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# “Asia as method” as a quest of the spirit and finding we-togetherness: a collaborative autoethnography

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**Abstract**
This paper responds to the special issue’s call for educators to examine the epistemological and ontological changes that happen to themselves after long-term working abroad and how this experience helps challenge theoretical and pedagogical norms in education. Employing collaborative autoethnography as our research method, we use our life stories of growing up in Asia and studying and working in the West to reflect on our journey of becoming scholars comfortable in engaging Chinese wisdom traditions—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—in Western academia. We share how our experiences of encouraging Asian spiritual traditions and engaging in contemplative practices led us to embrace the ontology and epistemology of Eastern wisdom traditions, and come to understand Eastern philosophies as living wisdom, as a way of being and knowing. We further detail how comprehending Eastern philosophies at a heart-mind level has transformed our views on humanity, allowing us to see the common struggles of peoples in the East and West, Asia and North America. Our ontological and epistemological transformations brought about by Eastern contemplative practices have enabled us to see that there is not such a thing as “Asia” or “North America. ” Rather, we interare and we are Earth citizens. We end our inquiry by advocating for the need to engage spirit as method and conduct research and teaching with a heightened sense of we-togetherness, from a heart and mind that is open and boundless, for the benefits of all our relations—visible and invisible, human and more than human.

**Keywords** Asia as method · Decolonization · Contemplative inquiry · Autoethnography · Asian epistemologies · Asian ontologies

## Introduction

Letting go of the worries to arrive at anywhere
I write
Body, mind, spirit in tranquil oneness
I listen
to the earth in me, holding
to the ancestors in me, guiding
to all the cries and laughters in me, reminding
me, dear one
stay true and alert to your truth
smile
and savor the insight of freedom

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This article grew out of our response to the special issue's call for educational researchers to examine the ontological and epistemological transformations that happened to them after long-term working abroad and how these transformations challenged theoretical and pedagogical norms in education. Both Yishin and Jing are immigrant educators of Chinese descent who have left home (i.e. “Asia”) to work in North American universities. As we immerse ourselves in North American societies and learn to speak the language of Western academia, we realize that something is missing in our way of pursuing, constructing, and sharing knowledge as Asian scholars. Even though our upbringing is Eastern, consciously we use Western frameworks in our teaching and scholarly writing. Despite being exposed to decolonial thoughts and practices (Shepherd, 2018), we can easily fall back into habitual, at times unwholesome, modern/colonial ways of being in our thinking and teaching. For instance, when we examine and generate insights into educational phenomena, we continue to follow Western and colonial tendencies of objectifying and separating nature—and subsequently, our body, from our inquiry thus prioritizing

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mind-intellect and neglecting the engagement of our own body, spirit, and emotions integral to traditional Eastern ways of knowing and knowledge constructions processes. As a result, we cannot bring our true self to academia and the knowledge we produced was disembodied, disconnected from our hearts as well as our deepest reality.

As educators who attempt to transform colonial habits of being and encourage epistemological diversity in academia, we are drawn to the special issue's invitation for educational researchers to consider "Asia as method" and re-center Asia "not just as an object of analysis but as an agential subject" in our educational thinking and practices (Kester, 2021). To avoid the further objectification of "Asia" during our inquiry, we engage our Asian parents, grandparents, land ancestors, spiritual ancestors, friends, and relatives who are alive in every cell of our bodies to think along with us. We bring in our inner lens and reignite our inner teacher, rejecting truth as outside of us, without context, or lack of internal life. We do not shy away from our vulnerability and see all aspects of our being—physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional—as sites for knowledge construction.

Our inquiry started with Yishin's curiosity to learn about Jing's journey of becoming a scholar well-versed in engaging Chinese wisdom traditions—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—in Western academia. What seemed to be an exploratory conversation between the two of us quickly spurred into a series of online dialogues and email correspondences where we further inquired into our upbringing in East Asia and Southeast Asia, our migration experiences, and the different life events that had led us to conduct educational research and courses in North America grounded in Eastern ways of knowing and being. To carry out more systematic examinations of our experiences of leaving Asia for North America, we employed a life course perspective (Elder et al., 2003) and the method of collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2016). Using the idea of "turning point" in life course theory, we looked deeply into how our migration experiences had reshaped our relationships with "Asia," transformed our knowing and being, and enabled us to begin the work of undoing colonizing practices in education.

