Literacy, Culture, and Politics of Schooling: Counternarratives of a Chinese Canadian Family

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To counter the “grand narratives” of the model minority myth, this study unvels the stories of a Chinese immigrant family who are encountering difficulties with schooling. The study demonstrates a complex interrelationship between home literacy, culture, and politics of schooling. Findings suggest that cultural mismatch theory alone cannot explain minority school failure. Rather, multilevel interactions, including cultural differences, modes of incorporation, and differential power relationships between school and home, result in minority students’ school difficulties.

The contemporary social scene is flanked with a diverse array of more or less distinctively postmodern counnternarratives. To understand the social present is very much a matter of recognizing and understanding the extent to which and ways in which our everyday lives are invested in and impacted and punctuated by these counnternarratives and the “official” narratives against which they emerge as oppositional responses. [Peters and Lankshear 1996:1]

With the recent rapid increase of Chinese immigrants in Canada as well as the United States, their children are becoming a significant segment of the North American school population. Contemporary public perceptions of Chinese and other Asian students are based on reports of these students’ high test scores and academic success in comparison with other minority groups, such as African and Hispanic students in the United States, and Aboriginal students in Canada (Brand 1987; Steffenhagen 2000; Woo 1997). As a result, Asian students have been perceived as “academic nerds,” “high achievers,” and “model minorities” who are “joyfully” initiated into North American life and English literacy practices (Lee 1996; Townsend and Fu 1998). These images are further reinforced by reports of Asian success stories in the research literature, and have become a destructive myth for those children whom the schools are failing, as the images disguise the social realities of many children who are not successful (Olsen 1997).

Many may attribute some Chinese children’s school failure to deficiencies in the families themselves (see, e.g., Taylor 1993). For example, many may assume that these parents do not have high expectations for their children, do not understand the importance of education, do not emphasize discipline, effort, and learning, or are unwilling to invest and sacrifice for their children’s success in school. This “blaming the victim” approach has directed attention away from the problems many Chinese children face in and out of school (e.g., sociocultural barriers, language differences, and poverty), preventing us from unraveling the social realities of those who face problems in our educational system.

Making the social realities of these children known to educators is the central theme of this article. My purpose is twofold. First, by providing an anthropological picture of one struggling Chinese Canadian family, the Liu Family, I examine how different socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural, and political factors of cross-cultural living have contributed to their difficulties with schooling. Second, by unraveling the social realities of the Liu family, I aim to debunk the destructive myth of the “model minority.” I therefore refer to the stories of the members of the Liu family as “counternarratives” rather than “narratives,” because the problem with many stories about immigrants is that the stories are often “framed and resolved in ways reinforcing the status quo social order” (Florio-Ruane 1997,154). The concept of counternarrative, borrowed from Michael Peters and Colin Lankshear (1996), also includes two layers of meanings. First, I retell the stories to serve a “strategic political function of splintering and disturbing grand stories” (1996:2). That is, the Liu’s stories are “new” stories that counter those stories of “model minorities,” which have gained their legitimacy from the destructive myths concerning “model minorities” and Chinese children as high achievers. Second, I emphasize that these stories are not just about the personal, but about the social and political (Florio-Ruane 1997). I use the Liu’s stories to counter the “legitimizing stories propagated for specific political purposes to manipulate public consciousness.” These stories of the Liu family are the little stories of the individuals “whose knowledge and histories have been marginalized, excluded, subjugated or forgotten in the telling of official narratives” (Peters and Lankshear 1996:2).

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Minority Students’ School Failure

In developing the theoretical framework of this article, I draw together three distinct perspectives on minority students’ school failure: (1) cultural mismatch theory; (2) theories of minority assimilation and acculturation; and (3) cultural capital theory. Cultural mismatch theory allows me to understand the different values and beliefs between the Liu family and Canadian schools. I rely on theories of assimilation and acculturation to examine the Liu family’s particular “modes of incorporation,” that is, their particular social contexts—the location of their settlement and the condition of the labor market—in Canadian society (Portes 1996; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). However, the above two theories leave the role of schooling and the larger political nature of their struggles unexamined (Villegas 1988). To examine the politics of schooling that may have hindered the Liu family’s possibilities for educational success, I
turn to cultural capital theory, exploring the inherent power relationships between families and schools (Fairclough 2001).

In recent years, researchers have concluded that minority students’ school failure may be the result of the mismatch between learners’ primary Discourse of home and the secondary Discourse of school, including differences in language, literacy beliefs, and interactional patterns (Gibson 1988; Heath 1983; McCartney 1997). As familiarity with school literacy discourses is the mark of school success, students from non-mainstream cultural backgrounds have to learn a different set of conventions of literacy practices and often experience difficulties with schooling (Lopez 1999; McCartney 1997; Meek 1991).

Another theory of minority school failure focuses on examining how a minority group’s modes of incorporation shape their downward or upward assimilation and hence their educational success or failure (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Researchers in this trend suggest unfavorable social contexts (such as social isolation, detachment from an ethnic community, and low socioeconomic status of their schools) and negative societal reception (such as experiencing racism) result in negative educational attainment in their children (Gibson 1988; Portes and MacLeod 1995). Other negative factors include the location of the minority settlement (e.g., whether immigrants are in close contact with native-born minorities) and the absence of a mobility ladder (e.g., whether immigrants are confined to low-paying, labor-intensive occupations that offer few channels for upward mobility; Portes and Zhou 1994).

