

- **Institutional Description**

The research was conducted in the College of Foreign Languages at Anhui University of Finance and Economics (hereafter referred to as AUFE) in Anhui Province of China. The mission statement of the college reflects the elevated strategic position of the university in the region's economic development under the national Belt and Road Initiative, including outcomes such as these: to help students “draw on multiple languages to discover, analyze, and solve problems embedded in everyday, workplace, and international contexts” and to develop students' ability to “craft and communicate significant stories across languages and cultures” (“Learning Outcomes”). Aiming towards these revised learning outcomes, the English department had been working to reinvent its curriculum by developing new professional and digital writing courses, which ran as addendum to traditional, proficiency-based courses in English Pronunciation, Speaking and Listening, Reading and Writing.

In 2018, the first author, a faculty member in the English Department of the University of Pittsburgh, offered a six-week summer course as part of the institutional effort to develop an asset-based curriculum that prepares students for communication in global workplace and professional contexts. In this course, the first author integrated translingual theory (Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011), aiming to help students develop translingual dispositions and practices through assignments that position students' languages and cultures as assets for learning, encourage students' theorization of cross-language relationships, and invite students' inquiry into language differences. focusing on “translation” (Gonzales, 2018; Horner & Tetreault, 2016; Wang, 2020a) as a useful metaphor to help students recognize and develop strategies for moving meaning across languages, modalities, genres, and life worlds, course assignments invited students to practice and reflect on their own practices of translating texts from their home language into English (Kiernan, Meier, & Wang, 2017), to theorize and represent language and cultural differences (Wang, 2017), and to consider their multilingualism as shaped by powerful literacy brokers and spaces (Stewart & Hansen-Thomas, 2016).

Positioning students' languages and cultures as sites of inquiry, such assignments created many opportunities to identify, discuss, and gather data about students' multilingual repertoire in connection to their experiences with and expectations for geographical, academic, and professional mobility. An asset-based pedagogy not only invited students to share, reflect on, and theorize their own multilingual repertoire as shifting and transformative, but also provided us with the opportunity to complicate the ways in which multilingual repertoire are co-constituted with mobility. It is from this research context that this project emerged.

The second author was a student enrolled in the summer program, who expressed interests in working in collaboration with the first author to explore some of the themes that emerged from her writing assignments, which allowed them to collaboratively explore the experiences, aspirations, and entanglements of left-behind children in rural China. In 2025, the first and second author collaboratively developed a study, that integrated ethnographic research methods (Finlay & Bowman, 2017; Smith, 1997). They traveled together to retrace the second

author's migratory journey to generate journal entries and digital photography, which were then used to surface memories and narratives, discuss migratory experiences and aspirations, and explore embodied and emplaced relationships with shifting landscapes (Spinney, 2011; Warren, 2017).

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- **Theorists:** A one-page digest of key theorists and frames used in the choice of methods and research design; this should highlight between 2 and 5 main perspectives that guide your work: the scholars you cite most often, or the “schools of thought” you draw from. Each entry should be **just a few sentences long**—enough to give readers an understanding of your methods and analytic frames. *This framing will be particularly important in this workshop setting: we will ask you to emphasize this material in your actual workshop introduction.*
- **Anna Tsing:** We draw on Anna Tsing’s idea of “interspecies entanglements” (2015) to account for ways in which entangled world-making projects overlap, allowing room for more than one way of being and living. Each organism changes everyone’s world by making ecological living places, altering earth, air, water, and the world for everyone else. Such a perspective allows me to explore how migrant’s social, geographic, and literacy mobility as shaped by their relationship with other things.
- **Donna Haraway:** We draw on Donna Haraway’s term of “sympoiesis” to capture how living and non-living beings are always “making with” and “worlding with” each other in complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems (2016). In this view, all the players, encompassing reivers, indigenous plants, snakes, hills, cottons, and a host of other friendly or hostile insects and herbivores, enter open-ended assemblages and participate in the ongoing becoming-with-each-other at all sorts of sizes and scales, through diverse kinds of relationalities, and with varying degrees of openness to opportunistic assemblages (Haraway, 2016, p. 60).
- **Karen Barad:** We echo Karen Barad’ postulation that humans do not simply “assemble different apparatuses for satisfying particular knowledge projects” but rather are “themselves specific parts of the world’s ongoing reconfiguring” (2007, p. 341). That is, we position humans in entanglement with the natural and cultural landscapes to observe how human’s movements and learning are necessarily motivated by and motivate changes in other living and non-living things.
- **Paul Prior:** We use the concept of **chronotopic lamination** to explore how ideas, texts, memories, and artifacts are mobilized and continue to form expanding relationships for multilingual writers. When taking up this approach, it becomes important to notice and theorize literacy activities as ways of being in the world and forms of life that are always in the making through relationships. It becomes equally important to observe how semiotic fibers form “complex, multifarious chains of transformations in and across representational states and media” (Prior & Shipka, 2003, p. 181). Multilingual writing becomes part of how multilingual writers make, inhabit, fiddle, and transform natural, social, and imaginary worlds.
- **Mikhail Bakhtin:** We build on Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of chronotope as a typified and dynamic envelope of spatial and temporal meanings to explore how situated, dispersed, distributed, and mediated literate activities are reassembled and reconfigured to give meaning and shape to emergent literate activities.

