Chinese white-collar workers and multilingual creativity in the diaspora

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ABSTRACT: The nearly universal requirement of English study in colleges has afforded the language an unprecedented institutional status and given rise to an increasingly large English-literate public in the Expanding Circle countries. Adopting the lens of domestic diaspora, the present study explores Chinese white-collar workers’ multilingual creativity when they seek to represent themselves as a distinct social form and to articulate their diasporic consciousness on an electronic bulletin board. Using thematic and rhetorical analysis, the study reveals not only patterns of social and personal behaviors of the new Chinese workforce but also the symbolic strategies that they develop to achieve agency. Rather than confining themselves to bilingual resources, white-collar workers actively utilize resources from multiple languages (such as Standard English, Standard Mandarin, Chinese regional dialects, and Internet language), and the multimodal functions of the digital technologies. Their idiosyncratic, fluid use of English defies the time-honored scholarly view of China English as a discrete formal linguistic system.

INTRODUCTION

Bilingual creativity is a prominent issue in world Englishes. Its discussion so far has been centered on contact literature in the Inner and Outer Circle countries. Numerous studies, notably Kachru (1989), Kachru (1990; 1992; 2005), Baker (2001), Thumboo (2006), Ashcroft (2009) and Butt (2009), fix their attention on writers from African countries, India, Malaysia, Singapore, and the West Indies. In the Expanding Circle countries where English does not claim an institutional status, literary creativity is marginally recognized, as exemplified by the works of Lin Yutang and Ha Jin from China (Bolton 2002; Zhang 2002). Instead, the most noted bilingual creations in these countries take place at the lexical level. Individuals borrow or invent English expressions to capture their unique experiences, feelings, and thoughts (Kang 1999; Stanlaw 2004; Dimova 2007). Creativity in pragmatic strategies, discursive patterns, and speech acts has also attracted scholarly attention. For example, Kirkpatrick (1991; 1993), Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002), and You (2008; 2010) have noted the wide variety of discourse strategies that Chinese-English bilinguals use in the contexts of letter writing, school essay writing, and online communication. Lee (2004), Stanlaw (2004) and Moody (2006) also highlight the inventiveness of Japanese and Korean artists when they compose song lyrics in English to convey their feelings and metropolitan sentiments.

As bilingual creativity most frequently occurs in multilingual societies where English enjoys an institutional status, the fast changing English profile in some Expanding Circle countries heralds greater bilingual creativity. Over the last three decades, economic globalization has encouraged nations such as China, Egypt, Korea, Mexico, Iran, Russia, and Turkey to champion a mass higher education and to increase their college enrollment (Arslan 2002; Kim and Lee 2006; You 2010). Most of their college graduates have learnt

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English and are proficient with modern communication technologies, such as cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and the Internet. The almost universal requirement of English study in those education systems has afforded the language a *de facto* institutional status. More importantly, the requirement has generated a large English-literate population in these countries. Coupled with the pervasive communication tools, this new sociolinguistic landscape sets the stage for more creative uses of English among the college-educated workforce.

The new workforce’s bilingual creativity has received some attention in the study of world Englishes. For example, Stefanescu (2005) observed the mixing of English expressions in Romanian Internet-mediated communication among information technology (IT) specialists. You (2008) noted the rhetorical strategies that Chinese college students and graduates developed when communicating in English on electronic bulletin boards. To grasp the creative meaning potential of English enacted by the college-educated workforce, we need to achieve some fundamental knowledge of them as professionals, as private individuals, and as literary beings. Any artistic use of English demonstrates the users’ agency in bringing the wide patterns of social and personal behaviors into the open and dynamic linguistic system (Butt 2009). To uncover the nativization and creativity of English, scholars must ask a series of questions about English and the new workforce: How does English mediate their everyday lives? How do they negotiate competing values and construct their identities through English? And in addition to Standard English, which they have learned in school, what are the rest of their symbolic resources?

The present study explores the creative uses of English along with other symbol systems among white-collar workers in China, who constitute the core of the fledgling Chinese middle class. In particular, I am interested in how white-collar workers develop multilingual and multimodal strategies as they use English to make sense of their life experiences, to articulate their values, and to construct their identities as white-collar workers.

**SYMBOLIC RESOURCES IN MULTILINGUAL CHINA**

The term “bilingual creativity” is limited in understanding the symbolic resources available to individuals in contemporary multilingual societies. Used as an umbrella term in world Englishes, bilingual creativity refers to the phenomenon that individuals creatively appropriate linguistic and cultural codes from two natural language systems, one of them being English, in their communication activities. However, in multilingual societies, both the speaker and the audience often have more than two linguistic systems at their disposal. Further, the discussion of bilingual creativity has largely focused on communication in the print medium. When bilinguals or multilinguals communicate in a digital space, they apply the additional digital code language to construct their messages. The digital space also opens up an array of opportunities to construct meaning in multiple modes, including words, images, and sounds; a feature commonly under-recognized in the print context. In multilingual societies, English should be understood as one of the multiple representational systems constitutive of an individual’s communicative ecology (Cope and Kalantzis 1999; Canagarajah 2007). The term “bilingual creativity” can not sufficiently capture the diverse sources of linguistic and cultural codes from which an individual may draw in the present cybernetic times.
In China, English users are multilinguals. According to the official count, there are 56 ethnicities within the country; many of them have languages of their own, most notably Chinese, Kazakh, Korean, Manchu, Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Zhuang. The national majority group, the Han people, speak Chinese, which is represented by seven major regional dialects: Mandarin, Wu, Cantonese, Min, Hakka, Gan, and Xiang. These dialects are so distinct and mutually unintelligible that some linguists, including Leonard Bloomfield, consider them different languages (DeFrancis 1984). Within a major dialect, regional variants can be so great that some are also mutually unintelligible. As a standardized version of Mandarin has been mandated in schools, educated Han people normally have Standard Mandarin and a regional Chinese dialect at their disposal. College students of an ethnic minority background usually speak both Standard Mandarin and their ethnic language. Together with English, the educated Chinese have at least three linguistic systems in their communicative repertoire.