Cultural capital theory associates minority school failure with the power relationships between the minority groups and the schools. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) suggest that cultural capital (i.e., a family or a school’s social and cultural resources) shapes children’s academic performances. They posit that schools, as symbolic institutions, reproduce unequal power relationships, creating a system of oppression that works against minority groups (Stuckey 1991). As the Liu family’s experiences with the schools demonstrate, the cultural capital of the schools is used as a form of social and cultural exclusion to ensure that the status quo of minority groups is maintained (Lamont and Lareau 1988).

These three theoretical perspectives on minority school failure suggest that Chinese immigrant children, while bearing the negative impact of model minority stereotypes, also face different sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical challenges. It remains unclear how these challenges result in the school failure for some Chinese children. To address this gap, I explore one Chinese Canadian family’s multilevel struggles with schooling. The Chinese Canadian case is particularly well suited for this exploration, since Canada has witnessed increased racial, economic, and educational tensions between the new Chinese immigrants and the mainstream society in recent years (Li 1998; Steffenhagen 2000).

### Settings and Participants

The settings for this research were the social spaces of the Liu children outside of school, which included the Liu family’s restaurant and their residence. The city the Liu resided in had a Chinese population of 4,000, comprising only 1.8 percent of the city’s total population. The majority of the population were European Canadians and Aboriginal people (the latter represented 11.8 percent of the city’s population and were primarily Indian and Métis; Statistics Canada 1996). Together with their extended family, the Liu family emigrated to Canada in 1978 from Canton, China. The family operated a Chinese restaurant in the hub of an Aboriginal neighborhood where many families lived in poverty and were on government welfare programs. The Liu struggled to manage the business on their own, but it did not do well. The Liu house was located several blocks from their restaurant. Their neighborhood was the city’s high-crime area, where there had been reported robberies, domestic violence, street fighting, and murders. Table 1 provides a profile of the Liu family.

The Liu children attended nearby community schools, which were established in the 1980s by the provincial board of education to serve the educational needs of Aboriginal children considered “at-risk.” The Liu children were the only non-Aboriginal students in the community schools. Because of the growing rate of family poverty, increasing family and community instability, and changing family structures in the area, these community schools carried out many roles in the lives of the children who previously were the responsibility of their families or the community (Saskatchewan Education 2002). There were four components to

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<tr>
<td>Peter (Father)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>Restaurant owner/operator</td>
<td>Grade 4, China</td>
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<td>Kathy (Mother)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>Restaurant owner/operator</td>
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<td>Daniel (Son)</td>
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<td>Erin (Daughter)</td>
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<td>Gina (Daughter)</td>
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these community schools: (1) early intervention programs for three- to four-year-olds, adaptive academic programs, retention, reentry and transition to high school programs, and adult and community education; (2) parent and community involvement; (3) integrated services, including health care, counseling, justice, and recreation services; and (4) community development, such as safety and security, housing, and antiracism initiatives (Saskatchewan Education 2002). In these schools, a lunch program was usually provided for the students.

Data Collection and Analysis

My fieldwork entailed weekly visits to the Liu family restaurant and home during December 1998 and April 1999. Each visit was one to two hours long. During these visits, I aimed to find out (1) the nature of home literacy in the Liu family; (2) their cultural beliefs about the literacy and social contexts in which they had settled; and (3) each member’s experiences with literacy and schooling. As ethnography can accurately describe the cultural behavior and meanings of a cultural group in particular contexts (Jacob and Jordan 1993), I used participant observation to obtain information about the family’s home literacy practices in the home milieu, and semistructured and informal interviews to obtain the Liu family members’ perceptions of literacy in their home and host country and their experiences with Canadian schooling (Bogdan and Biklen 1992). To help me understand the Liu family’s literacy experiences, I collected documents such as school newsletters, letters from the community, and menus. I wrote field notes and reflective notes after leaving the research setting. Because the study was designed to investigate the Liu family’s literacy practices in the home milieu, I did not seek or obtain permission to enter the schools the Liu children attended. Therefore, the data and analysis in this article concern only the Liu family members’ perspectives and voices.

During the visits to the family restaurant and home, my role as ethnographer varied from site to site; the types and intensity of participation with the family members also varied greatly in different contexts (Spindler and Spindler 1992). In the family home, I used a more direct observation method with the children in their familiar settings. These observations entailed sustained involvement with Daniel, the Liu’s eight-year-old son, and his sisters in the house, which was maintained long enough “so that the observer has some basis in experience, in words heard and actions observed, for coming to whatever more general conclusions seemed warranted” (Goldenberg 1987:151). In other contexts, I assumed a participant observer role and mingled with the children and the family as if I were one of them. For example, I watched videos with the children and celebrated Chinese New Year with the Liu family in their restaurant.