- **Glossary:** A list of any potentially context/culture-specific terms, both practical and profound; the glossary collectively produced will be further discussed during the workshop itself.

**Entanglement:** Entanglement describes the ongoing interweaving, of different kinds of things acting at different scales (e.g. mushrooms, pine trees, soils, migrant women, rural villages, cell phones, gift-giving customs, markets, etc.), into complex relationships.

**Left-behind Children:** Children who remain in rural regions while their parents leave to work in urban areas. This is due to restraints for rural residents to access public resources such as healthcare and education in the cities. These children are often left under the care of grandparents who remain in rural areas.

**Rural Void:** refers to the increasingly depopulated and economically stagnant rural areas in China, primarily caused by a large-scale migration of people from villages to urban centers in search of better job opportunities and living standards, leaving behind a "void" in rural communities with dwindling populations and often lacking essential services

**Belt and Road Initiative:** A global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in nearly 70 countries and international organizations. It is a centerpiece of Chinese leader Xi Jinping's foreign policy.

### The Elephant Hill without Its Head: An Ecological Perspective on Left-Behind Women's Literacies

With China's rapid economic growth and urbanization, the population of migrants moving from rural areas to urban centers has increased from 70 million to 247 million in the past three decades, accounting for 16.5% of its total population. More recently, China's expansionist agenda has motivated additional labor migration and immigration through geopolitical initiatives such as *Belt and Road* (Lee, 2017). This intertwining of labor movements and an exclusionist social policy, which prevents migrant families from accessing public resources in urban centers, has led to 61 million children being left behind in rural areas (Naughton, 2007), with girls disproportionately represented within this population (Wang, et al., 2017). Despite emerging research examining the detrimental effect of an exclusionist policy on migrant children, including their overall wellbeing (Mo. et al., 2015), access to educational resources (Hsin, 2017), and prospect for upward social mobility (Szablewicz, 2014), the predicaments of left-behind children are trivialized against the backdrop of celebratory narratives, which highlight China's economic transformation and binarize the country's urban/rural areas as contemporary/backward (Ismangil, 2019). Simultaneously, scholars have observed how social mechanisms of censorship, propaganda, and grassroots patriotism have facilitated the inculcation of nationalistic discourses (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Grier, 1997), which often silence the voice of the vulnerable, deprive those left behind of agency, and create obstacles for disrupting social hierarchy (Yang, 2016).

In rhetoric and composition, research into migrants' literacies has been informed by theories of literacy mobility, which examine how transnational migration provides opportunities to negotiate multiple identities, languages, and networks (Blommaert, 2012; Lam & Christiansen, 2024), while noting how migrants learn new literacies to achieve geographic mobility, economic solvency, and emotional intimacy (Karimzad & Catedral, 2021; Viera, 2019). A celebratory stance towards migrants' achievements, however, has helped to create "contemporary silences about internal migration" and overlooked how migratory experiences are shaped by dominant narratives controlled by nation-states (Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Moreover, current research has yet to examine how migrants' practices, aspirations, and imaginaries are shaped by their multisensory and embodied experiences with the shifting cultural and natural landscapes they traverse (Dobrin, 2001; Reynolds, 2007).

