



# Education Research in Asia As “Method”

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## Abstract

The rise of Asia has fueled great interest in the region across all fields of study, including Asian cultural studies, arts, and education. Yet Asian intellectual traditions are slow to gain traction in the academic world. Asian scholars continue to travel to Western nations to pursue doctoral studies and to learn from Western academics. While many Asian scholars research policies and practices in their own countries, they readily pick concepts and theories from Western literature as the theoretical frame to analyze data generated from their home countries in Asia. Such practice not only undermines the richness of the local context in Asia but also reinforces the universality of Western theories to explain observations

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beyond Western societies (Chua BH, *Inter-Asia referencing and shifting frames of comparison*. In *The social sciences in the Asian century*, ANU Press, 2015). Our research is influenced by the approach taken by Chen (Asia as method: toward deimperialization. Duke University Press, Durham, 2010), who argues for critical studies of Asia using “Asia as method” to rethink the process of knowledge production in sociocultural research. Based on a focus group interview of HDR education students ( $N = 6$ ) in an Australian university, this chapter reports on benefits and difficulties of deploying Asia as Method in the students’ research projects. This chapter argues that Asia as Method provides a new research imagination for HDR students to bring Asian knowledge, traditions, wisdom, and values into Western-dominated intellectual discourse of educational research. This chapter further investigates the difficulties encountered by research participants and strategies they used when they applied Asia as Method in their research.

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**Keywords**

Asia as method · Educational research · HDR students · New research imagination

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**Introduction**

Asia is now home to more than half the world’s population. The overall economic status of people on the Asian continent has climbed from low to middle income within a single generation. By 2040, it is likely to generate more than 50% of world GDP, and could account for nearly 40% of global consumption (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019). Asia is now the main growth engine of the world, with scholars proclaiming that the West’s centuries-old status as the center of global wealth and power is coming to an end, and that the Asian Century has arrived (Mahbubani, 2018; Khanna, 2019). The swift rise of Asia has fueled great interest in the region across all areas, including Asian cultural studies, arts, and education. Yet Asian intellectual traditions are slow to gain traction in the academic world. It is not uncommon to hear Asian scholars lament about the dominance of intellectual traditions from the West (Zhang et al., 2015). While many Asian scholars research policies and practices in their own countries, they readily pick concepts and theories from Western literature as the theoretical frame to analyze data generated from their home countries in Asia. In doing so, the complexities and nuances of the local data are often ignored, so that the data can “fit into” and be explained using the selected Western theories (Chua, 2015). Such practice not only undermines the richness of the local context in Asia, but also reinforces the universality of Western theories to explain observations beyond Western societies (Chua, 2015). Moreover, opportunities are missed for Asian scholars to bring Asian ideas, knowledge, and values into intellectual discourse.

Asian scholars continue to travel to Western nations to pursue doctoral studies and to learn from Western academics. In the field of education, numerous students from various regions of Asia are pursuing research degrees throughout the world, but mainly in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Europe, Canada, and Australia. Graduate research student colleagues from a variety of Asian countries indicate that they frequently, but not always (see O’Sullivan & Guo, 2010), face similar issues to those from Asian countries, who tend to focus their research on educational issues in their home countries, rather than their host countries. They frequently employ what we will refer to as “western” concepts and theories to interpret these issues, meaning that their research on Asian education tends to be conducted “through western eyes”: when Asian PhD and Master’s students come to Australia, they are frequently encouraged to study their own country’s educational practices and systems through a “western” lens. This chapter aims to explore the experience of PhD students who are studying at the Faculty of Education, Monash University while researching educational issues in Asian contexts. This chapter aims first to set out our understanding of Chen’s main ideas of Asia as Method, second to systematically review the literature on how Asia as Method has been employed in various fields of studies, third to introduce the methods of data collection and analysis of our study, and, fourth, to shed light on the benefits and difficulties and, possibly, limitations of Chen’s work for educational PhD students.

The main research question is: How do education research students conceptualize the various ways in which they can use Asia as method in their research studies?

Three sub-questions are as follows:

- What is their perception of Asia as method for conducting educational research?
- How has Asia as method influenced their doctoral studies?
- What are the difficulties and solutions associated with employing Asia as method in their research?

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## The Idea of “Asia as Method”

Chen’s book, “Asia as method: Towards Deimperialisation” was released at a time coinciding with the increased prominence of Asia on the world stage. His provocative ideas have inspired scholars researching Asia, to look within Asia for their frame of reference and to interact with the rest of the world about Asian knowledge and values. Taken together, these developments could also offer hope for Asia’s status to evolve from being merely a recipient and user of Western knowledge to one that is also an active contributor to global knowledge.

Chen (2010) insists that studies of Asia studies move beyond their paralyzing Western focus as either a positive or a negative referent, and that they build their own standpoints, reference points, and research agendas.