I used informal interviews as a way to elicit natural and meaningful information about the family’s perceptions of and experiences with literacy and schooling (Eisner 1991). These informal interviews took place primarily in the family restaurant, and were a powerful form of communication between the family members and myself. The mother, Kathy Liu, who was in charge of most of the family affairs and was most available during my visits, became my main informant. Her voice permeates the Liu family’s counternarratives.

Data analysis occurred throughout the data collection process. I followed Bogdan and Biklen’s (1992) framework for data analysis in the field: I narrowed down the issues that I wanted to pursue in-depth with the family, and developed organizing questions based on my previous observations. I began more systematic data analysis by using Harry Wolcott’s (1994) data display techniques to identify themes and patterned regularities for each family member. For example, I employed matrices to display the complex data of the children’s language use and discourse choices in the house and restaurant—a technique suggested for exploring and describing multiple sites in qualitative research. After identifying the themes, patterns, and codes for each family member, I finished the data analysis by “factoring, noting relations among variables, and building a logical chain of evidence” (Creswell 1998:141). Once finished with this stage of analysis, I used theories of minority school failure, described above, to interpret the data.

Researcher’s Role

An ethnographer’s own cultural background and positionality is “the initial framework against which similarities and differences in the studied group are assessed” (Agar 1980:43). I am an immigrant from China who came to Canada to pursue a Ph.D. in education in 1996. My cross-cultural background provided a unique position in this research. I was an insider in certain ways, but an outsider in others. My language and nationality created a common bond between my participating family and myself—I was one of them, an insider. However, as a researcher from a higher educational institution where the Liu family aspired their children to be, I was an outsider. In this sense, I functioned as a “border-crosser” of the boundaries of literacy, culture, and social class.

My experiences in China and Canada have influenced how I view literacy in the family. I look at the social reality of the Liu family as constructed through the uses of literacy within the sociocultural contexts of their home and their restaurant. Furthermore, I am able to look critically at the “blaming the victim” approach, and focus not only on the responsibilities of the minority family, but more importantly, on the responsibilities of the schools and society that have marginalized the children and their families. Coming from this critical perspective, my role as an ethnographer in this research has also taken on new meaning in that I was not just a researcher who was gathering information, but also an advocate for the children and family who were silenced within the discourse of power.
Literacy, Culture, and Living: The Liu Family's Counternarratives

Here, I retell the stories that long to be heard—counternarratives of the Liu family. In doing this, I seek to uncover and understand how their modes of incorporation in Canadian society, their cultural differences, and the politics of schooling shaped their activation of cultural capital for educational attainment.

Opportunities Missed: Kathy and Peter Liu's Counternarratives

Kathy came with her family from China to Canada after her high school graduation in the late 1970s, when there were few Chinese people in the city. Kathy's early immigration seemed to fit the "modes of incorporation" that often lead to downward mobility. Her family did not have a solid Chinese community to support them when they arrived. Instead, they settled in a neighborhood where historically marginalized Aboriginal minorities lived. Kathy's family did not have government help to learn English, and because of their limited English and low education background, they were restricted to low-status manual jobs that required minimum English (Portes and Zhou 1994). Kathy, for example, worked two jobs during her first four years in Canada: one in a sewing factory from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. and the other as a dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant from 5 p.m. to midnight. She barely had time to sleep and had little time to do anything else such as learn English. When she recalled those times, Kathy became very emotional. "I want to learn English. It is easy to say it. You cannot imagine how difficult it is! As time goes on, you just give up. I did not have time to sleep, not to mention studying English. I had to help my parents feed the whole family!"

Peter had only a fourth grade education in China. He came to Canada from China in 1982 after marrying Kathy. After coming to Canada, Peter worked day and night in various restaurants in order to support his family, and had no extra energy to care for his own or his children's education. Like Kathy, he seldom had an opportunity to communicate with people outside of the workplace. Nor did he have any time to learn English. "Ah ya, mei shi jian la! [Just no time]," he said, shaking his head.

Because they could not speak, read, or write English, Kathy and Peter relied on other people to deal with anything in English. For example, they called on Kathy's brother, Jeff, for major decision making. To pay bills, write checks, translate newsletters from school, or read business letters, they relied on their children, especially Erin. A Chinese student who worked in their restaurant several years ago helped them with their English menus and their advertisement in the yellow pages of the phone book. All the items in the English menus were numbered in Arabic, so it was very easy for Kathy to record customers' orders. They watched Chinese channels from Toronto to get some Canadian news and the weather, and watched Chinese television programs via satellite. Initially, I was surprised that the family survived for over 20 years without knowing much English. When I asked Kathy about learning English in Canada, she told me, "I did not learn English, no time. I had to help my parents and I missed the opportunities."

Unlike the model minority parents who reportedly spend a lot of time with their children helping or supervising their homework (Louie 2001; Peng and Wright 1994), Kathy and Peter's long work hours prevented them from spending time with their children. Because their restaurant was open from 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. seven days a week, the children were left on their own, watching videos. Their after-school life was very different from that reported in literature, of children whose parents actively monitor their children's television watching, playing, and homework time (Peng and Wright 1994; Siu 1994; Townsend and Fu 1998).