Despite the prevailing assumption of a unitary Chinese culture, China has always been a multicultural society. When culture is defined as an anthropological term, China acclaims the cultures of at least 56 ethnicities. As major Chinese cities have gradually internationalized, attracting millions of foreign migrants and workers, major international cultures, such as American, British, French, Korean, and Japanese, are well represented in these cities. When culture is defined by social production, China embraces both traditional farming culture and industrial culture. When defined by personal income, Chinese culture consists of low-income class culture and the emerging middle-class culture. Regional variations in food, clothing, architecture, and dialects define regional cultures. The rise of electronic literary production also enriches contemporary Chinese literary culture. The variegated cultural norms and codes are another trove of symbolic resources for English users in China.

**WHITE-COLLAR WORKERS AS A DOMESTIC DIASPORA**

College-educated white-collar workers make up the main body of English users in China. The number of college graduates rose from 0.61 million in 1990 to 1.69 million in 2008 (Department of Comprehensive Statistics 2005; Department of Education 2009). From 1980 to 2008, China graduated more than 30 million college students. As English has been a compulsory course for secondary and tertiary education since the late 1970s, the statistics indicate that in 2008 more than 30 million Chinese had studied English as a school subject for at least eight years (six years in secondary school and two years in college). After passing the required College English Test (CET), students reach an intermediate English proficiency in reading, writing, and listening comprehension, a level similarly required by TOEFL for international students who take it in order to study in North American universities. Instead of preparing students to study abroad, Chinese colleges prepare them to work competently in their respective fields. As the key users and shapers of China English, these white-collar workers need to be better understood.

Most white-collar workers share a domestic diaspora identity. Being first-generation college goers, they usually leave their hometown to study and work in other cities. In fact, many leave their rural birthplace to work in metropolitan centers, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Inevitably they will encounter an array of challenges as they adapt themselves to the urban life style. In the big cities they form various communities...
and organizations called tongxianghui 同乡会 to network and support their fellow provincials or townspeople. The cultural and economic shifts that they experience in the massive migration from city to city and from the rural to the urban areas in some ways resemble the transnational experiences of various diasporas. Diaspora is commonly understood nowadays to describe any population that is considered “deterritorialized,” “transnational,” or any population that originated in a land other than which it currently resides and whose social, economic, and political networks cross the borders of nation-states. The movement of the Chinese white-collar workers happens largely within the Chinese nation-state, but considering the vastness of the country and the fact that white-collar workers’ social, economic, and political networks cross various regions, these workers may be termed “domestic diaspora.” The term has been used by scholars to describe similar movements of certain populations. For example, Page (2007) calls people who used to live in small towns in Cameroon but left to work elsewhere, a domestic diaspora, and both Thomas (1990) and Shapiro (2001) describe the movement of African Americans from the South and the South West to Northern and Mid-Western cities in the 20th-century United States as domestic diaspora.

Conceiving of white-collar workers as a domestic diaspora offers us a vantage point for examining how their lives are mediated by English. After reviewing literature in a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, Vertovec (1997: 278) identifies three meanings of diaspora. First, diaspora has been conceived as a “social form” involving specific social relationships, political orientations, economic strategies, and collective ties with a certain history and geography. Second, diaspora can also be viewed as a “type of consciousness.” We can study diasporic consciousness by understanding the people’s experiences, their state of mind, and their sense of identity. Third, diaspora can also be viewed as a “mode of cultural production.” In the context of globalization, cultural objects, images, and meanings flow across national borders resulting in “variegated process of creolisation, back-and-forth transferences, mutual influences, new contestations, negotiations and constant transformations.” I suggest that domestic diaspora can be similarly viewed as a social form, type of consciousness, and mode of cultural production. Adopting these three meanings or theoretical constructs, we can study how English mediates white-collar workers’ social relations and their articulation of diasporic consciousness as a mode of cultural production.

The present study will focus on the white-collar workers’ English use on Internet forums. There are several reasons for choosing this platform as the research site. First, online forums are home to diverse modes of discourse, such as announcements, essays, digital stories, poems, and short exchanges, which can offer a broad view of China English creativity. In contrast, messages transmitted via other platforms, such as emails, personal blogs, instant messaging, and cell phones, tend to be private, transient, and limited in the modes of discourse. Second, online forums often entice a large number of participants, which is conducive to community building. In contrast, other platforms tend to involve fewer individuals. For example, the Hujiang BBS (http://www.hjbbs.com/), the most popular English bulletin board system in China, claims 2.6 million registered members. Other popular sites include the 21st Century Community (http://forum.21stcentury.com.cn/) and the 24En BBS (http://bbs.24en.com/). In present China, English forums are created largely to cater for English learners. To meet the needs and interests of the learners with different English proficiencies, these BBS’s host forums with different focuses.
DATA

The data of this study was collected from a 21st Century Community forum. The community is an online platform offered by 21st Century Newspapers, a popular English-learning newspaper group targeting students of all levels in China. Thanks to the popularity of its newspapers, the group attracts a large number of students and college graduates to its online space. The community hosted over 543,000 registered members by the end of 2010. Participation in the community is on a voluntary basis with no access restriction for non-registered participants; however, only registered members can post messages. In the community, there are 33 forums for different participants (teachers, college students, teens senior, teens junior, kids, etc.), with varying interests (language pedagogy, language skills, opinions, Q&A, etc.). The present study focuses on one of the forums called “English Writing” (英语原创: 原创英语小文章). The Chinese title emphasizes original creations in English. According to my observation, most forum participants are college students and graduates. I have followed their discussions since 2005. During the last four years, the forum has featured over 3,000 threads of discussions.

As the present study focuses on how white-collar workers use English to mediate their diasporic experiences, I have chosen to study threads initiated by white-collar workers or individuals with white-collar personas. The white-collar identity is determined based on what the posters reveal in their initial and subsequent posts. As active members, some white-collar workers tend to attract those of a similar background, which elicits a string of follow-up posts. For the manageability of the study, only threads that attracted more than fifty follow-up posts are examined. Twenty threads meet these requirements, totaling 2,063 posts. Among the white-collar workers who started these threads, a woman nicknamed “Sunshine” claims the most popularity. Among the 20 threads that I have examined, she initiated nine. Due to the strong presence of her voice, the overall sample tilts towards a distinct femininity in persona, sentiment, and language style.

ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was combined with rhetorical analysis to understand these white-collar workers’ multilingual creativity. In the thematic analysis, I go through every post in the 20 threads and identify themes that reflect the white-collar workers’ major concerns. Then I group them according to the three theoretical constructs of diaspora. Under these themes, I search for discursive moments indicative of multilingual creativity. I then present a rhetorical and linguistic analysis of those moments.

Domestic diaspora consciousness

The diasporic consciousness emerges conspicuously when white-collar workers describe their movement between Chinese cities. The consciousness is marked by an individual’s awareness of decentered attachments, of being simultaneously “home away from home” or “here and there.” To receive a college education, one often has to leave home for a city. To seek employment, he or she probably has to relocate to another city. The sense of instability and fluidity of life permeates narratives and reflections posted on the forum. Sunshine, the most popular member, describes her arrival in Shanghai from south China:
Sitting in front of the newly-bought desk by my host, I hoped to tackle everything with the new Korean ballpoint pen every day in Shanghai.

Shanghai is the most attractive city in China, different from Guangzhou. When walking along the neat street against the cool autumn wind, I felt good: It is Shanghai; I’m here now. She is like an elegant lady, peaceful but open minded which is opposite to Guangzhou, an impetuous boy, energetic but impolite.

However, there still many interesting things happened since the day I stepped out of the train and on the land that Annbaby, a pop writer in China, described.

At 5:20 a.m., August 28, 2002, I arrived (“流年 [Fleeting years]” post No. 2).

Using a flashback to open her narrative, Sunshine goes on to share with the reader those “many interesting things” that have happened since she came to Shanghai. The most striking part of the passage is the narrator’s conscious comparison between two major Chinese cities. Her skilled use of similes (“elegant lady” versus “an impetuous boy”), vividly captures these cities’ dissimilarities that she perceived upon arrival in Shanghai. Permeated in the text are flows of her delight (“I felt good”), excitement (“I hope to tackle everything”), and enchantment (“many interesting things” and the pop writer “Annbaby”). Arriving freshly in a new city, she hopes to “tackle everything” with her Korean pen, or with Chinese and English words, signifying the pivotal role of writing in her diasporic life.

Despite her excitement and joy, however, her mentioning of Annbaby’s literary description of Shanghai shows the darker sides of Shanghai living. In the short story, Winter of Shanghai, the net writer Annbaby describes men and women living restlessly in this cold metropolitan center, indulged in netlove, desire, and sex. Similarly, in a diary entry dated “May 2003” (eight months after her arrival in Shanghai), Sunshine comes to discover this “cold” city, a city tragically described in Annbaby’s short story.

How I missed my big babies!

“Silly Sunshine!” “Our Shineshine!” “Silly Baby!” How I hope to hear their calling me again. They made me warm and comfortable. “Sunshine” “Sunshine” and “Sunshine” are around me plus with their candies and smiles.

But now, only “Miss Wang” or something like that. Polite means distance actually.

Those who said they are my friends called me “Ms Wang”.

Those who worked with me addressed me “Ms Wang”.

“Ms Wang” is polite.

“Ms Wang” is distance, too.

So how can I feel there is friendship in “Ms Wang”.

And what’s difference between friends and colleagues?

COLD POLITE.

Could a BF change all these? I’m far from the good old days with my big boys and can’t go back to it even if I back to Nanning or Guilin because we can’t stay in the same place. My Silly is in Guilin; Land Nanning and Fatty and Mosquito.

Cold polite is somewhat worse than SARS. Can I manage to live in the city around the cold polite for the rest of my life? (“流年” post No. 3).

Once Sunshine immerses herself in the city life, she becomes devastated by the human distance. She tries to seek a way out by recalling her “good old days” when she taught in middle schools in Nanning and Guilin. In those days, she developed a close relationship
with her students, or her “big babies.” Instead of addressing her as “Ms. Wang,” her students called her a series of intimate names. Naming signifies an index of social relations. Confucius (1989: 171) once admonishes in the Analects that to affect social change, names need to be used correctly. The narrator’s yearning for these intimate names indicates her strong desire for a better human relationship in Shanghai. Throughout her nine threads, Sunshine repeatedly evokes her former students and even shares with the forum members their correspondence. This frequent evocation signifies a paradoxical dualism—her experiences of alienation in Shanghai and her identification with old places and individuals, or in the words of Clifford (1994: 322), “the empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling here assumes a solidarity and connection there... [It is] the connection (elsewhere) that makes a difference (here).”

Alienation and distance are not exclusively experienced by Sunshine. Most of the 20 threads are inspired by the temporal and spatial displacement and alienation. The forum members share their feelings and find comfort in each other’s patient listening and responding. Several times Sunshine cast doubts on the meaning of life. She wants to escape her harsh reality: “It seems that there’s no way to escape from the world where now I have to stay. Like a long lost child in the dark forest, I find no one near me and no way out, either. ‘What am I gonna do?’ Many a time I questioned myself, and God, as well. Still, no answer” (“Lost in the Forest,” post No. 1). Her loss of direction in life elicited 169 sympathetic and encouraging responses, representing diverse worldviews. One response, titled “Life,” is a mixture of Anglo-American cultural values and Christian thoughts:

human is different from anything else, for he has thought.
but it is the same with others for he has his limit.
life is so fraguil, sometimes even a falling leave can take it away. life is so strong, it donnot fall down even before death.
“no pain, no gain”, but how about pain without gain.
someone can enjoy happiness just from his or her born.
for someone live in city is just a dream.
you can do nothing before God.
but i believe every dog has its day (Allen002, “Lost in the Forest,” post No. 21).