Our research fills such conceptual gaps by examining the experiences of young women who grew up as left-behind children amidst China's massive labor migration. It draws on ecological theories (Sheldrake, 2022; Tsing, 2015) to explore ways in which young women's (im)mobility and literacies co-evolve with shifting entanglements of living and non-living beings (e.g. trees, rivers, animals) that co-populate the natural and cultural landscapes they traverse. Attending to how women are physically, affectively, and imaginatively entangled with rural villages, bustling metropolises, and cosmopolitan centers, this project surfaces how women perform improvised, spontaneous literacy work to affectively relate to shifting ecologies and to write their migration into meaning. In so doing, this research explores how a.) national migratory processes shape the literacy learning of the socially vulnerable and b.) how left-behind women's ecological entanglements become resources for achieving social mobility, linguistic innovation, and political resistance. Doing so enters migrants' voices in dialogue with dominant structures that otherwise silence them.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

An interdisciplinary body of scholarship in translingualism, transnational literacies, and literacy mobility studies has explored the shifting forms and functions of multilingual writing in connection to globalizing processes. Transnational literacy scholars have detailed how cultural, geographic, and imaginary border crossing allows transnational migrants to develop funds of knowledge and bi-focal lenses with which to view their migratory experiences, mobilize

resources and networks for negotiating academic, social, and career challenges, and develop strategies for disrupting meta-narratives and nefarious politics that stigmatize migrants (Medina, 2009; Lam & Christiansan, 2022; Lam & Warriner, 2012; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008; Sanchez, 2007; Sarroub, 2002; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

In composition studies, the broader conceptual turn toward translanguaging has theorized languages as practice-based, adaptive, and mutually constitutive linguistic structures, recognized language irregularities as linguistic innovations performed against historically inscribed norms, and highlighted language users' agency in negotiating through language ambiguities for strategic gains (Canagarajah, 2012; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Horner et al., 2011; Lu & Horner, 2013; Li, 2018; Silva & Wang, 2021). Such a conceptual turn encourages use to view multilingual writing as creative, agentic processes through which writers discover, interpret, and move meanings across languages, modalities, and rhetorical situations (Canagarajah, 2013; Fraiberg, Wang, & You, 2017; Leonard-Lorimer, 2017; Norquist, 2017; Wang, 2020). In particular, broadly-construed acts of translation are considered a core process of all writing, which is always implicated within the traffic of ideas, concepts, symbols, and discourses (Gonzales, 2018; Horner & Tetreault, 2016; Kiernan, Meier, & Wang, 2015; Pennycook, 2007; Wang, 2020).

As transnational migrants' literacies are increasingly entangled in efforts to achieve geographic mobility, economic prosperity, and emotional well-being (Vieira, 2011), it is important to explore multilinguals' literacy activities across multiple spheres. Increasing attention has been given to digital spaces for allowing transnationals to participate in globally distributed forms of youth culture, develop linguistic and technological dexterities for writing across genres and for diverse audiences, and maintain simultaneous affiliations with local and translocal communities of diaspora (Black, 2005; Christensen, 2017; Fraiberg & Cui, 2016; Lam, 2009). Such an understanding resonates with composition scholars' effort to understand how writing, reading, and digital literacies developed in the writing extracurricular continue to connect and co-evolve beyond writing classrooms (Gere, 1994; Rounsaville, 2014; Roozen & Erickson, 2017; Wang, 2019; Yancey, 2014; Yi & Hirvela, 2010; Zhang-Wu, 2022).