Our collaborative autoethnography demonstrates that "Asia as method" holds potential in finding our cultural reference point and returning to our holistic ways of being, including research, teaching and activism, but scholars need to go beyond Asia as a geographical-political-intellectual concept to pursue a spiritual, felt understanding of who we are as "Earth" citizens. All educators—Asians and non-Asians—can tap into our cultural inheritances and involve spirit as a method in our effort to heal and transform colonial tendencies in Western academia. Actions resulting from our self-understanding and transformation through contemplative inquiry and practices can lead to social transformation for a world of we-togetherness and interconnection.

## Literature review

### Asia as method

In his book "Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization," Taiwanese cultural studies scholar Chen (2010) urges critical scholars residing in imperialistic states to undertake a deimperialization movement by reexamining their countries' empire-building histories and how these histories have left harmful impacts on the world. Furthermore, Chen invites critical intellectuals in the former and current colonies of the Third World to "deepen and widen decolonization movements, especially in the domains of psyche, culture and knowledge production" (p. vii). Instead of always referencing the West in their subjectivity and worldview (either positively through worshiping Western theories or negatively through opposing Western knowledge), Chen encourages Asian scholars to multiply their points of reference by shifting their attention towards Asia (Lin, 2012). Using "Asia as method" as an imaginary anchoring point, Chen (2010) points out how "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). To promote alternative frames of reference within our psyche, subjectivity, and worldview, Chen proposes the idea of "critical syncretism," which is the strategy of looking outwards to multiple forms of cultural identification, especially those of the marginalized and subalterns, through the practice of "becoming others"—becoming female, homosexual, indigenous, poor, animal, third world, etc. (Chen, 2010)—not just in our head but also in our heart.

Chen's proposition of "Asia as method" originates from the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies at a time when regional scholars in Asia were trying to "reclaim inter-Asia regionalism" and replace "outdated area studies frameworks" to study Asia in order to resist the forces of nationalism and global imperialism (Goh, 2019). In the field of education, Chen's work has inspired a group of Asian researchers in Australia to examine their struggles of conducting research in Asia while studying in the West (Zhang et al., 2015). By placing Asian history, politics, and culture as key reference points in their research, they were able to stop referencing the West and engage multiple frames of references in knowledge production. In the area of curriculum, Chen's idea of critical syncretism has been further adopted by educators like Lin (2012) and Tam (2018) who develop curriculum that educates for the transformation of colonial and imperial subjectivities. For example, Lin (2012)

demonstrated how curriculum can be creatively designed to help students "emotionally take up the subject positions of 'the weak 'as defined by current structures of domination" and transform themselves through emotionally identifying with "the homosexual, the female, the colored person, the poor, the working class, the migrant worker, the linguistic minority, the physically challenged, the un-educated, the outsider, the foreigner, the communist," not just with the rich and the powerful (p. 172). Tam (2018), on the other hand, developed a syncretized approach to teaching drama-in-education in Hong Kong where she used a Taoist story as an Asian anchoring point to reinvent Western-originated drama practices so that these practices can both nurture Asian cultural sensibilities and recognize their (post)colonial inheritances.

Like the aforementioned educators and scholars, we found Chen's idea of "Asia as method"—especially his call for scholars to multiply frames of reference and cultural identifications in their effort to decolonize ways of knowing, being, and teaching—resonating with us. At different times in our life, we have both tried to understand and break away from the influences of imperialism and colonialism on our psyche by shifting our attention toward Asia in our educational thinking and pedagogy. This does not mean that we abandon the West entirely in our thinking and doing given our deep-rootedness in Western modernity. Yet, we have attempted to multiply our frames of reference and broaden our sense of self and worldview by going beyond West–East binaries and learning from East, Southeast, and South Asian knowledges and experiences past and present (Moon, 2022). In the remainder of this paper, we inquire into our life stories by referencing the historical and geopolitical specificities of the Asian societies in which we grew up. We examine different stages of our lives, paying attention to our mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual bodies and how our identities have been influenced by the stories of local people residing in different parts of Asia. When examining ontological and epistemological changes that have happened to us while long-time working in North America, we zoom into examining how our subjectivity (e.g. deep-rooted desires, attitudes, imaginaries, and emotions) and worldview have changed as the result of engaging/referencing "Asia" in our way of thinking and practicing education.