In this poetic and humorous statement, Allen002 sees both the fragility and strength of life. Despite his despair over the hopeless dream of a happy city life, he still wants to live with dignity. In his text, he uses two Anglo-American expressions—“no pain, no gain” and “every dog has its day”—expressions probably acquired from his college textbook. He also evokes some Christian thoughts, such as the unique nature of humans, the fragility of life, and God as the omnipotent being. In the exchange, it is worth noting that both Sunshine and Allen002 appeal to God. The evocation of the Christian deity is not an isolated instance in the white-collar workers’ discourse but rather pervasive. Regardless of whether they are Christians or whether they understand Christianity, this phenomenon reaffirms a century-long effect of English education in China. In his historical study of essay writing in Chinese schools, You (2010) unveils that students always consciously or unconsciously negotiate with Christian values in their English discourse.

White-collar workers not only negotiated with Western values but also traditional Chinese values. Various cultural movements in 20th-century China repeatedly rejected
traditional Chinese thinking and embraced Western thought. After the Cultural Revolution (1967–1976), while the Chinese still actively sought everything Western, they also revisited Chinese classics. Nowadays, white-collar workers are among the active students of Chinese antiquity. One response to Sunshine’s same post defines a meaningful modern life within a Daoist framework:

However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you are richest. The fault-finder will find faults in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poor-house. The setting sun is reflected from the windows of the almshouse as brightly as from the rich man’s abode; the snow melts before its door as early in the spring. I do not see but a quiet mind may live as contentedly there, and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace. The town’s poor seem to me often to live the most independent lives of any . . . Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends, Turn [to] the old, return to them. Things do not change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts (ychx, “Lost in the Forest,” post No. 62).

As an alternative to Confucianism in ancient China, Daoism emphasizes understanding the way of nature and living a simple life. Throughout the passage, the respondent ychx advocates a frugal life style. Dialectical thinking, a staple of Daoism, also pervades the passage. ychx argues that despite living a material-poor life, one can still find “pleasant, thrilling, glorious” moments if the person is a keen observer of life and nature: “[Life] looks poorest when you are richest.” In this short response, ychx offers an antidote to the kind of life that Sunshine dreads most—an urban life rich in material but poor in human-connectedness. English enabled ychx to bring forth an ancient Chinese prescription for a modern human disorder.

In addition to the aforementioned rhetorical strategies, linguistic choices also assist in constructing white-collar worker identity. The online discourse quoted so far reveals a wide spectrum of linguistic deviations from Standard English, deviations that would be usually marked as errors by school teachers. Many of these deviations have been singled out by language acquisition scholars as characteristics of “Chinglish,” an interlanguage that Chinese learners should get over. However, it is exactly this Chinglish that these white-collar workers use to stage a symbolic claim that they are Chinese and college-educated. The most prominent deviation comes from the frequent missing of articles before nouns, as in the following sentences: “And that’s [the] difference between friends and colleagues?” “[A] human is different from anything else, for he has thought.” “for someone [to] live in [the] city is just a dream.” The members also treat some verbs and adjectives as nouns. For example, Sunshine repeatedly uses “polite” to mean “politeness” and Allen002 uses “born” to mean “birth” in the sentence: “someone can enjoy happiness just from his or her born.” The front-loading of adverbial phrases, a feature of Standard Mandarin (Kirkpatrick 1991; 1993), is also noticeable as Sunshine says “When walking along the neat street against the cool autumn wind, I felt good” and “However, there still many interesting things happened . . .” Orthographic deviations—misspellings and non-standard uses of punctuation—also abound. These linguistic deviations can be explained either by the care-free nature of online discourse or by the members’ underdeveloped competence in Standard English. Regardless of the reasons, the deviations seldom cause miscommunications. Almost everyone deviates from Standard English and most of the time nobody cares.
Diasporic social relations

Besides forging diasporic consciousness, the online discourse also reveals the social relations that the white-collar workers developed. As we have already seen in Sunshine’s posts, she consciously recalls the “good old days” with her former students in south China as a strategy to deal with the dreadful human relationships in Shanghai. She even calls and writes letters to her former students; she tries to maintain a relationship with people from her old “home.” Other forum members also evoke the notion of “home.” They regularly share their experiences of going back home to visit their parents and relatives, observe traditional festivals, or participate in hometown celebrations. Such topics reveal not simply their homesickness but more importantly their efforts to maintain a relationship with the old home. In a post, lile1111 describes her brother’s wedding that was held in her hometown in Shanxi province. Her description reveals not only details of a modern-day wedding but also the strong human ties that she wanted to maintain.

The bride wore a brand-new white wedding gown and wore beautiful make-up, sitting in the wedding car together with the bridegroom. After they arrived the new house, the bride bend over on the groom’s back, others from the groom’s family will rob the bride’s shoes and kept them out of the door, trying to ask for red bag or gifts for change. Don’t consider this a really robbing, they are just for fun. Finally the bride and groom went into the house, the children will surrender water to them for washing hands and also the bride will give them red bag. After they changed an other suit, all the people went to the restaurant for lunch, it was a big feast. There also are games for the new couple, songs given by the relatives, everyone was enjoying their time at the moment (“Everyday Writing,” post No. 123).

In her previous posts, lile1111 depicts her life in Beijing as busy, stressful, and boring. Attending her brother’s wedding becomes a spiritual escape for her. Furthermore, the wedding ceremony is an important ritual that embodies a wide spectrum of social norms, customs, and mores, involving complicated relationships and institutions. By performing rituals or participating in their performance, as You (2006) argues, one will identify with both the community values and the community members. Attending the wedding helps lile1111 reconnect to her cultural roots and her people.

While trying to maintain a relationship with their old “home,” white-collar workers foster new relations in their present “home.” Discussions on workplace relations and economic strategies abound on the forum. Members share stories about their bosses, their workmates, and their roommates. They share strategies to navigate the labyrinth of corporate culture. The following is an exchange between two individuals—Greenfield and sky song—on how to bargain for a salary increase.

on one hand try your best to finish the work
the other hand fight with your boss for more reasonable reward
yes, i mean "money"~--maybe it’s superficial but also realistic~ (Greenfield, “流年” post No. 62).