Although such research has provided increasingly nuanced understanding of multilingual writing as strategically negotiated with networked semiotic repertoires and dynamically mobilized across spheres of transnational literacy landscapes, it is limited in several ways. First, in operating with dichotomous views of social spheres that writers inhabit as divided, extant research often overlooks the simultaneously fluid, frictive, and fixed ways in which literacy practices pass from one person, spacetime, language, and mode to another to fulfill the multifaceted expectations for literacy in multilingual lives (Lorimer Leonard, 2017). Second, by conceptualizing literacy practices (e.g. journaling, fanfiction, writing, reading) as discrete

dimensions of multilinguals' literacy lives, current research has yet to arrive at a productive reconciliation of celebratory accounts of multilingual writers performing transformative and agentive literacy tasks outside of writing classrooms and the challenges such students face in navigating literacy tasks expected in university classrooms. Lastly, in focusing on the strategic and agentive practices of multilingual writers, we have yet to fully explore the messy, chaotic, and unpredictable processes of working through multiple, competing material and symbolic structures that afford and limit opportunities for writing (Rule, 2019; Takayoshi, 2018). Consequently, there has been limited understanding of transnational students' multilingual writing processes and the concrete strategies they perform *in situ* and across literacy spheres to complete writing tasks embedded within and beyond FYW.

The current study develops an ecology-informed approach for tracing the contours of multilingual writing across temporal and spatial boundaries. On the theoretical front, this project builds on a long tradition of composition scholarship that engages with ecological metaphors to explore writing as discursively, physically, and materially positioned, driven by relationships, and co-constituted with ecologies of cultural, social, technological, disciplinary, and material configurations (Bawarshi, 2001; Coe, 1975; Cooper, 1986; Dobrin & Weisser, 2001; Inoue, 2015; Mays, 2017; Rule, 2019; Syveson, 1999). I draw on a post-humanist, ecological conception of entanglement developed in fungi studies (Tsing, 2015; Sheldrake, 2020) to extend ecological theories of writing. From this perspective, entanglement is the norm of multispecies living, which is enabled by the interplay of many kinds of beings across categories and species. Attention to cross-species association necessitates the need to abandon theoretical categories that separate and hierarchically order nature/culture, material/discursive practices, and past/present times. Simultaneously, entanglement invites the willingness to listen for polyphony of multiple temporal trajectories and the readiness to grapple with surprises and unpredictable encounters.

Entanglement offers useful tools for reconceptualizing multilingual writing-in-becoming. First, it expands multilingual writers' ecologies beyond the sociolinguistic landscape (Blommaert, 2012; Leonard-Lorimer, 2017) by conceiving multilingual writing as emerging through relationships with natural, cultural, and literate beings and as mobilized across brokers, languages, modalities, and technologies with negotiated boundaries, properties, and meanings (Barad, 2007; Fleckstein et al., 2008). Second, entanglement challenges the humanistic lens that depicts the writer as an objective knower that observes, represents, and transforms an uncontested world with determinacy, coherence, and clarity (Tsing, 2008). Instead, entanglement allows us to notice the slippery, ephemeral, and indeterminate features of writing as the necessary outcome of coordinated effort to make meanings and livings possible (Law, 2004). Lastly, entanglement recognizes writers as part of open-ended practices that materialize and reconfigure with the world, offering ways to conceive authorial intention as

malleable and co-emergent with the contours, relationships, and environs of multilingual living (Rickert, 2013; Edbauer, 2005).

In so doing, an entanglement perspective theorizes multilingual writing as the outcome of open-ended gatherings of writers and other forms of being in response to fickle environments. Writing in entanglement takes shape through thickets of relationships that are complete with competition, collaboration, and coordination; it is charged with spatial and temporal meanings at various scales; it emerges through encounters across differences, which produce, unintended detours, surprising discoveries, and improvised acts. As such, a writing-in-entanglement perspective encourages our attention to the ephemeral, messy, and surprising ways in which writers, ideas, and texts move, connect, and interanimate across spatial, temporal, cultural, and linguistic boundaries.

