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### Embracing the Literacy: A Celebration of Diversity

It was during a summer program a year ago that I actually came across the word - literacy. This was quite late in my English learning process. Compared with other English words, literacy is more mysterious to me. I still remember the first time I tried to understand literacy in class last year. The professor handed out color-coded cards in the first class, asking us what reading was, what writing was, what literacy was. As a result, the walls were covered with colorful cards expressing everyone's thoughts on reading and writing. After this open-ended starter, the professor guided us through the discussion of literacy in the program, including children's education, digital media, social anthropology, political movements, brain neuroscience, and English language teaching. When we write a string of words, the most secret thing in the world happens - why we write them, and nothing else. This is also doomed to the loneliness and personality of writing, but also gives us the meaning of studying it -- all of them are related to the formation process of literacy. It's about a person's cultural background and life experiences. I think that is the charm of literacy -- the diversity and complexity of formation and understanding.

Curious about the diversity of literacy, I invited my Chinese friend Gabriel for an interview. Gabriel is from western China and is a member of the Yi ethnic group. There are a total of 56 ethnic groups in China, including the main ethnic group -- Han, and 55 other ethnic minorities, such as Uighur, Tibetans, and Yi. The ethnic minorities in China are similar to the Native American tribes in the United States. They belong to one country but have different

historical and cultural backgrounds. They have their own distribution areas, unique cultures and languages, each group preserving its heritage. In particular, some Chinese ethnic minorities, like Tibetans or Uighur, have autonomous regions with a degree of self-administration, which is similar to the self-governance or reservation system for certain Native American tribes. The Yi group is one of the ethnic minorities and they have their own unique ethnic language -- Yi language. So, Gabriel grew up speaking three languages -- Yi language, Chinese and English. For all I know, Gabriel can only speak Yi language at home and has to use standard Chinese in school. I believe this situation involves the formation of her home literacy and school literacy. I am curious about her journey on the three languages and the differences of literacy experience at home, in Chinese school, and the U.S. university. I also longed to know the literacy practices that connected her to the Yi culture and how valuable they were to her.

Gabriel was born in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, which is the largest distribution area of the Yi people and located in Southwestern China -- adjacent to Tibet and near the junction of China, Vietnam, and Myanmar. As the power of the Yi group continues to grow, it becomes an extremely political area. Standard Chinese is considered the orthodox language, and the use of Yi language is further restricted. Gabriel's school does not allow students and teachers to use Yi language, and all communication and writing should be done in Chinese. Interestingly, Yi is a special language with only pronunciation but no physical characters. Without the physical text, there is no reading or writing. Without reading and writing, I think it is hard to build literacy. So, I asked her how she defined her own concept of literacy. Gabriel made a distinction, referring to her experience of using Yi language as home literacy.

Because we only use Yi language at home or in informal settings, I think the literacy you mentioned refers more to home literacy. I think home literacy is not just limited to reading and writing. Some valuable experiences should also be part of literacy. The key lies in what abilities you acquire. For example, although the Yi language has no physical texts, our heritage and experiences have been preserved through oral transmission. I think this is also a process of developing home literacy.

But instead, I thought about the issue that Amanda Hayes mentioned in her article *Splintered Literacies*, “The weakness of oral cultures is that they can die in a generation” (225), so her mother used the typewriter to “wrote out some of the family stories and put each story in a box frame with its corresponding heirlooms” (225). I went on to ask Gabriel how the Yi people could ensure that the Yi language would not disappear without physical texts and under such special control. Gabriel thought preserving a language without writing was indeed difficult because it requires at least two generations or a large group of people to be able to recognize the sounds and meanings of the Yi language at the same time. However, she and other Yi people are not concerned about the extinction of the Yi language at the moment, as they have a large ethnic group and older generations teach their children to speak Yi language soon after they are born. This inheritance became routine and strengthened the protection of the Yi language.

I realize that Yi language does not just play a role in conveying meaning here. People invisibly use oral language as a kind of home literacy to unite the ethnic group and make it become a source of personal empowerment. This home literacy is focused towards passing down valuable experiences and information while also helping later generations learn more about their history and culture. In this case, Gabriel's home literacy formed naturally, but her school literacy

appears to be different from the home literacy -- the use of Chinese seems to be compulsory. I told her about Hayes' dilemma in school literacy, "writing was not constructed as playing the preserving role it did in my early life"(226). According to the perspective of school literacy, "A hillbilly background was a thing to be overcome, not embraced"(226). I asked Gabriel if she had the same sense of conflict.

School literacy did negate home literacy to a certain extent, but it gave me a lot of knowledge that home literacy did not have. I prefer to regard the two as complementary. At school, I was taught how to read, how to write, and how to present and retain my work in an academic way. As you mentioned, home literacy taught me protection; and school literacy taught me how to learn in the future and gave me the ability to create. These two literacies were formed in completely different ways, from which I was able to think more critically about the nature of literacies.

I was surprised by Gabriel's thoughts on the difference between home literacy and school literacy. Not only did she not regard school literacy as a factor that threatened the home literacy, but she also believed that the school literacy established in the Chinese middle school and high school directly promoted a new literacy based on English she developed after coming to the United States. Gabriel said it was school literacy that laid the foundation for her continuous and standardized academic learning at the U.S. university. It was a gradual process in which she was able to use previous strategies to think more broadly about the bilingual environment. She thought she could do more.

In general, I gained a new perspective on literacy after many interviews with Gabriel, both on the formation and role of different kinds of literacy. I think Gabriel's literacy journey shows the dynamic interplay between cultural, linguistic, and educational forces in shaping the multifaceted literacy. People should value the importance of diverse forms of literacy, whether rooted in oral traditions as home literacy or formal education as school literacy, as essential contributors to the rich tapestry of human knowledge and expression.

Works Cited

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