The implication of ‘Asia as method’ is that using Asia as an imaginary anchoring point can allow societies in Asia to become one another’s reference points, so that the understanding of

the self can be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. On this basis, the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilised to provide alternative horizons and perspectives. This method of engagement, I believe, has the potential to advance a different understanding of world history. (2010, p. xv)

To Chen (2010), the practice of using of Western methods to analyze Asia data is akin to using the wrong lens to interpret and explain Asian phenomena, and they provide a wrong frame of reference for Asian countries. Based on his concepts of “Asia as method,” Chen (2010) calls for the generation of knowledge and values that are specific to the Asian regions. He proposes:

[using] Asia as the ‘method’ or an imaginary anchoring point and that societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt.’ (p. 212)

He urges Asian scholars to ground themselves in the cultures of their own countries and to reference other Asian countries with similar history and context when engaging in research, causing a shift in frame of reference. To do this, he puts forward two strategies – self-reflexivity and inter-Asia referencing. According to Chen (2010), self-reflexivity relates to interventions in local spaces, taking into consideration historical narrative, experience of colonization, imperialization, and cold war in the local context, while inter-referencing operates at the regional level, whereby societies in Asia become each other’s points of reference.

“Asia as method” offers a new imagination of study that extends beyond a constant reference to the West toward alternate viewpoints, with Asian history, politics, and culture as main points of reference (Zhang et al., 2015). In many Asian educational contexts and in much study on these contexts, the so-called Western theories are frequently applied in an unproblematic manner, with much too little attention being paid to where these ideas originate and how they are interpreted in Asian educational contexts, with inadequate attention being paid to the so-called non-Western educational thinking and practice. At the same time, the authors have also become aware that people in some of these contexts would reject Western knowledge unproblematically and mobilize somewhat restricted notions of local knowledge and wisdom. What has become apparent to us is that no concepts or ways of thinking are as straightforward or innocent as they might first appear. These meta-notions of “west” and “east” and “Asian” must be viewed with special caution, owing to the nuances that they obscure.

This chapter responds to Chen’s invitation to move beyond Western obsession and instead to undertake educational studies in Asia that recognize the complex links between history, geography, culture, and knowledge in and about education. In other words, it views Asian education studies from an Asian viewpoint – completely understanding the manner in which Asian education systems, policies, and activities have interpreted Western awareness differently in relation to their own unique changing societies, contexts, and policies. Employing “Asia as method” in this research suggests the value of starting where people are, not where theory or critique

would like them to be. It also points to the fact that different institutional and personal situations offer different affordances for this sort of research, and that these need to be taken into account.

## **Key Concepts: Translation, Base entity, and Inter-Referencing**

Asia as method has been conceptualized by different scholars. However, this section focuses on unpacking three major concepts: Translation (Asia and West), Base entity (cultural tradition), and Inter-referencing (Asia and Asia).

### **Translation**

To assist us to rethink and reinvestigate traditional cultures in the dialectical dialogue with the West, Chen provides the notion of “translation” that, “gives us a way to conduct reinvestigations that allow the organic shape and characteristics of local society and modernity to surface” (Chen, 2010, p. 244). How does translation play its role in the dialectical dialogue between exotic cultures and local tradition? Chen explains that:

The object to be translated has to be subjected to existing social forces and must negotiate with dense local histories if it is to take root in foreign soil. What comes out of this long process of negotiation is not what was imagined at the initial moment of translation at all, but a localized product of this blending process. (2010, p. 244)

We can see, therefore, that the object of translation has to be subjected to both the “local” and the “foreign,” and the process of translation usually involves dialogue and negotiation between exotic cultures and local traditions/wisdom. How, then, does translation actually happen? Chen (2010) posits that translation is a progression of both “negotiations” and “blending” between the “local” and the “foreign,” rather than a simple act of one toppling the other. It occurs through two-way, simultaneous processes. Translation as a guiding concept brings to the fore the manner in which existing regionally based local society is articulated to, and often overdetermined by, the forces of modernity. Or, to put it another way, it invites us to explore the ways in which aspects of modernity are articulated to what was/is already there – all the while keeping in mind that “negotiation” has not occurred on equal terms.

### **Base Entity**

Chen (2010) employs the concept *base-entity* to assist us to think about how we might best understand what I have referred to above as “existing local society.” It is important not to romanticize and essentialize such societies, nor to treat them as if they are fixed over time. The concept base-entity seeks to avoid such problems and to deal with the difficult paradox that certain constancies are constantly evolving. He says:

Each geographic space – be it village, city, region, country, or continent – has its own base-entity and local history with different depths, forms and shapes. The methodological questions are: How can these base-entities be analyzed in terms of their internal characteristics? How can we best identify and analyze the interactions between and among different base-entities? (2010, p. 251)

The base-entity in each continent, country, region, city, and village is different. Therefore, it creates different forms of localization in each geographic space. Consequently, scholars in each country will search their local theories, thoughts, or daily language to explain current local phenomena.

### **Inter-Referencing**

Chen (2010) proposes de-binary thinking as a method for decolonization and deimperialism by proposing international localism. This is local, but also trans-border and regional. The main point, though, is that it involves inter-referencing (2010, p. 223). Here, Asian countries, Asian base-entities, become each other's reference point; they provide each other with new opportunities for comparison, other than the constant comparison with the West.