My boss told me just now that my salary will have a big rise at the end of this year. However, I also received an interview call offering me double my current salary. Hope that I can fail in the interview so that I can stay in this company because i really want stability. I may also succeed in the interview and give my boss a paper and let him make decision (sky song, post No. 63).

i’m glad to hear that you will get both higher salary and a better job. It’s favorable for you to lead a better life. maybe it’s not very easy to make a decision but i think you will choose the right way
The short exchange is significant in several regards. First and most obviously, the two white-collar workers share strategies to survive and excel in the corporate culture. Second, by sharing economic strategies with each other and other forum members economic strategies, they are fostering a new social relationship among the white-collar workers, which is partly based on work ethics and market rules. Third, the exchange is also rhetorically significant. While Greenfield’s first two suggestions (i.e. working hard and requesting a salary raise), and sky song’s response to these suggestions are all based on a market logic, Greenfield makes his last suggestion (treating him to a big meal) according to modern Chinese folk assumptions. Asking someone who has achieved a success to treat his or her friends to a meal is a common practice in modern Chinese society. The meal is an important ritual for sharing feelings and building human bonds. The way Greenfield writes his last sentence—combining short phrases and a smiley—shows his excitement, happiness, and humor. It is intriguing to observe that both modern market and Chinese secular values are evoked rhetorically to build social relations among the white-collar workers.

To survive in a capitalist society, money is imperative. However, the online discourse reveals that the white-collar workers are not always bogged down by money. As they work hard to make money, they try to live with dignity. Women’s efforts to seek financial independence are conspicuous. Sunshine and lile1111 shared with others their ways of handling financial hindrances:

Last night, I’ve got my monthly wages for part-time teaching, only 400 yuan [US$55]. But we’re happy. I gave half to my roommate for her seeking job and our food expenses. Until now, I’ve got not enough money to buy another mobile phone, but my roommate offers me hers. With her phone, I found my present job (Sunshine, “Lost in the Forest” post No. 5).

I had to find a job because I was financial lack because I lost a computer of my company before leaving, for this I paid company 2500 RMB [US$360] cause it was second-hand, fortunately my company gave me the year bonus and another one month’s salary for compensation. But I was still lack of money, I repaid my boyfriend 3000 RMB [US$440] for the outstanding debt between us. And my own computer was broken in a wrong time so I had to buy a new one. All this press me to find a good job. I was suffering the pain of losing my BF and also embarrassed by short of money (lile1111, “Outing” post No. 46).

In her revelation, Sunshine is kind enough to help her roommate out financially. They shoulder each other’s financial burdens with courage. lile1111 also manages to be financially responsible—she pays her company for losing the company computer, she pays back her boyfriend, she buys herself a new computer with her own money, and she tries to find “a good job.” Chinese college students are traditionally known for financial dependence on their parents. But as the forum discourse reveals, after they join the workforce, white-collar workers actively seek financial independence. In lile1111’s message, the first sentence is rhetorically worth noting. Throughout her hundred-odd posts, lile1111 habitually uses run-on sentences, which clearly mark her online accent. Run-ons always sound like a spoken conversation. Standard English draws particular lines between oral and written discourses, but Chinese does not. lile1111’s syntactic choice makes her sound like she is speaking Chinese.
As a way to develop human relations in the new “home,” members also actively build a virtual community of their own. They encourage each other to join the forum discussions and share discursive strategies. For example, when asked by a member how she could participate in the forum discourse, lile1111 suggests translating Chinese news into English as starter for a conversation: “You once said you always have no idea what to write, here is a good suggestion that you translate the Chinese news, or you read something in English and you write down only using your own words” (“Everyday Writing” post No. 110). Translation means more than transferring information from one code system into another. Instead, it requires bilinguals to appropriate the information in a code acceptable to the audience. In the process, one has to subtly bend the target language, which is English in this case (France 2005; Ashcroft 2009). In the previous passage, lile1111 encourages the other member to use his or her “own words,” or whatever English that is available to white-collar workers. All quotations from the forum discourse so far have testified that white-collar workers do not always conform their English to the rules of Standard English.

In contrast, Sunshine uses writing to express her gratitude to other people and to nourish a loving soul inside herself:

At the beginning, I open my eyes to the thankful heart to my people around me, who often help me out with their sincere care. And I would like to say thank u to them so I try to note down every moving things about them. But there’s another important part in writing, too. That’s to balace my life and work, my body and soul. To let something out is to release the sleepy love in my heart, which I’ve never come to realize how important to me (“流年” post No. 54).

Sunshine’s confession underscores the transformative power of English in this young female. English communication activities enable her to awaken her “sleepy” love and to achieve a balance in the city life. Through reflecting on their use of English, lile1111, Sunshine, and other forum members come to understand the ways that their English could help build a virtual community. They offer other members a linguistic tool to foster their diasporic identity, articulate their voices, and ultimately forge new human relations.

As we continue to observe the deviations from Standard English in the online discourse, it is important to note their idiosyncratic and fluid nature. White-collar worker English continues to reveal the lack of articles before nouns; the use of adjectives and verbs as nouns; misspellings; and the non-standard use of punctuation. There are also numerous instances of ungrammatical use of present participles, gerunds, and tense markers. However, nobody deviates from Standard English in a consistent, systematic way. Instead, the deviations tend to be idiosyncratic, fluid, and unstable. For example, Greenfield uses the infinite article “a” inconsistently: “I am glad to hear that you will get both [a] higher salary and a better job. It’s favorable for you to lead a better life.” Or he uses the preposition “on” in one sentence but not in another: “on one hand try your best to finish the work. [On] the other hand fight with your boss for more reasonable reward.” What these fluid deviations suggest is a worry-free, casual mood in the online communication, a mood probably derived from the rather informal social relations developed in the virtual space among white-collar workers.