Lack of a solid ethnic network in the neighborhood also limited the Liu's social circle. Both Kathy and Peter had very few friends. Kathy had a Chinese friend, Gail, with whom she studied the Bible in Chinese. Kathy's interaction with Gail seemed to remain at the Bible study level; she never asked Gail to help her with her children's educational issues. Kathy and Peter's only social resource for helping their children with school came through a customer, Lillian, who befriended them. Lillian was Portuguese, but had grown up in Hong Kong and could speak both English and Cantonese. Whenever there was a problem with the children in school, Lillian was called on to help translate or pass on a message to the family. Kathy also relied on Lillian to learn about the children's progress in school. Kathy said, "Lillian knows more about them at school than I do. The teachers look for her first when they are in trouble." I met Lillian once after she was called on to attend a parent meeting with Kathy. Lillian told me that although she was just trying to help, she had some concerns. "But I am not the kids' parents. I can only do much, you know, translating and passing on the messages. The parents have to do the things. But sometimes it is hard for me to see what is happening. It is sad."

Kathy and Peter's modes of incorporation, their limited English, and educational experiences had significant effects on their children's academic performance (Portes and MacLeod 1995; Portes and Zhou 1994). As their children's counternarratives demonstrate, their adverse social contexts, together with the lower-status community schools they attended, resulted in a "double handicap" for their school achievement (Portes and MacLeod 1995: 258).

Unfulfilled Expectations: Gina, Erin, and Fay Liu's Counternarratives

Although Peter and Kathy had missed the opportunity to learn English, they hoped that their children would grow up literate in English. However, after their children went to school, they brought home only disappointment and unfulfilled expectations.
study that Kathy requested for her. Fay would always work as a kitchen helper at her family’s restaurant and would never be employed as an ordinary person. The teacher asked me rhetorically, “Tell me, what are their expectations for her? To be employed in another trade like anybody else?”

The teacher insisted that the current program was the best for Fay. Kathy was in tears when she heard that Fay would stay in the special needs program. In China, only demonstrably handicapped groups such as the blind, profoundly deaf, or severely mentally impaired children attend special needs schools (Stevenson and Stigler 1992). To Kathy and Peter, it was a loss of face to have a child placed in a special needs program. They believed that Fay was capable of doing many things, such as housework and restaurant work. She needed not to be labeled or treated as a special needs child, but rather to be given more academically challenging school tasks and more patient teachers. Kathy finally gave up trying to get Fay into academic subjects. Her hope for her children faded between the borders of her home and her children’s schools—“walls erected between [her] reasonable dreams and [the] unreasonable worlds” (Ayers 1996:x).

“My Name Is Not Hope”: Daniel’s Liu’s Counternarratives

Being the only boy in the family, Daniel symbolized hope when he was born. He was named “Li-gang” in Chinese (independent and strong), in the hope that he would grow up to become the support of his family. But as soon as Daniel entered school, Kathy and Peter’s dream for their only son was broken. Daniel was eight and was in first grade for the third time. He was not fluent in either Chinese or English, although his English was better than his Chinese. His words were fragmented and he communicated mostly through body language, gestures, and grunts. For example, when he wanted water, he turned on the tap, let the water run, and said in English, “drink!” Then the people around him knew he was thirsty. If he wanted to tell other people what was happening in the movie he was watching, he imitated what was happening. He was watching The Jungle Book during one of my visits, for example, I asked him where the tiger went. He crawled on the floor, and told me in English, “Tiger go like this, like this!” Because of his language difficulty, he did not have long conversations with anyone, including his mother. Sometimes, he tried to tell the stories of the videos he watched in English, and his mother could not understand. He became so frustrated he called his mother “stupid!”

Daniel could not read or write in either Chinese or English. He could sing the ABC song in fragments until the letter G, and identify a few letters. If he was asked to read or write something, he always tried to get away, or put his head down, and said, “I can’t!” He could not count or identify colors. Though his parents realized his problem, they refused to think that he was a special needs child. They had asked his sisters to help him, but his sisters were struggling with school themselves. Daniel was often left unattended and spent all his spare time watching Disney videos. According to his aunt, one day he watched 12 videos. He and his sisters owned almost every child’s video imaginable. He showed me his collection; pointing to Mulan and a few others, he said, “Saturday no school. Watch this, this, this!”

I speculated that one of the reasons for Daniel’s difficulty with English was his early experiences at home. I was told that shortly after he was born, Daniel’s parents bought a bigger restaurant and they became very busy operating their new business. He was left with his grandmother, who was also busy taking care of other children in the house, and did not have much time for him. He was put in front of the TV or left by himself.

In school Daniel was often bullied and called “China Boy.” When he got into fights with other children, he was usually the child who was sent home. The recurring problem of Daniel fighting with other children made Kathy aware that Canadian schools were not the kind of place she expected. Like many working-class parents, Kathy and Peter regarded school as a place for knowledge and discipline (Lowe 2001). In their opinion, when a child got into fights, the teachers should try to find out what caused the trouble and solve the problem, rather than sending a child home. Kathy questioned the school’s action: “How can a child learn to correct his mistake if every time he is sent home?” One time, Erin, who witnessed part of Daniel’s fight, came home and told Kathy that it was not Daniel’s fault. Kathy suspected that because Daniel could not speak English well, he could not explain the situation. Apparently the teacher did not investigate who was to blame and assumed it was Daniel’s fault. Kathy was perplexed at the teacher’s actions: “I think they treat Chinese kids differently.”