The purpose of the inter-referencing approach is to avoid judging any country, region or culture as superior or inferior to any other and to tease out historical transformations within the base-entity, so that the differences can be properly explained. (2010, p. 250)

As Wu (2015) indicates, Asia as method aspires to move the locus of power within Asia through inter-referencing. By establishing new intellectual alliances inside Asia and the Third World, the West's hegemony as the single referent will be challenged; alternative viewpoints will be established, and subjectivity will be reshaped. However, Vu and Le (2015) remind that Asia as Method does not seek to demolish or eradicate the West as method, but rather acknowledges the West as a source of enriching knowledge, while also relying on other frames of reference to modify our subjectivities and worldview. According to Chen, we should recognize the West's influence on Asian countries and investigate how the West has been understood and remade in local society.

We certainly acknowledge the importance of inter-referencing and using Asian references, while, at the same time, concede that this is not all there is to the notion of inter-referencing, as argued and illustrated in the evocative collection edited by Ong and Roy (2011). Focusing on the urban, Ong and Roy argue in their introduction (2011, p. 12) that inter-referencing refers to "practices of citation, allusion, aspiration, comparison and competition." This suggests the importance of avoiding reductionist notions of what inter-referencing might mean. Further, it has to be said that, when the focus is on inter-referencing only in Asia, the collaboration between Asian and Western research seems to be forsaken, while, concurrently, the binary logic we referred to above is implicitly reinforced. Inter-referencing is about multiplying our conceptual resources, not restricting them to one part of the world in ways that may, unintentionally, reinforce modes of territorial apartness (Chan et al., 2015).

To conclude this section, Asia as Method can contribute to academic understanding on certain issues. For example, Biggs and Watkins (1996) proposed the concept of “Chinese Learners,” finding that what Westerners generally see as not favorable learning approaches, such as rote learning and large class learning, can in fact produce deep learning and learning outcomes better than those for comparative western cohorts. Theodore de Bary (1983) in his book *Liberal Tradition of China* analyzed the linguistic meaning of self and found that the concept of self is equivalent to Western concepts of autonomy and liberty. Kennedy et al. (2012)’s *Citizenship Pedagogies in Asia-Pacific* solicited 13 Asian chapters, expounding on citizenship pedagogies adopted in the respective countries, with very interesting findings. Even in authoritarian states, teachers were exercising their autonomy to teach independent thinking, and there are always contests and contentions between teachers and states in the interpretation of the curriculum and teaching approaches. Lee (2012)’s concept of Asian citizenship found that the Asian self is not submerged by the collectivity, as there is strong emphasis on individuality, rather than individualism. Furthermore there is a strong emphasis in Asian cultures on relations and harmony that affects perceptions and behavior among Asians and the relationship between government and citizenship. Lastly, Lee and Mak (2010), analyzing comparative education journals in China, found that Chinese scholars have been struggling with whether they should uphold Chinese as Method and/or absorb West as Method. This shows self-awareness among Asian academics as to whether they should use their own methodology or Western methodology in their research studies.

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## Enactment of “Asia as Method” in Different Fields of Studies

In a search of key terms such as “Asia as Method” and “Chen Kuan-Hsing,” plus combinations of these terms with alternative expressions, such as “as Method” and “Asia Method” in the ERIC, ProQuest and A+ databases, a total of 53 documents, including articles, dissertations, books, and book reviews surfaced. Upon deleting any duplications, excluding books, book reviews, and commentary, the search yielded 30 unique results relevant for this chapter. Table 1 below is a summary of the 30 articles categorized according to their area of research focus:

Chen’s concept of “Asia as method” can be found in works that span across different domains and fields of study, which is evidence of its appeal among researchers. While the influence of Chen’s work is still in its infancy stage, based on the limited cache of 30 articles that we have unearthed for this chapter, we have good grounds to believe that his concept of using “Asia as method” will gain traction in the world of academia against the backdrop of a rising Asia. The following sections discuss the application of Chen’s concept of “Asia as method” that were found across different fields of studies at the time of writing this chapter.

**Table 1** Summary of articles categorised by research themes

Themes	Author(s)	Number of articles
Curriculum and Education	Bae and Dimitriadis (2015), Blaise et al. (2013), Burman (2019), Daza (2013), Lee (2019), Lim (2016), Lin (2012), Park (2017), Rhee (2013), Takayama (2016a, b), Yelland and Saltmarsh (2013) and Zhang et al. (2015)	13
Cultural studies	Antweiler (2020), Chu (2011), Fujikane (2012), Iwabuchi (2014), Kim (2017), Lo (2014), Maeda (2017), Morris (2017), Schäfer (2020), Subrahmanyam (2016) and Yue (2017)	11
Science and Technology	Anderson (2012, 2018), Fan (2016) and Morita (2017)	4
Film studies	Neves (2012) and Ferrari (2017)	2
Literature studies	Rojas et al. (2016)	1
Music studies	Fung (2019)	1
Legal studies	Lee (2016)	1