Cultural production of the diaspora

As white-collar workers shuttle between multiple physical and cultural spaces, it is conceivable that they will produce fluid and hybrid cultural artifacts. Several examples
that I have quoted so far have offered us a glimpse of this cultural production, such as Sunshine’s account of her changing sensibilities living in Shanghai, forum members’ competing perspectives toward life, and the multicultural exchange between Greenfield and sky song on how to navigate the corporate reward system. If these artful texts are constructed by the members subconsciously, then conscientious invention is sometimes even more impressive. The following is part of an exchange between two female net friends. Raintear initiates a thread about the purpose of life: “Why do I come to this earth as a human being? Why not a bird or a tree?” (“Fading” post No. 1). qiaozi responds by showing understanding and support to Raintear. They continue their intimate conversation as follows:

My love, if I die someday, will you miss me . . . . (Raintear, “Fading” post 29).

:_PY My love, raintear, if you die someday, ill kiss you and die with you lying beside and holding you . . . :) (qiaozi, post 30).

Raintear demonstrates her creativity with both linguistic codes and visuals. Her screen name “Raintear” works perfectly for the melodrama of death that she stages in the conversation. She strengthens her ethical appeals by attaching an image of a young woman smoking. In the circling smoke, the Chinese words, written in different font styles, sizes, and colors, say “把你的名字写在烟上/吸进肺里/留在离我心脏更近的地方” (Print your name on the cigarettes, inhale it into my lung, and keep it nearer to my heart). The juxtaposition of a beautiful young woman and these mesmerizing “smoking” words makes the message emotionally appealing: a beautiful woman is smoking without fearing death. When she dies, she wants to keep her dear friend close to her heart. qiaozi continues to show her friendship in her response. In addition to expressing her appreciation for qiaozi’s friendship, Raintear has circulated an image of female white-collar workers in present China: modern (smoking cigarettes), sentimental (evoking death), and craving for love and friendship. The Internet facilitates the circulation of such an image, attracting more than 6,000 viewers to this heart-rending thread. Raintear’s conscientious artfulness, as well as other artistic examples in this section, suggests that as the number of bilingual and multilingual speakers continue to grow in China, more of them will seek true, conscious literary expression in English.

Although forum members are swamped by their daily chores, they keep an attentive ear to what is happening in the country and in the world. The binary divisions between private and public; psyche and social; and national and international collapse when white-collar workers discuss news of great public interest, creating what Bhabha (2004: 19) has
described as “an ‘in-between’ temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history.” Through reporting and debating the news items, the forum members recast and circulate messages, images, and icons. For example, a forum member was deeply concerned about the US war effort in Iraq. Adopting the innocent voice of an Iraqi child, she chose to compose a poem in reaction to the news:

**A poem of an Iraqi child**

Dad, where did you go  
Mum and I needed you so  
I heard the terrible sound and smelled the smoke  
but what happened, I don’t know  
Dad, where did you go  
Mum and I missed you so  
Mum is tearing  
I am scaring from heart to soul  
but what had happened,  
people say that I am too young to know  
Dad, come back  
Mum and I love you so  
She says you will be back  
With good news and hope (Joyce, “A poem of an Iraqi child” post No. 1).

The poet uses first person and short rhymed lines to imitate the voice of a child. The poet’s login name “Joyce,” which forms a contrast with the child’s sadness, constitutes a stark irony. Dotted with casual Internet spellings, such as “i,” “u,” and “&,” the poem takes on a tint of net culture. In a later post, the poet explains her state of mind: “When I wrote this poem, my tears were full of my eyes. I really felt heart-breaking [sic] when the war began” (post No. 39). Her work must have appealed to other forum members: 90 responses ensued. Some composed sequel poems adopting the voice of the father; others made comments on the poems and the Iraqi war. One of the sequel poems reads:

You ask me when I will come back,  
I don’t know, and I can’t be sure.  
Maybe when the rainbow appears,  
when the sun begins shining,  
or when the serious typhoon stops,  
I will come home.  
Forgive me for leaving you alone,  
take care of yourself.  
I miss you and mom deeply.  
You ask me when I will come back,  
I ask myself as well,  
Maybe when the catastrophe stops,  
when the hateness disperses,  
or when the misunderstanding is resolved.  
Forgive me for leaving you alone,  
Don’t be anxious about dad, I will take care myself.

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I miss you and mom deeply.

You ask me when I will back,
Who will tell me the answer?
And Who can?
But I think it’s the coming future.
Even though we are separated temporarily,
we will get together.
Belive dad, I promise it.
I miss you and mom deeply (smallsmall, “A poem of an Iraqi child” post No. 2).

Together with the first poem, this piece successfully creates a grave dialogue between a loving father and an innocent child. Through the two poems, the poets convey their sympathy and support for the Iraqis and their implicit condemnation of the US war machine. Similar to the first poem, the narrator paints a depressing scenario of the war (“I don’t know, and I can’t be sure”), but her optimism for the future permeates the discourse. However, if the poet intends to imitate the discourse of an Iraqi, her use of the metaphor “typhoon” is culturally inappropriate. Typhoons only occur in East and Northeast Asia. Commonly used in Chinese literary works, the set metaphors—“rainbow,” “sun,” and “typhoon”—are more akin to the Chinese life experiences. However, considering the fact that the poem is composed by a Chinese for a largely Chinese audience, we should appreciate her erratic use of the metaphor as an artistic maneuver. In a multilingual and multicultural online space, the meshing of a Chinese symbolic device in a fictional Iraqi discourse is natural.

In this particular thread, English plays a catalytic role in cultivating individuals’ critical views towards war, turning the thread into an international tribunal. Joyce chooses to compose her poem in English probably because English is an international language. She wants to share her sadness and indignation not only with other Chinese but also with international audiences. Most forum members follow her suit and use English to write their sequel poems or their comments. The thread stages a rhetorical performance where several dozen Chinese white-collar workers express their sympathy with the Iraqis and their condemnation of the US war machine. Their messages do reach international audiences. An American nicknamed MikeG responds: “Please know that Americans are also touched by this poem and the horrors of the war in Iraq. We never want to see the innocent people hurt. Many of us are lovers of peace. Our government always tells us that we must fight to preserve peace. But our hearts know that peace does not come from violence. I pray that the war will end” (Post No. 55). MikeG’s response not only confirms the deliberative and judicial nature of the thread but also suggests that this online community, or more broadly this domestic diaspora, is both open and fluid.