When the school did several IQ tests on Daniel (everything was tested in English and the tests results were not disclosed to Kathy and Peter), and informed them through Erin that the best thing for Daniel would be to transfer him to another community school, Kathy was devastated. In her opinion, transferring him to another school would not solve Daniel’s problem. With tears in her eyes, she told me that the perception of Daniel as an “at risk” Chinese student would be transferred to the new school. But Kathy and Peter firmly believed that Daniel could learn because they had taught him some restaurant duties such as setting tables. He could comprehend videos, and could even retell some stories using his limited English. Like many immigrant parents who believe in effort and hard work in making it in the new country (Gibson 1988; Ogoshi 1982), Kathy and Peter also believed that for Daniel, “making it” was a matter of effort rather than innate ability. However, they noticed that although Daniel and his sisters were not doing well in their studies, there was little homework for them. This was different from their school experiences in China, where homework was a very important part of school life. Unlike many “model minority” parents who have an advanced college degree
Gina Liu. The eldest daughter, Gina, was 16 and in eleventh grade at the time of my study. She was living with her uncle's family in a small town, where she worked for her uncle in the family's video store after school and on weekends. I met her only twice when she came home to visit. Among the three sisters, she was the most talkative and outgoing. Kathy attributed this outgoing personality to living in the small town:

Gina did not learn English in school here [the city] and she was frustrated all the time and had a bad temper. She fought with her sisters all the time, and did not do well in school. I did not know what to do with her. So I sent her to live in a small town. She can work in her uncle's video store and learn to communicate with customers and learn to deal with people. And best of all, learn to speak English. She has to.

Gina liked her new environment in the small town. "I really learned a lot of English there, because I had to speak English to the customers. And my uncle's family is the only Chinese one there. And my cousin can help me with homework sometimes." When recalling her old school in the city, Gina said she hated it. "I learned nothing there, and it was bad. I did not want to go back there. I learn more in the school in the small town."

Erin Liu. Fourteen-year-old Erin was shy and quiet. I first met her in 1996 when I visited the school to learn more about community schools. The principal, a Caucasian male, told me that he had two "problem kids" in his school who were having difficulty learning English. Because of my Chinese background, he wanted me to meet Erin and her cousin Lynne and talk to them. The visit was brief, but the principal's words stayed with me. When I saw her again for this research study, I was relieved that she survived the school. Because she was doing adequately in school and had less problems, Kathy let Erin take charge of many things in the family—for example, writing checks, paying bills, and translating letters from the schools. Although Erin was performing satisfactorily in school, Kathy did not seem to have much faith that Erin would someday end up in college. Rather, Kathy just hoped that Erin would be able to finish high school.

Kathy also encouraged Erin to get a job to learn more English. Erin worked in a nearby Chinese grocery store, but did not have many opportunities to learn or speak English, so Kathy decided to let Erin help in their restaurant's kitchen after school. Like her older sister Gina, Erin did not have friends from school. Erin explained to me why they did not socialize with others: "We were told not to trust people outside... My grandma and grandpa had so many problems with people here before, and it is also not very safe around our house either." I asked her what she would do if she needed help with schoolwork, and she said, "We call our cousins in the small town for help."

Erin and her siblings' isolation was unique. They seemed to have chosen not to be in close contact with the people in the neighborhood who were low socioeconomic minorities and tried to resist this "downward assimilation" by staying within the kinship of their family (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:59). In contrast to "model minority" students, Erin and her siblings never engaged in any extracurricular activities such as dance, music, and sports. Instead, they stayed home and watched videos or worked in their parents' restaurant.

Fay Liu. Kathy's low expectations and passive, pessimistic outlook on Erin's future were shaped by Erin's elder sister Fay's experiences in school. Fay attended a high school known for accommodating recent immigrant and refugee children. She was enrolled in a three-year Life Skills Work Study (LSWS) program designed to assist special needs students to perform independently in the community. The program focused on basic academic skills, social living skills, and vocational skills. Fay's courses included home economics, lifestyle, visual arts, and technology. Out of all her courses, Fay liked visual arts the best. She was very proud of her drawings and artwork, and often drew pictures in my notebook during my visits. On a number of occasions, she showed me her crafts, such as paper lanterns and cranes. And she wrote to me about the painting she was working on for her school project: "I will show you my painting when you come and visit me some day!" However, Fay demonstrated much stronger interest in reading and writing. She liked to quiz me on English words she learned from books borrowed from her school library. She started writing letters to me after I began my research with her family. She said, "I like writing letters! I used to write to my teacher, and she moved away!" In one of her letters, she wrote about her home reading and school life:

Sorry I write so long. I been reading all day long about a book called wanted is about a girl named Alice's very rational father suggests that she drive his precious, Alice didn't hear the water. Someone vanished into the mall. Now we are sewing we finish cooking we are doing lots of different things. I will always write to you. I am smiling all the time and I will keep the smile.