## Education

### Childhood and Educational Studies

Chen's concept of "Asia as method" has generated significant interest among researchers in the field of curriculum and educational studies. Within the area of childhood and educational studies, it has been applied across Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea (Blaise, 2012), in distinctive and historically grounded East Asian understandings of gender inequality in the early years. Chen's concept of de-colonizing and de-imperializing in "Asia as method" has been also considered in the development of new reflexive and transformative knowledge practices about literacy activities. The research, which took place in the context of a Hong Kong kindergarten classroom, turned to Chen's concept of "Asia as method" as the researchers felt that the Western understanding of literacy learning does not describe what happened in the Asian context (Blaise et al., 2013). In the same way, Chen's concept was drawn upon to elaborate on innovative methodologies for ethnographic and cross-national comparison of childhood and educational contexts for the Global Childhoods Project, which was initiated by a group of researchers from Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, and Australia. A central premise of the group is that researching global childhoods is best conducted by local researchers with knowledge of their own culture and contexts (Yelland & Saltmarsh, 2013). Other researchers have drawn inspiration from Chen's work in the development of their own methodological framework. For example, Burman (2019) referred to Chen's "Asia as method" when she proposed "Child as method," a framework to analyze the notions of "child" and "development." She draws a parallel between the two "methods" in her argument that similar to the notion of colonization in Chen's work, children's lives, subjectivities, and aspirations are dominated and colonized by



adults. She argues for a more child-centered view and to consider child development across economic, sociocultural, and individual trajectories.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

Chen’s concepts have featured in curriculum analysis and discourse in several education systems across Asia. For example, in her analysis of the content of South Korean high school social studies textbooks, Rhee (2013) applied Chen’s Asia as Method as she moved away from fixating on the West as a reference point. She worked to produce geo-historically grounded knowledge for specific interventions at this mediating site, moving toward decolonization, de-cold war, and de-imperialization. In the process, she discussed how Asia as Method provokes political, psychological, and social engagements of everyday life, multiplies reference points for knowledge production, and requires a researcher to rework one’s subjectivity, which is inevitably constituted by imperialism. Other Korean scholars have also critically examined Chen’s concept and argue for its viability in the context of the Korean education system, as well as its potential contribution to the field of education in content, pedagogy, and knowledge production (Lee, 2019; Park, 2017). In Singapore, Lim (2016) drew on key ideas in Asia as Method in exploring the tensions that arise when a curriculum centered on critical thinking, which is appropriated from Western knowledge traditions that favor autonomy and liberalism, is introduced in a meritocratic and rigidly hierarchical Asian society such as Singapore.

### **Teacher Training, Development, and Research**

Beyond the field of curriculum, Asia as method has served as a reference point for analyzing teacher training across national contexts (Cheng, 2015) and other pedagogical and educational transnational dynamics (Takayama, 2016a, b), as well as curricular applications in both teacher education and schools (Daza, 2013; Lin, 2012), and in education research (Chan, 2012; Takayama, 2016a, b; Zhang et al., 2015). For example, Takayama (2016a, b) explores the ways in which Japanese education research communities can reposition themselves in the wider international education research community by looking beyond the West as method and considering “Asia as method.” This is a possible strategy for alternative knowledge work, which recognizes the ambivalent epistemic location of Japanese education scholarship.

### **Cultural Studies**

Asia as method has generated significant traction in the field of cultural studies in which Takayama works. Published work in this area ranges from critical discussion on key concepts (Lo, 2014; Iwabuchi, 2014), argument for new epistemologies and approaches in the field of Area Studies (Antweiler, 2020; Schäfer, 2020), and the application of Chen’s ideas to examine social phenomena (Fujikane, 2012; Yue, 2017). For example, Fujikane (2012) examines the decolonizing and deimperializing movement in Asia and the Pacific, underscoring the need for Asian American settlers

to challenge the US settler state and its assault on indigenous peoples and to enact a future beyond empires. While the recent transgender turn in the West has resulted in trans-visibility and acceptance, Yue (2017) argues for a different model to consider the narrative of progressive modernity based on the experience of trans-visibility in Singapore, one that does not replicate Eurocentric ontology. While they have not directly applied Chen's work in their research, several scholars have been inspired by his work when conceptualizing their own "method" of research (Chu, 2011; Kim, 2017; Maeda, 2017; Morris, 2017).

## Science and Technology

In the field of science and technology, scholars have sought to examine the development of science and technology in Asia through an Asian-centric lens by considering the distinctive context, focusing particularly on the historical formations of science, technology, and medicine in the region (Anderson, 2012, 2018; Fan, 2016; Morita, 2017). Using Chen's Asia as method, Morita (2017) offered an Asia perspective in the understanding of Chinese medical practice in the region.