The conceptual turn toward entanglement urges writing researchers to attend to writing as contingent coordination of multiple life worlds rather than individual achievement, thereby inviting methodological ways to engage with the unruly, random, and messy aspects of multilingual writing as meaningful sites of inquiry. To grapple with messy multiplicities, fluid relationships, and indeterminate ways, I propose three methodological moves--turning to thickets of relationships, listening to polyphonic temporal rhythms, and following chronotopic figuring. In particular, I engage with a body of scholarship that rejuvenates Bakhtin's conception of chronotope (1981) to explore transnational migrant's ways of being and imagining as co-constituted with chronotopic meanings and practices (Agha, 2007; Blommaert & De Fina, 2017; De Fina, Paternostro, & Amoroso, 2020; Dick, 2010; Divita, 2019; Karimzad & Cathedral, 2021; Leander, 2002; Rosa, 2017). I offer my reading of the Bakhtinian chronotope to consider chronotopic meaning and figuring as ways to follow multilingual writing through porous and interesting spatial and temporal contours, to observe situated writing practices as infiltrated with meanings from multiple literacy spheres and trajectories, and to explore the dynamic ways in which semiotic materials are mobilized and layered to gain expressive, affective, and imaginative meanings.

Operating with such theoretical ideas, our project explores the following questions: How are left-behind and migrant women's literacy learning entangled within the cultural, linguistic, and natural ecologies of shifting urban and rural landscapes of contemporary China? How do women's entanglements with such shifting ecologies provide opportunities for learning, aspiration, innovation, and resistance?

### **Methodology & Work Plan**

This project builds on existing ethnographic data I gathered during summer research travels (2018, 2019) to construct thick descriptions (Glaser & Strauss, 2007) of women's migration and literacy



in four historically underdeveloped provinces (Anhui, Yunnan, Guizhou, Hainan) with significant populations of outward-bounding migrants and left-behind children. In summer 2024, I completed additional ethnographic fieldwork with four focal participants, extending my research by integrating mobile ethnographic methods (Finlay & Bowman, 2017; Smith, 1997). Xiqiao traveled with Ke on her migratory journey to generate journal entries and digital photography, which were then used to surface memories and narratives, discuss migratory experiences and aspirations, and explore embodied and emplaced relationships with shifting landscapes (Spinney, 2011; Warren, 2017).

Currently, we are working with a GIS (global information system) specialist to engage in spatial analysis of ethnographic data. We have been collaborating with a GIS specialist to assemble, clean, and convert spatial, demographic data on migrant laborers (e.g. trajectory, income, age, time of migration, profession) and left-behind children (e.g. gender, education, family structure) that were curated between 1995-2025 at national, provincial, and county levels, experiment with spatial analytical methods, and generate spatial representation and research write-ups. Such analysis will help construct broader contexts of social and economic policies, regional and national migratory patterns, and changing local economic circumstances. Following spatial analysis and representation, we will explore the use of ArcGIS StoryMap to explore how ethnographic and spatial data could be fused to construct multimodal, spatial representations of case studies.

### Findings

For our presentation, we explore how interview, artifacts, narrative data generated through ethnographic studies could be combined with GIS mapping of migratory journeys to explore the struggles Ke and her family experienced as they were forcibly relocated from their home village. As one of the four focal participants in the study, Ke grew up as a left-behind child as her parents left for the nearby Jiangsu Province to work in a flourishing garment industry. Drawing on Ke's poetry, we discuss surface aspects of her memories that depict her intimate entanglement with rivers, trees, mountains, cotton fields, snakes, and wild berries. In particular, we name her intimate connection with a river, on the bank of which her family home was built. Juxtaposing her memories of drinking from, bathing in, and relying on the river as a child with mobile interview data that documented the hollowed-out village as well as intensely sensory experiences with pollution in the area, we discuss how Ke's literacy and geographic mobilities are profoundly shaped by the natural and industrial ecologies of her home village, as villagers were forced to relocate to a nearby new construction to make room for a state-funded chemical industrial complex. Using GIS analysis, we explore how the construction of the industrial complex led to pollution of the rivers and soil, increased the number of residents diagnosed with cancer and respiratory diseases, and created new job opportunities that drew out-bound migrants back into their hometowns.

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