Kathy and Peter did not know that Fay was enrolled in a special needs program and wondered why Fay's program did not seem to be very academic and why English was not in her program. Kathy commented, "I don't understand. How can she learn other subjects or improve if she doesn't learn English?" They realized that Fay's program would not be good for her future survival in Canadian society, and they wanted to talk to the teacher about this. "I wanted her to learn from my own regrets that I did not learn to read and write English," Kathy told me. I facilitated a meeting between Kathy and Fay's teacher in February 1999. Kathy wanted the school to give Fay more challenging courses and to focus on her English. At the three-hour meeting, in which I served as the translator, Kathy was told that Fay did not qualify for ESL courses because she was born in Canada. In the teacher's mind, because Fay was cognitively delayed, she would never be able to master the academic
and sufficient English ability, and who can assign homework themselves to their children even if Western schools do not (Li 2002; Peng and Wright 1994). Kathy did not have the ability to assist her son: “I don’t know how to teach him. The teachers do not care. . . . I cannot do much at home when there is no homework.”

Kathy and Peter’s experiences with the schools had thus taken away all her aspirations for her children to excel in school, attend the university, and some day become scholars who would be able to read the classics. Ten years previous to my study, despite her husband’s strong objection, Kathy insisted on buying her children a set of classic titles, such as The Encyclopedia Britannica. Working as a dishwasher for a couple of years, she managed to pay off the charges for the seven cases of books, at (Canadian) $400 a month. The classics included sophisticated writings in philosophy, economics, anthropology, sociology, literature, and theology, including the works of Newton, Aristotle, Freud, Marx, Milton, Einstein, Shakespeare, Plato, and Socrates. During my study, the books were still in their plastic wrappers, covered with dust. Kathy and Peter could not see any of their children, even Erin, becoming the kind of scholars they wanted them to be. In retrospect, they thought Kathy could have spent the money better if they had invested it in their struggling restaurant business.

The Meaning of the Counternarrative Discourses

The counternarratives of the six Liu family members present an example of the “cycle of low literacy” (Purcell-Gates 1996) that goes unnoticed, in the assumption that Asians are model minorities who thrive in North American society. In this section, I situate my understanding of the Liu family’s counternarratives within theories of cultural discontinuity, assimilation and acculturation, and cultural capital. I first analyze how the cultural values of the Liu family differed from those of the schools the Liu children attended, focusing on three cultural discontinuities the Liu family members experienced. I then investigate factors such as the family’s modes of social incorporation and their individual characteristics that affected their activation of their cultural capital for school success, and the critical role that schools played in this process.

Literacy, Culture, and Schooling

The counternarratives of the Liu family confirm that cultural discontinuity explains, in part, widespread minority school failure (Ogbu 1982). The family members’ stories demonstrate that their literacy and life way, embedded in heritage cultural values, were not congruent with the school culture. Because surface cultural differences such as home language use are obvious, I focus on the “deep principles and logic according to which empirical reality functions” (MacLeod 1987:12), for example: (1) what it means to be literate; (2) the role of schooling; (3) and the

meaning of special needs children. These discontinuities, associated with the family’s immigrant status (Ogbu 1982), were also byproducts of the family’s social isolation in a marginalized, low SES community.

Discontinuity 1: What It Means to Be Literate. Literacy is grounded in specific cultural values. Kathy’s and Peter’s conception of what it means to be literate was rooted in the traditional Chinese philosophy that emphasizes the ability to read classic literature (Zhao and Guo 1990). This belief was different from the Canadian school practice of using children’s picture books to help foster their children’s interest in reading. Kathy’s and Peter’s notion of literacy was reflected in the Liu family’s expectation of more homework and English language instruction from the schools. Chinese education emphasizes rote memory of texts, a practice considered effective for preparing for national standardized examinations. Students are encouraged to spend time in and after school on homework, doing practice exercises, and reciting and copying texts to enhance school learning (Li 2002; Parry and Su 1998).

Discontinuity 2: The Role of Schooling. The Liu family looked at school as the place for learning that encouraged individual efforts, formality, and discipline (Zhao and Guo 1990:56). In their minds, school was the place for knowledge and discipline, where children could not only become better students and be transformed from being ignorant to being learned, but also could be introduced to “a package of rules and expectations” (Wood 1999). The family’s encounters with the schools showed that the schools’ practices were not congruent with the family’s conceptions. For example, the teachers often sent Daniel home whenever he got in fights with other students, without correcting his behavior, and Fay’s school placed her in a program that did not encourage academic learning.

Discontinuity 3: The Meaning of Special Needs Children. The Lius believed that their children might be slow learners, but they could improve through efforts reinforced by their schools. They were reluctant to accept the school label of “special needs student.” In China, it is believed that innate ability is given by birth and cannot be changed. Through continuous effort, however, those with low innate ability can achieve the same as people who are “born smart” (Stevenson and Sigler 1992). The school, on the other hand, communicated the message that children’s low innate ability determined their school performance. For example, Erin was labeled as a “problem kid”; Fay’s teachers had already assigned her to a future in her family’s restaurant and believed that Fay did not need to acquire literacy in English.