## Film/Literature/Music/Legal Studies

Beyond the above field of studies, "Asia as method" has been featured in areas such as film studies. Taking film festivals in Asia as its chief example, Neves (2012) examined the idea of inter-Asia referencing and looked at the often-critiqued practice of taking Asia as data or source material and the West as method or theory. Like other scholars in the field of film studies, he advocated for using Asia as a reference point for studies on Asian films and cinema studies in Asia. A theatrical application of Chen's concept is found in Ferrari's (2017) Toki Experimental Project, where she takes part in Asia as method's effort toward "decolonization, deimperialization, and de-cold war" through aesthetic and epistemological deconstruction, endorsing a dialogic model of intercultural performance as a form of inter-Asian relations. In literature, Chen's Asia as method provided a reference point for the analysis of local Malaysian Chinese literature (Rojas et al., 2016). In music studies, Fung (2019) has observed the lack of suitable concepts, vocabulary, and theories that can accurately elucidate Asian music. Fung points out that this, combined with the fact that studies of Asian popular music are minor voices in the global academic discourse, has resulted in the doubled exclusion of both Asian music and its scholarship. Whenever Asian music has to be explained, it has to be artificially dovetailed with concepts of Western music. The result is that the application of these concepts to Asian music often reaffirms the robustness of these Western concepts instead of revealing the specificity of this music. Finally, in human rights studies, Lee (2016), through an application of Chen's (2010) Asia as Method, critically reviews how global LGBT politics interact with Asian societies that are influenced by Confucianism.

Chen’s Asia as method seeks to transcend the established East/West axis that has continued to empower West as method as the dominant mode of knowledge production. Recent work has shown a small but increasing number of Asian scholars taking up Chen’s proposal to consider the unique histories and cultures of Asian societies, while acknowledging the West as constitutive of Asian subjectivity when analyzing situations in Asian societies. The cache of 30 articles presented in this chapter represents a small step toward this endeavor.

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## Methodology

This chapter utilizes a critical interpretive research methodology to examine the data that will enable researchers to make sense of and interpret the interests, concerns, and solutions of research students when they rethink the process of knowledge production during their studies at Monash University. This is a qualitative case study of six postgraduate research students (five PhD and one Master’s) in the Faculty of Education, Monash University. These research students were invited purposefully to participate in this research because their research projects are connected to Asian contexts. Their nationalities are diverse and the group includes one Australian, three Chinese, one Singaporean, and one Vietnamese.

Before beginning the data collection phase, the researchers applied for and received ethics approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee to guarantee that participants were safe, information was confidential, participation in the study was voluntary. The 1-h Zoom session was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and provided to each participant for review. The transcripts were then anonymized and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic data analysis began with a review of the final transcripts to identify and manage emerging themes. During this step, literal interpretive readings of the data based on Saldaña (2016)’s affective coding technique were used. By labeling with codes subjective human experiences, such as values, attitudes, evaluations, judgments, decision-making processes, reasoning, and emotions, this method was used to research or explore the concept and enactments of character education (Saldaña, 2016). Finally, the researchers used reflexive reading to develop arguments, in which they critically reviewed and located their own perspectives and theoretical underpinnings during the data analysis process (Seidman, 2006). During this phase, the results of data analysis were juxtaposed with the relevant literature of “Asia as method” in multiple disciplines. Two main themes and five subthemes were identified. The two main themes are theoretical imagination and methodological hesitation.

## Findings and Discussions

### Building Up a New Research Imagination Beyond the East and West Dichotomy

Chen (2010) argues for a new research imagination that extends constant referencing of the West toward alternative perspectives, with Asian history, politics, and culture as key reference points. He offers, instead, a range of standpoints and concepts to assist scholars (such as, Lee, 2019; Lim, 2016; Park, 2017; Rhee, 2013; Takayama, 2016a, b) to move beyond such impasses. This has inspired researchers in various areas to try to develop a fresh research imagination (Chu, 2011; Kim, 2017; Maeda, 2017; Morris, 2017), which also helps us to clarify and address our concerns about “East and West” in education studies.

Sandra is doing her PhD on Asian Australian immigrant teachers. She comes from Singapore, a postcolonial context. Just as they are for many others who live in postcolonial countries, Western theories are the “default” ones for Sandra.

*So even from my educational days, and my teacher training days, and subsequently, when I did my master in Singapore, we have always made references to western theories. So in our studies on pedagogy practices in school, teaching strategies to be used in school, we seem to import all these theories from western centric setting, so theory from the US, theory from the UK, and we import these theories into our teaching practices and to implement them on our students.*

Due to her postcolonial educational background, Sandra never previously questioned the so-called “default” Western theories in her educational and teaching experiences.

*We assume that these theories can be implemented across the contexts, even though Singapore is, theoretically, an oriental society, we are majority Chinese, but yet, we have this assumption that the importation of western theories will benefit our society, just like they have benefited the western society.*

This was until recently, when she started reading about “Asia as method,”

*But as I progressed in my research and researching Asian teachers, I realized that many of my Asian teachers’ beliefs and values are anchored in the Asian ways of doing things and also influenced by their Asian cultural context. And many of these Asian cultural contexts cannot be explained using western theories. So the use of ‘Asia as method’ lens, as an alternative lens to cast light on some of these findings have been very enlightening.*

For Sandra, the idea of Asia as method “has been eye opening.” It opens up a different perspective on how she views this whole complexity in education. At the same time, Asia as method also helps to explain many research findings of her PhD project, since Western theories do not inform what happens in the Asian context (Blaise et al., 2013).