**DISCUSSION**

The analysis demonstrates that white-collar workers in China use English to actively negotiate their diasporic experiences. Mediated by linguistic strategies, they represent themselves as individuals who work away from their old “home” but manage to retain some connection to it. They strive to survive in their new “home” by developing economic
strategies and forging a variety of social relations. They develop their diasporic conscious-
ness by constantly contrasting here and there, and the present and the past. Influenced
by competing worldviews, they articulate different attitudes towards the challenges of the
new “home.” As a well-educated generation, they constitute the largest cultural force in
Chinese society. On the forum, they circulate, consume, and produce both domestic and
transnational cultural meanings. The online discourse reveals the multifaceted nature of
the new workforce.

It needs to be stressed that the online construction of this new workforce is performed
predominantly in English. The wide use of English on this forum, as well as the other 32
forums on the same digital platform which involve more than 500,000 individuals, indicates
that English has entered a new domain in Chinese society. The popularity of English-
based BBS’s, personal blogs, emails, and cell phone messages has ushered English into
the average Chinese’s interpersonal communication, fostering an increasingly expanding
English-literate public. As my analysis of the forum discourse shows, English enjoys
degrees of creativity and nativization in this new domain.

How do we characterize the creativity performed by white-collar workers on this forum?
If we conceive these individuals as literary beings who share their diasporic experiences,
then the twenty threads can be viewed as a grand multivocal narrative. In the narrative,
the writers strive to depict their diasporic consciousness, identity, and social relations, and
share economic and cultural strategies to survive “here” and in “the present.” From this
perspective, white-collar worker creativity could be viewed as a kind of literary creativity.
After examining Han Jin’s In the Pond, Zhang (2002) identifies linguistic creativity in
areas such as lexical items, metaphors and proverbs, and discourse patterns and strategies.
Creativity in these areas also abounds in the twenty threads.

Creativity at the lexical level manifests in the various ways that English terms are
invented with local colors. First and most noticeably, the forum members create intrigu-
ing screen names by translating Chinese expressions or mixing English with a Chinese
family name. For example, “Sunshine,” “Chinazero,” “Greenfield,” “soundtoy,” “Rain-
tear,” “smallsmall,” and “Blue stripe” are probably Chinese translations or spontaneous
contrivances. “Michael.qin,” “sky song,” “Lacey gu,” “SallyHsieh,” and “Jayson_liu” are
created by blending an English name with a Chinese family name. Second, terms with local
cultural meanings are translated or created. For example, Sunshine talks about “Annbaby”
(安妮宝贝) when describing her first impression of Shanghai. ychx encourages Sunshine
to appreciate and enjoy her simple life style like a Daoist “sage” (圣贤). lile1111 describes
newlyweds giving out “red bags” (红包) as part of the local wedding ritual. On the sec-
ond day of the wedding, the couple will “go back home” (回娘家) to visit the maternal
family.

Creativity also materializes in the members’ usage of figures of speech. For exam-
ple, Sunshine is a master of similes. She compares Shanghai to “an elegant lady” and
Guangzhou to “an impetuous boy,” forming an intriguing antithesis. She uses “my big
babies” to describe her former students, signifying a close relationship between them.
When her life is filled with uncertainty, she feels like “a long lost child in the dark forest”
and she uses writing to awaken her “sleepy love in heart.” In the thread of “A poem of an
Iraqi child,” members prefer metaphors. Joyce never mentions the Iraqi war but uses “the
terrible sound” and “the smoke” to evoke it. In her response poem, smallsmall uses three
metaphors—“sun,” “rainbow,” and “typhoon”—to express an Iraqi father’s optimism. The
thread also contains other figures such as intermittent repetition, antithesis, parallelism, rhyming, and rhetorical questions.

Appropriation of Chinese or non-traditional Chinese discourse strategies constitutes another creative dimension. For example, when advising Sunshine on how to survive life challenges, Allen002 borrows Christian and secular Anglo-American expressions while ychx cites some Daoist thoughts. In the conversation between Greenfield and sky song, Greenfield blends market and capitalist discourses with Chinese folk discourse. He advises sky song on how he should demand a salary raise and later congratulates him for receiving it by asking him for a treat, a typical demand among friends on similar occasions. In the thread “a poem of an Iraqi child,” the Iraqi father persuades his son to sustain hope in life by adopting a Chinese set of metaphors.

Compared to the bilingual creativity of contemporary Chinese writers such as Guo Xiaolu and Yan Geling, the online discourse demonstrates both similar and different ways of multilingual creativity. Like the forum members, both Guo (2007; 2009) and Yan (2007) depict the diasporic experience of Chinese young adults who move between rural and urban areas in China or between global metropolitan centers. While both novelists write primarily for English monolingual readers using a print medium, the forum members compose their messages for multilingual readers using digital technologies. Different audiences and media entail ingenuity less ventured by previous literary writers. Addressing multilingual and multicultural audiences, forum members blend multiple linguistic systems and multiple cultural codes in their messages. The two poems on an Iraqi child and his father are examples of multilingual and multicultural mixing. The poets mix linguistic strategies from literary Chinese, Standard English, and the Internet language, and they blend both Chinese and Iraqi cultural traits. Mixing multilingual codes is also commonly seen in other threads. For example, in the thread of “Fading,” qiaozi mixes codes from Standard English, Standard Mandarin, Chinese regional dialects, and Internet language in the following two messages:

raintear, my beloved girl, i cannot often surf online now. we will together become birds and trees next life! we are peace-lover-birds-and-trees! during the period i disappear from internet, i hope you and a la will still enjoy your life and share your feelings with us! 不要牵挂我, 我很快乐的, 就是希望你们也都很愉快很健康 [Don’t worry about me. I am very happy and I hope you are both happy and healthy] (post 17).

raintear, i miss you friends so much! now I’m in Shijiazhuang! how great the life is! i was living in [Taihang Mountain] for twenty days. 哦, 多想跟你们讲讲农村的元宵节啊 [Oh, how eagerly I want to share with you about the Lantern Festival celebrated in the countryside] raintear, be happy, 囧囧 [your little sister] will be companying with you! :p 嘘嘘, 说说话, 夸夸俺们可爱的 raintear! [We will chitchat and praise our lovely raintear!] (post 84).