In sum, the Liu family’s cultural values were different from those transmitted by the schools. These cultural differences may in part explain the Liu children’s difficulties in Canadian schools, yet many Chinese immigrant children experience such discontinuities, but are successful in school. A closer look at Daniel’s parents’ support indicate that they share some of the characteristics attributed to “model minority“
parents. They had high expectations for their children; they understood the paramount importance of education, especially literacy skills in Canadian society; they emphasized discipline, effort, and learning; they were hardworking; and they were willing to invest and sacrifice for their children’s success in school (Chao 1996). Why was the Liu family unsuccessful? In the discussion that follows, I explore other factors unique to the family that played a role.

**Modes of Incorporation, Family Characteristics, and School Performances**

An examination of the Liu family’s counternarratives suggests that their mode of incorporation and their individual family characteristics had a great impact on the children’s school performance. Negative social reception, isolation from their ethnic and immediate communities, and the socioeconomic context of their schools placed the Liu family in a vulnerable position of downward assimilation rather than upward mobility (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). These factors stand in sharp contrast to those associated with the success stories of many Asian minorities.

Research on immigration and assimilation demonstrates that a strong ethnic community can provide immigrant families with varied social networks and access to a range of moral, cultural, material, and educational resources that are generally not available through official channels (Gibson 1988; Portes and Zhou 1994). The city that the Liu family resided in did not have a strong preexistent ethnic Chinese community, because the Chinese population in the city was relatively small, and the limited number of Chinese did not live in one community as they do in bigger cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, New York, or San Francisco. This lack of an immediate ethnic network and collective community effort diminished the social resources available to the Liu family to support their children’s education. Further, the children did not have the opportunity to benefit from ethnic peer encouragement and support as many Asian students do (Epstein 1983; Gibson 1988; Steinberg et al. 1992).

Moreover, the social reception the Liu family received in their community and the community schools was not favorable to integrating them within that community. Kathy and Peter immigrated in the late 1970s, when the perception of the Chinese in Canada was still negative and immigration was restricted by Canadian immigration policies (Li 1998). Kathy and Peter did not receive government help with learning English, as such programs for new immigrants were not yet in place. Their hostile reception resulted in distrust of outsiders, and the family remained distant and isolated from others in the community. At the time of this study, hostility still existed and was reflected in the children’s school experiences and their parents’ perception that the schools and teachers treated Chinese students differently. The social context of reception, together with their own lower socioeconomic and educational background, also limited the parents’ access to the Canadian labor market. They were confined to lower-level manual jobs with minimum exposure to English. These labor-intensive jobs prevented the parents from spending time with their children at home, as many Asian parents do. As a result, their children were often left unsupervised, generally watching videos at home. More importantly, the parents’ lack of English also limited their ability to communicate and made them reluctant to integrate into Canadian society. Hence, their ability to assist their children with schooling was limited. Direct parental involvement with children’s academic and social lives, time spent doing homework, and television viewing are three key variables that influence students’ academic achievement. The Liu parents’ inability to be actively involved in these aspects of their children’s lives was a major difference between them and other, more successful Asian families (Keith et al. 1986; Peng and Wright 1994; Schneider and Lee 1990; Siu 1994; Zhang and Carasquillo 1995).

The second factor that made the Liu family more vulnerable to downward mobility was the location of their settlement. Instead of settling in a higher socioeconomic neighborhood that might have had a positive influence on their “upward assimilation” (Portes and MacLeod 1995), the Liu family found themselves in a crime-ridden, high-poverty neighborhood where historically marginalized Aboriginals lived. The Liu family passively resisted downward assimilation by not socializing with their Aboriginal neighbors. This further strengthened the Liu family’s isolation, and limited their access to social resources that may have been beneficial to their children’s education. They remained outsiders within the community; this may have resulted in the cultural discontinuities discussed above. This further distinguishes the Liu family from other Asian minority families who have had the option of upward assimilation through integration with the mainstream or dominant sociocultural group.

Another distinct characteristic of the Liu family’s modes of incorporation was the low socioeconomic status of the community schools the children attended. These inner-city schools were established in 1985 to resolve the problems faced by Indian and Métis students who were considered at risk of school failure due to poverty and family and community instability. School efforts were primarily devoted to accommodating the needs and culture of the Aboriginal students. As a minority in these schools, the Liu children may not have benefited from school programs designed to serve Aboriginal students. For example, lack of resources may have been one reason that Daniel’s school recommended his transfer to another school. Although Daniel’s special needs were quite apparent, it is not clear whether Fay’s literacy problems resulted from the lack of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) support in her early school years, or from being cognitively delayed. In either case, the schools did not serve as an effective cultural broker in addressing the needs of the Liu children or in communicating their educational decisions regarding the children to the Liu parents. This gap may indicate either a lack of resources or insufficient attention to the educational...
needs of minority students such as the Liu children within school programs for Aboriginal students.

Cultural Capital, Schooling, and Minority Education

The Liu family’s cultural differences and distinct modes of incorporation created double barriers for them in applying their cultural capital toward their children’s educational attainment. In addition to these barriers, the Liu family faced another layer of complexity that hindered their activation of cultural capital for school success: differential power relationships between the family and the schools. These power relationships were negotiated through the family’s exchanges with the schools (Bourdieu 1973; Faireclough 2001; Giroux 1996).