Different from other participants, Jodie is a local Australian PhD student who is looking at an international school in China for local Chinese students through the lens of Western theories. She didn't know much about “Asia as method” in the beginning. But when she started to become familiar with the concepts, her initial thoughts, from a Western perspective, is that,

*‘Asia as method’ encourages the use of using Asian theories and concepts in the Asian context to help understand the research that is happening in that context. And it’s useful for me as a foreign researcher, for me to look back at my own research, and what biases I have and to overcome any deficits that may come through on western theories.*

And for Jodie, “Asia as method” provides an opportunity for her as a researcher in Asian education with a Western cultural background to be flexible in the use of conceptual tools. Even though Jodie is not using the specific concepts of “Asia as method,” she is drawing on the theory of cultural logic (Ong, 1999), which introduces the idea of using specific Chinese concepts in her theoretical framework to analyze the data. By using the Chinese concept, *Suzhi*, Jodie explores her data and provides in-depth analysis. As Jodie indicated, “... by using this Asian method, I can justify my theoretical constraints and say that these are more important than western theory because it provides a deeper analysis.”

When Jodie reflected on her understanding and employment of “Asia as method” in her study, she claimed that although she is not specifically using Asia as method (she is using a different Chinese framework), she still applies Asia as method as a theoretical justification for what she is doing.

*And I think by using ‘Asia as method’, it helps me put forward the argument that western concepts and theories interpret and analyze the issues or tensions, how I get my data. It can help, I guess some fill that gap. And it helps look at the perspectives of my time participants in a different context.*

We can say that Jodie has, in a way, used “Asia as method” as a new research imagination to successfully develop new theoretical thinking about the Chinese participants in her research project. It is not perfect by any means, but it suggests the value of starting where participants are, not where theory or critique would like them to be. It also points to the fact that different institutional and personal situations offer different affordances for this sort of research, and that these need to be taken into account. Asia as method points to the benefits of dialogues about how to shift away from Western perspectives, toward more Asia-centered perspectives in educational research about Asia. We believe that this provides a useful pedagogical starting point for deployment by researchers in other similar circumstances who face the knowledge problems and dilemmas that we have faced (Lee, 2019; Park, 2017).

## Repositioning Researcher's Subjectivity and Identifications

In the focus group, some participants reported the struggles of developing their academic identity as Asian scholars in Western countries to make contributions to the academic community.

The hardest struggle for Yulisa is finding how to position herself in the academic community, such as what kind of scholar that she wants to be in the future. Using Asia as method gives her a new perspective to think about Western theories, which “*actually gives me the confidence to keep pursuing my academic development in this particular way.*” However, she is still worried whether her new understanding of Western theories or concepts can be accepted. “Asia as method” provides a lens for Yulisa to reflect on her academic development route in the Western academic community, which will help her to build up an intercultural academic identity by synthesizing her cultural traditions into a Western knowledge framework.

As an Asian educational researcher with a Western cultural background, Jodie has encountered a different struggle, that is, how to rebuild her academic identity. For her, the book of “Asia as method” in educational studies (Zhang et al., 2015) is only targeted at Asian researchers who are studying educational issues in their home countries while studying at Western universities. She said,

*I think one of the reasons why, I don't know if many people have heard of it, especially in my case, because as foreigners or westerners, we're not really encouraged to go beyond western theory. And I just want to make the point that we can do that. If you're a western researcher and you're out in Asian context, you should be considering 'Asia as method' or thinking about how you can integrate culture theories into the specific cultural context you're looking at.*

Because her research is looking at Chinese in the Chinese context, Jodie has tried to go beyond the default “West as method” and to embrace “Asia as method” in her PhD project. But the process of getting her into “Asia as method” is not easy.

*And as I said, in the beginning I found it very confronting, difficult to work with. It really challenged me as a new academic, because I was just very used to certain western theories. That was my comfort zone. So to go into something new, it really challenged me. And it's taken me years, and just lots of going back and rereading.*

And it was not until the very last stage of her PhD candidature that she could actually see it coming together.

*I have my data and I have my participants. I have Chinese teachers, I have Chinese students, I have foreign teachers, and they all give me these different stories. And by changing your lens, you see things differently, and you see things that I missed. And I thought, Wow, if I didn't go back to using Chinese concepts, I would never have discovered it in the first place.*

As Kenway (2015) indicates, when Chen (2010) “links knowledge production to matters of subjectivity, he clearly hopes to change the subject – and that means ‘you’,

whoever and wherever you are” (p. 15). She further argues that “the researcher’s subjectivity and identifications must come under scrutiny. Not least, the research community’s ‘structural flow of desire’ (Chen, 2010) towards the USA and Europe needs to be challenged” (2015, p. 26).