In these two messages, qiaozi not only uses English and Standard Mandarin but also three terms from Chinese regional dialects— a la (阿拉, meaning I or we) from Shanghai and Ningbo dialects (regional variants of Wu), 囧囧 (nan’nan, meaning a girl or a daughter) from Wu, and 俺们 (an’men, meaning we or our) from Mandarin. The predominant use of lower case spellings and a smiley (“:p”) are codes of Internet language. What is fascinating about qiaozi’s mixing of codes is the fact that, as she reveals in one of her posts, she actually grew up in the North, speaking Mandarin. However, she artfully uses two address terms from the southern dialects to signify an intimate
relationship with her net friend Raintear, who is a southerner. In terms of mixing linguistic and cultural codes, novelist Guo Xiaolu has come closest to the online creativity. In her novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), she mixes Standard Mandarin with English and blends Chinese and Anglo-American cultural traits to construct a first-person narrative, portraying a young Chinese woman’s cultural struggle in London.

Digital technologies also render literary creativity both multimodal and interactive. The moment individuals join this particular BBS, they are given the opportunity to choose an image for themselves. They can select an icon provided by the BBS or upload their personal photos. For example, an iconic cute little girl wearing earphones against a dark yellow backdrop always accompanies Sunshine’s posts. In contrast, lile1111 uses a personal photo as her signature image. When composing their messages, individuals can again use visuals provided by the BBS or upload their own visuals to blend with their words. In an example mentioned earlier, Raintear uses an image of a young woman smoking to express love for her net friend qiaozi. Besides blending images with words, sometimes members simply upload images to share with the forum members or to express their feelings. The responses from the audiences further spur individuals to be more creative with their messages. Multimodality and interactivity increasingly feature in literary creations in the electronic media (Lennon 2000; Strickland 2006; Hayles 2007). Nowadays, such features have even been appropriated by the print medium. For example, Myracle (2004) develops the storyline of her novel *ttyl* entirely using the interactive style of instant messaging between a few American teens. The forum members capitalize on these stylistic advantages afforded by the digital technologies, which are absent in the English works of Guo Xiaolu (2007; 2009) and Yan Geling (2007).

The analysis of white-collar worker multilingual creativity sheds new light on the construct of China English. Scholars have invariably conceived China English as a discrete formal linguistic system. For example, Li (1993: 19) defines it as embracing “normative English as its core but with Chinese characteristics in lexicon, syntax, and discourse.” Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002) describe it as a socially accepted variety bearing a number of Chinese syntactic and pragmatic norms in the future. You (2008: 247) also views it as “a rather sophisticated, self-sustaining linguistic system” with elements, structures, and rules drawn from both English and other languages. However, white-collar worker language defies the notion of China English as a discrete linguistic system like Standard English or Standard Mandarin. Years of stringent standardized tests have instilled Standard English code in the white-collar workers, but, as their online discourse illustrates, with different proficiencies and communicative exigencies their English deviates from the standard code in a wide spectrum. In fact, they develop and follow their individualized, variable code. The code consists of Chinese borrowings, reduced or altered English forms, and creative new constructions inspired by a variety of representational systems. This form of English is negotiated by the discursive participants in every particular context when constructing their intended meanings. Without a formal, uniform code in sight, China English does not seem so different from either lingua franca English (LFE) or plurilingual English used in South Asia, all of which Canagarajah (2009: 7) describes as “a highly fluid and variable form of language practice.” The white-collar workers develop their individualized, variable code because when communicating with other Chinese they resort to several different presentational systems in their communicative repertoire.

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CONCLUSION

Nowadays the nearly universal requirement of English in colleges has afforded the language an unprecedented institutional status and given rise to an English-literate public in many traditionally non-English dominant countries. The deep diffusion of modern communication technologies has generated novel contexts of English use. While the educated class in those countries will continue to use their local languages for interpersonal communication, sometimes they will opt for English or English mixed with local languages and dialects. They will use English not only for work and leisure but also for literary creations, as individuals in this study have done.

The present study has explored the creative meaning potential of the emergent English-literate public in the largest Expanding Circle country in the world. Studies of bilingual creativity in the Expanding Circle countries have largely focused on the nativization of lexical items and discourse patterns and the creative practices of bilingual writers and artists. The present study shows that given the right occasions, the educated Chinese are not shy to invent lexical items, discourse patterns and strategies, and figures of speech, a practice that commonly characterizes literary creativity among bilinguals. The study further reveals that the Chinese white-collar workers produce not just bilingual creations but multilingual, multidialectal, and multimodal ones as well. Their domestic diasporic experiences, digital technologies, and the multilingual and multicultural audiences have jointly prompted these artistic productions. Their idiosyncratic and fluid use of English defies the long-standing scholarly perceptions of China English as a discrete formal linguistic system.

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NOTES

1. I tallied the numbers of Chinese college graduates from 1980 to 2008 using information provided by both the Department of Comprehensive Statistics of the National Statistic Bureau and the Department of Education of the People’s Republic of China. During the 29 years, China produced 30.4295 million college graduates.
2. All direct quotes from the online forum are original. Grammatical and mechanic deviations from Standard English are kept intact.
3. In some instances, when a Chinese calls out for “God,” he or she simply may have translated it from the Chinese expression 天哪 tian na, literally meaning “good heavens!” and “good lord!” To Chinese people, heaven is perceived on the one hand as the supreme force that rules the universe, and on the other as the spiritual entity to whom they bring their cares and worries. Therefore, whether “god” means the Christian deity or “heaven” in traditional Chinese thinking needs to be determined in the communicative context.

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