An examination of the Liu family’s interaction with the schools shows that the connection or exchange was problematic. Serpell (1997) identifies three criteria influencing home-school connections: congruence of family life with the agenda of schooling; intimacy, or depth of understanding between teachers and parents; and sociocultural productivity of the interaction between the school and its students’ home communities. There was little familiarity, understanding, or sociocultural productivity between the school and the Liu family, who were situated on the margins of the dominant society. The school’s literacy and cultural practices, which were incongruent with those of the family, failed to respond to “the perceived psychological needs of the developing child, which in turn are related to her/his perceived emergent competencies and dispositions” (Serpell 1997:595). None of the Liu children received any language or ESL support, even when the parents requested it. To the contrary, the schools labeled Liu children as at risk and problematic (Erin and Gina), regulated them through discriminatory testing (Daniel), and streamed them into the labor market (Fay) from an early age. Therefore, the schools assumed exclusionary literacy practices that eliminated the Liu family’s opportunities for upward social mobility and their only passport for social mobility as immigrants—equal education. The Liu family members were designated “outsiders” in these exclusionary practices:

Those situated outside the confines of the monolithic, exclusionary literacy are designated as the Other, alien and troubled, lawless and frustrated, and marked by an inherent failure to learn to read and write, and an inability to use language appropriately. [Mitchell 1991:xviii]

For the Liu children, English literacy, a major form of mainstream cultural capital and of access to the dominant discourse, was controlled by the schools and by teachers who were the gatekeepers of access. Testing, streaming and stratification, and denial of access “reinforce and concretize by [their] sanctions the initial inequalities” (Bourdieu 1973:79). These forms of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:5) located the Liu children and their family in a powerless position.

Conclusion: What Has Been Learned from the Liu Family?

The counternarratives of the Liu family provide an example of how multilevel interactions mediated by cultural differences, modes of incorporation, and differential power relationships between school and home result in minority students’ school difficulties. The Liu family’s narratives stand in contradistinction to the success stories of the Asian “model minority,” and illuminate the sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical problems that many Asian children face in schools and their communities.

What can be gained from an inquiry into the Liu family’s counternarratives? Such research enhances a critical understanding of the lives of underachieving minority children, especially those who are overlooked because of public stereotypes. These counternarratives help us examine “the nature of culture and power, and the relationship of institutions and ideologies of communication in the contemporary world” (Street 1993:12). The Liu family’s counternarratives provide insight into the daily struggles faced by these minority families, which are seldom known to educators and policy makers. The voices of the Liu family also suggest that each family or child must be understood in their specific social, cultural, and political contexts. By informing educators and policy makers of problems that are specific to children whose schools are failing, we can work toward solutions as well as explanations for minority student failure.

This study also shows the fallacy of the model minority myth. Like the Liu, many children and families experience tremendous difficulties with schooling. This research reveals how misguided the often-repeated blaming question is—"Why can’t they learn to speak English and be as successful as other Asian families?" Inquiring into counternarratives may lead educators to consider the multifaceted factors at work in the lives of immigrant families-cultural discontinuities, modes of incorporation, and home-school power relationships—and how these factors shape the success or failure of minority children. For teachers, the implication is that instructional practices need to focus on the whole child, and that it is necessary to work closely with parents from diverse cultures to meet each child’s developmental needs. Most importantly, educators need to listen to parents’ voices.

Policymakers also can learn from this study. If English literacy is the “ticket” to academic success in North America, it is essential to recognize that some minority children who are born in North America may not possess this ticket, and require ESL support. To assume that Asian students do not need such assistance, or that all second-generation immigrant children possess English skills simply because they live in an English-dominant society, overlooks many minority children’s sociolinguistic needs.

More community outreach is needed for all students, especially those who constitute a “minority within a minority.” Schools need to establish
partnerships with parents to assist students' academic development. For families like the Liu, who sometimes make the wrong choices out of good intentions (e.g., purchasing an expensive encyclopedia rather than age-appropriate books), home-school partnerships may help them find more effective ways to actualize their aspirations for their children.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of minority parents' agency in transforming the conditions that place their children at a disadvantage in school. Although exercising agency is not an easy task for border-crossers such as the Liu family, there are pathways to self-empowerment. Networking in their residential, mainstream, and ethnic communities in multiple ways (e.g., through churches, Chinese grocery stores, and business associations), and through multiple media (e.g., Chinese newspapers and newsletters), is advantageous. Establishing partnerships with schools and educators, so that their children's educational needs can be better communicated and understood, may enable educators to act more effectively as cultural brokers for their children. This requires that immigrant families become involved in their children's education not only at home, but also in the school setting. Although the Liu family's experience shows the barriers to this type of involvement, this study also demonstrates the importance of parental involvement. Spending time with children at home while working on homework, supervising their television viewing, and exposing them to different literacy activities such as libraries and museums, are helpful. At school, parents can serve as volunteers, participate in school activities, and meet more frequently with teachers. This kind of active involvement, though admittedly difficult for families such as the Liu, will help fight the political forces and school practices that have such a profound and negative impact on second-generation immigrant children's educational experiences.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to ensure the anonymity of participants. As the Liu family used English names in their communications with nonfamily members, English names rather than Chinese names are chosen for this article.

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