*Rather than being constantly anxious about the question of the West, we can actively acknowledge it as a part of the formation of our subjectivity, in the form of fragmented pieces. The West has entered our history and become part of it, but not in a totalizing manner. The task for Asia as method is to multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview, so that our anxiety over the West can be diluted and productive and critical work can move forward. (2010, p. 223)*

Kenway (2015, p. 26) suggests that “an important feature of ‘becoming others’ is multiplying the objects of one’s identification and, thereby, constructing alternative frames of reference. This enables a movement beyond the limited lens of single-issue identity politics, it challenges the structures just mentioned and makes new affinities possible. Through such practices, Chen believes, it is possible to find a different sense of self. Indeed, he says, ‘understanding the other is a way of transcending the self’ (2010, pp. 252–3)”. By looking beyond the West as method we can consider “Asia as method” as strategies toward alternative knowledge production. These strategies provide possible ways in which Asian education scholars can reposition themselves in the wider international education research community (Takayama, 2016a, b). In the process, Asia as Method provokes political, psychological, and social engagements in everyday life, multiplies reference points for knowledge production, and requires a researcher to rework their own subjectivity, which has inevitably been constituted by imperialism (Rhee, 2013).

## Methodological Hesitation

The last decade has seen the expansion of movement toward understanding theories through a wide range of diverse contextual and cultural perspectives that have emanated from the East. Chen (2010) recommends that scholars from former colonies and ex-imperial countries in Asia should rethink and reexamine their own colonial and imperialist histories. This recommendation has been drawn upon to elaborate innovative methodologies for educational studies (Burman, 2019; Yelland & Saltmarsh, 2013). Our participants, for example, have drawn inspiration from Chen’s work in the development of their methodological framework in their PhD projects. However, the participants also mentioned some methodological hesitation, relating to difficulties and challenges when they applied *Asia as method* in their Asian education context.

Ann first expresses her concerns about using the very term “Asia.” “Asia” brings something new to social theories that are heavily shaped by Western thinkers and ideologists. For many academic researchers in social sciences, including education, choosing a theoretical lens largely shaped by Western thinkers has become the

standard norm in conducting any research project. But the term “Asia” itself is problematic, because it entails and reproduces the category between the West and the Rest (East) and involves a possibly harmful generalization, through which contrasting and conflicting bodies of literature from China, India, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and many other countries are all thrown into a “single cultural basket” called “Asia” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

*Thus, for any research, I think the questions ‘what is Asia?’ and ‘what is Asia as method?’ require complex and multidimensional explanations and justifications before the term ‘Asia as method’ is applied.*

Jodie has tried to understand Asia as method in education studies from the perspective of a Western PhD student. As she said,

*The beginning I found it very confronting, difficult to work with, it really challenged me as a new academic, especially the decolonial approach, the deimperial on the de-Cold War, because I was just very used to certain theories. That was my comfort zone. So to go into something new, it really challenged me. And it’s taken me three years, and just lots of going back and re-reading.*

She went out of her comfort zone to use the Chinese concepts, *Suzi* and *save face* (literally *quality* and *be respected*), to interpret collected data from her project on Chinese students in an Australian international school in China. She challenged herself to look at the pedagogical difference of West and East to teach the Chinese students.

*And it wasn’t until I got my data, and I analyzed and re-analyzed and had to go deeper, that I began to see the connections and really looking at my participants stories and what was saying, because there are elements in there. And if we just use a western theory, you’re going to miss those key elements and you’ll interpret one thing. But if you apply Asia as method, it gives you a lens to see from perspective that there is something there that really contributes to the field. If I didn’t go back to using Chinese concepts, I would never have discovered it in the first place.*

Many academics think that Asia as method targets Asian researchers who are studying their home country’s education issues in a foreign university. In fact, Asia as method encourages Western researchers to go beyond their Western-centric knowledge and to reach “non-western as method.” When they conduct their research in an Asian context, they should be considering Asia as method or thinking about how to integrate cultural theories into the specific cultural context. By adopting Asia as method, they can offer implications of their research findings from both a Western and Eastern perspective. In this way they have the benefit of translation between the two cultures.

Yulisa mentioned that the concept of the base entity is ambiguous and fluid under the impact of globalization. She explains her thoughts:



*The difficulty for me is the understanding of the base entity because we are now beyond the [home country] location, because we are looking at, for example, Chinese students in a western context. And in this sense, the basic entity is more complicated. And it's also being influenced by all sorts of powers, for example, the changing relations in different nations, such as Australia and Chinese relations, and the politics stuff is unpredictable. And so, it's kind of hard for me, so I keep thinking about this basic entity and to think how to investigate the complex issue in a more flexible way and apply it in the context of globalization or Asian people, Asian origin people in a globalized context.*

Chen's concept of base entity implies an entity with a local history, which is expressed at different levels of depth, with different forms and shapes. But the base entity does not remain indefinitely unchanged. In fact, it will change, but the changes will take place very slowly. Chinese international students' base entity will be shaken by engaging with another culture. Yulisa added her struggle about positing herself as a future scholar.

*While using Asia as method gives me a new perspective to think about western theories, I am worries about that whether this concept can be accepted. . . I started to think about this lately and to read more literature. Asia as method gives me the confident to keep pursuing my academic development in this particular way.*

The idea of Asia as method inspires young and enthusiastic scholars from different disciplines, who will then engage and develop the research. They use the concept to investigate complex issues in a more flexible way and apply it in the context of globalization and Asian people, or people of Asian origin in a globalized context.

