way ESL students construct their identities in poetry, he shared interesting and valuable examples that explored the complexity and beauty in constructing identities and translingual literacy in poetry writing. Also, studies have shown that ESL/EFL students tend to lose their voice and identity in writing classes within ESL/EFL contexts (see Iida, 2012a, 2012b; Liao, 2012; Matsuda, 2001; Pennycook, 1996). Among them, Pennycook (1996) posited the idea that ESL/EFL students fail to develop ownership of English. He wrote, "it remains an alien language—and thus to write 'in their [students'] own words' is not something that can be done in English" (p. 225). Jia-Hao's writing reflects this sense of alienation. Both in the interview with Jia-Hao and his poetry book, he perceives himself as having a shortage in English writing. In Jia-Hao's reflections, he wrote, "I check up my grammar, because this is still my problem of using English to write."

However, by constructing himself as a writer he gains a sense of achievement from writing poetry in English, such as expressed in the conclusion of his poetry book: "I look at my poems, I am so excited. I never imagine that I can write those things. But, in fact, I did." This is in line with previous studies that indicate writing poetry writing can invite ESL/EFL students to gain their writer's identity (see Hanauer, 2010, 2011; Iida, 2012a, 2012b), Jia-Hao's statement cited here implies that the poetry assignment in an English composition class enabled him to develop a beginning ownership of English. Moreover, his statement does not mean that it is wrong in stating that L2 students fail to develop ownership of English; instead, it can be interpreted that L2 students can develop their ownership of English if they are exposed to writing assignments that encourage and invite this ownership.

In addition, L2 students can find it easier to express their identity when writing poetry because it is not necessarily bound by grammar rules. Students are encouraged to write more freely and to invest more deeply in a personal level of their work. As presented earlier, the topic of Jia-Hao's poetry book is on a father-son relationship, and his reflection in the poetry book indicated the reason for his choice of topic:

I finally realized that I love my father and I want to express my real feelings about guilty. I did many things that hurt my dad's heart. Now, I'm growing up and starting to consider how to make it up to my father. At this time, I wrote those poems in order to decrease my sense of guilty and show my real emotions to readers.

One can interpret that it is this poetry project in a context far away home that has invited Jia-Hao to come to this understanding of his father's love and to be able to express his feelings that he was unable to do earlier in his life. As a result, this study finds that writing poetry as a translingual literacy approach can promote the use of code-mixing in language classrooms and the development of ownership.

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This study aims to explore how one Chinese ESL undergraduate student, Jia-Hao, constructed his multiple identities through his English-language poetry and how he code-mixes in his translingual creative writing practice within a studying abroad context in the U.S. The collected data are one interview with Jia-Hao and a poetry book created by him, containing an introduction, ten poems, and reflective writings as the conclusion. Moreover, by examining his identity construction, the study also explores how this Chinese ESL student code-mixes in translingual poetry writing practice, where he presents the ownership of his multilingual competence. Finally, this study proposes a translingual poetic literacy pedagogy in language classrooms. For ESL students, this might mean not being able to totally adapt to using second language or the difficulty achieving it. Lack of confidence in using the language in front of the class adds to this problem as well. See why boosting students' confidence in speaking is extremely important for ESL educators. To solve this, an ESL teacher must be encouraging enough to persuade students to speak English, and only English in class. When students start to whisper to each other in their native tongue, do not hesitate to ask if there are questions. Another common solution is setting a rule of imp