### Life course theory

Life course theory alongside the concept of turning point is specifically used to make sense of the different ontological and epistemological changes that we have experienced while living and working in North America. Life course theory urges us to examine how historical time, our social location, and culture affect our experience at various life stages, e.g. childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age etc. (Hutchinson, 2011). It suggests that each person experiences many different transitions or changes in status or role in their lives, for example, leaving schools, having a job, getting married, giving birth to children etc. (Elder et al., 2003). All these transitions may contribute to different intersecting life trajectories such as educational trajectories, career trajectories, and marriage trajectories, that present long-term patterns of stability and change in a person's life (Hutchinson, 2011). A turning point is a time when substantial changes take place in our life trajectories (Elder et al., 2003) which can result in a redirection in our life path as well as opportunities to transform how we view ourselves, our identities, and meanings in the world (Wethington, 2003). When revisiting our life stories, we took note of different transitions that had happened during our life course and examined how they informed our family, educational, and career trajectories. We then zoom into inquiring into significant turning points that have led to the reconstruction of our sense of self and a shift in our epistemology, ontology, and educational practices while working in North America as Asian scholars and educators.

## Research method

### Collaborative autoethnography

We employed collaborative autoethnography in our research process. Autoethnography is a qualitative, self-focused, and context-conscious method that has been increasingly used by researchers to access inner thoughts and generate sociocultural understandings of self to shed light on personal matters like depression, spirituality, death, and illness (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Collaborative autoethnography provides opportunities for researchers to continue using autoethnographic approaches but do so in collaborative, team-based settings (Chang et al., 2016). In our collaborative autoethnography, we alternate between group and individual works and use tools like memory work, self-reflection, self-analysis, interviews, and contemplations to collect and generate autobiographical data (Chang et al., 2016).

Our research process started with a recorded conversation where we listened to each other's personal stories of transformation and talked freely about issues concerning us in our life and work. After listening to each other's stories, we worked individually for two months to write about our experiences of leaving Asia for North America and the different transformations that had happened to us while working in North America. As we wrote our stories, we met twice on Zoom to review and ask questions about each other's life. These meeting exchanges allowed us to further clarify our writing, deepen our reflections upon our past and present, and figure out what "Asia as method" meant to us. At the

stage of analysis and interpretations, we went deeper into understanding the onto-epistemological transformations that we had experienced while working in North America. We engaged in contemplative inquiry techniques, that is, holding our puzzles and each other's stories in our hearts without "thinking" too hard about the stories and rushing into analysis from any theoretical standpoint. We allowed our busy minds to settle and centered ourselves in the present moment. Listening to what is being said and unsaid in our stories, we stayed close to our own and each other's lived experiences in order to identify common themes emerging from our experiences. Finally, we wrote about these themes together for this paper, engaging other literature and bodies of experience when conveying our messages and meanings. Below, we shared our individual stories of onto-epistemological transformations while working in North America, followed by a deeper collaborative inquiry into these transformations and how they help us initiate decolonial moves and work for peace and sustainability in Western academia.

## Personal narratives

### Yishin's narrative

I grew up in a Chinese family in Malaysia, a multi-ethnic post-colonial country in Southeast Asia, under the loving care of my parents and grandparents. My mom who immigrated from Taiwan to Malaysia not long before I was born ignited in me a passion for reading and learning the Chinese language. My dad, with his fondness for nature, peoples, and histories, opened my eyes to the diverse natural and cultural landscapes of Malaysia. As a child, I spent many hours playing with children in my neighborhood and inventing our games using tin cans, bricks, old rubber slippers, and all sorts of gifts from Mother Earth. My family was not well off but I never felt a sense of lack. There was nothing I enjoyed more than following my grandparents around and helping them prepare for Chinese celebrations and festivals like the Lunar New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Dragon Boat Festival.