Molly doesn't consider Asia as method or choose Asian theory over Western, because of the limits to her knowledge. She expressed this view:

*I felt that because my knowledge is absent of come Asian theories, because all educational knowledge I acquired in Monash are all from western, like Vygotsky and Bourdieu. I lack knowledge of this Asia's method.*

Asian scholars have translated Western concepts (such as those of Vygotsky and Bourdieu) to localize/adapt them to local content. Moreover, not all Asian theories and concepts are new to researchers. Some of them have been known in the West for the last 150 years and are widely used in scholarly publications. One such conceptual system is *Confucianism*, the ancient Chinese belief system that focuses on the importance of personal ethics and morality. Other well-known examples include *Yin and Yang*, a Chinese philosophical concept, which describes how opposite or contrary forces may be complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world; *Feng Shui*, an ancient Chinese art, which involves creating a space that is harmonious with the environment; and thirdly *Guanxi*, the fundamental dynamic in personalized social networks of power. Asian scholars should be encouraged to boldly theorize Asian concepts. For example, Chan (2019) discusses network governance and specifically *Mohe* in Chinese education governance. He shows that *Mohe* explains why actors in a network deploy their own resources in exchange

for other actors' resources in order to achieve their goals. The concept is generally useful and fruitful for understanding the policy process in China. *Mohe* has the potential to provide a framework to analyze the policymaking process in the West, especially for those countries in which state power is still in place and cannot be excluded.

It is encouraging to see Molly develop this idea further. She believes that student researchers should spend more time learning about Asia, especially as she explores how Chinese international graduates, as well as international graduates from other Asian countries, study and live in the host country.

*Yes, I feel like we should have something that is more resonating with our own context, rather than just to simply focus on the theories from western countries. Maybe we can have a combination and share something that's more flexible and to combine together, so these two theories can support each other, and they can complement those impairments.*

Asian and Western theories should not be in opposition to one another. Researchers can aim to synthesize them, or to collaborate using theories from both the Eastern and Western sides of the world, to present the ideas holistically.

Yumi shares her problem when she tried to use Asia as method in her study.

*But if Asian understanding is based on Asian context and then western understanding based on western context, the two concepts are very different and not always comparable, how I'm going to bring them together? It doesn't have to be labelled as rigidly Asian, it's just calling for the possibility to have a different way.*

There is no single term that can adequately describe the diversity of Asia's regions. The diversity of Asian cultures, religions, and traditions should be acknowledged and recognized. It follows from this that inter-reference is one of three central concepts in Asia as method. It goes without saying that Asia and the West are equally important reference points.

Yumi further added another issue about the acceptance of Asian theory.

*Because if we can theorize something Asian, and then we bring that into the picture, it's not just a voice of an individual, it would be a voice being accepted by academia. And then it could be used by go the practitioners to justify their practices. For a teacher in real life, I can use this theory telling my principal.*

We also realize that "Asia" and "Asia as method" are somewhat problematic in terms of entailing categorical differences and homogenization. Thus, how to position oneself and avoid being caught up in these generalized categories is challenging. Another difficult thing is our assumption that any theoretical perspective needs at least some clear definitions and explanations. As we read the term/approach "Asia as method," we would also expect to have some strategic explanations about this approach and how to apply it in educational research. Such requirements might again be problematic, because they create a fixed understanding of the approach itself. The last difficulty associated with this approach for a PhD project comes from the

dominance of Western theoretical approaches in academic research. Such dominance might create fears for researchers when engaging with any non-Western theoretical approaches in the main theoretical framework of a PhD project.

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## Conclusion

The employment of Asia as Method in educational studies involves an overall pedagogy to help HDR students cultivate a new research imagination for the future. Asian research students studying education in the “West” need to know what the vision of this research imagination might be. The concept offers Asian education studies from Asian perspectives – acknowledging the manner in which Asian education systems, policies, and practices have differentially mediated Western knowledge in relation to their own specific evolving culture, contexts, and politics. Those living and working at the centers of various empires of knowledge must move beyond the “West as Method” (Hall, 1992) and engage with Asia as method in education research about Asia. Educational researchers need to acknowledge the importance of hearing different voices from different countries and also different voices from within them. This is in contrast to the perspective of Western educators who see their international students through Western lens, which has inhibited the process of internationalization (Singh, 2009).

In summary, using Asia as method is to ensure that Asian localities, rather than Western theories, become a reference point for each other. Theorists can counteract hegemonic knowledge production by shifting the reference points for Asia away from the West and toward local sites that share similar sociohistorical processes. In other words, Western discourse is not the only reference resource in the social sciences in general, and in Asia-related research in particular. This chapter is important because it is the beginning of a conversation that responds to Chen’s challenge in educational studies. As the world changes, the national states constituting Asia change as well; these Asian states have been “internally pluralised, or multiculturalised” (Beilharz, 2000, p. 39). Asia as method helps to eliminate anxiety about a lack of reference to Western knowledge and cultural imaginaries as the focal point of reference. It also provides a substantial analytical tool to explore the translation of values and subjectivities. Finally it can raise awareness of the optional use of Western values to enrich cultural values of the base-entity.

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