When I reached the age of entering school, my parents moved to the city and sent me to a Chinese vernacular primary school known for its strong emphasis on academic achievement and the transmission of Chinese tradition, culture, and language. The education system in Malaysia is highly ethnicized and politicized due to the legacy of British colonialism and Malaysian state policies (Joseph, 2008). During British rule in the late nineteenth century, the colonial government imported a large number of immigrants from South China and South India to work on newly discovered tin mines, seaports, and rubber plantations to fuel the industrialization of Europe (Joseph, 2008). Regrettably, under the British divide-and-rule policy (Ang, 2009), new Chinese and Indian immigrants were not put into contact with the local Malay populations but were segregated geographically, economically, and socially from the locals (Hirschman, 1972). The schools for immigrants and natives were also segregated into separate linguistic-ethnic streams: English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamils (the language of most South Indian immigrants to colonial Malaya) (Hirschman, 1972). After independence, Malaysia assumed the divisive colonial education system and different types of schools emerged across the country. There are the National primary and secondary schools (with the enrolment of different ethnic groups), Chinese vernacular schools (which include National Type Chinese primary schools and Independent Chinese secondary schools for Chinese Malaysians), Tamil vernacular schools (at the primary level only attended by Indian Malaysian of Tamil descent), and Religious and Technical Schools (Joseph, 2008). Attending schools in Malaysia during the 1990s, I learned to study hard and excel on standardized tests. Malaysia was booming economically until the 1998 financial crisis hit. Being a Chinese child, I knew subconsciously that getting good grades was the most guaranteed pathway for me to get a good job and succeed in a country that is known for its preferential policies for the Malays and indigenous groups (the majority ethnic groups) in education and employment (Guan, 2005). Uncertain whether I would stay in Malaysia or go abroad for my post-secondary education, I performed as best as I could in all subject areas, hoping to have more choices in my educational future and career. My hard work paid off and I was ranked top in my class while representing my school in all sorts of regional and national competitions. However, the achievements I got did not make me happy. In Grade 9 after falling ill from stress, I started questioning how I ended up in an education rat race that became so unreal and disconnected from life. Even though I had deep love and respect for my teachers who instilled in me a great sense of cultural confidence, I did not understand why my Chinese school life was so separated from the community, and why I had few opportunities to interact with children from other ethnic backgrounds inside and outside of school.

A big turning point came when my father started working as an ex-pat in mainland China during a time of increased foreign direct investments in the country. Under the auspices of my father's employee benefits package, I had the privilege of finishing the last two years of high school at an international boarding school in Hong Kong. In this school, I was able to live and learn together with 250 students from more than 90 countries. I spent a lot of time exploring my Chinese Malaysian identity, developing leadership skills, and participating in service learning with communities in Hong Kong, mainland China, and neighboring Southeast Asian countries. It was important for me to study in a school that challenges

racial-ethnic segregation. Through working together with peers from different cultural, national, and socio-economic backgrounds, I learned to see that humans share more similarities than differences. Instead of creating separation, education can be a force to unite peoples, nations, and cultures for more peaceful and sustainable futures.

After finishing high school, I pursued international development studies, anthropology, and later international educational development and curriculum studies in both Canadian and American universities. My academic training led me to work on different educational projects in various developmental contexts in Asia. I remember visiting Ladakh, a mountainous region in the Indian Himalayas, and learning from the Ladakhi people's regenerative ways of working with Mother Nature (Norberg-Hodge, 2013). The Ladakhi ways were very different from the Western ways grounded in materialistic achievement, a linear idea of progress/development, and human utilization of natural resources for personal and economic gains. Realizing how the quest for Western-typed modernity has altered Ladakhi traditional knowledge landscapes and dominated the development of schools around the world (including schools in Malaysia and universities in North America), I turned to China, eager to reclaim my cultural heritage and figure out how different Chinese epistemologies and pedagogies may help imagine a more peaceful and sustainable world beyond Western modernity, development models, and enlightenment values (Tu, 1993). During my master's and doctoral studies, my work with educators in rural and urban China exposed me to the progressive thoughts of Chinese educators-reformers like Liang Shuming, Tao Xingzhi, Yan Yangchu, and Ye Lan, as well as different sustainable educational models indigenous to China (Khoo, 2015). Despite feeling excited about reconnecting myself with my Chinese roots in education, I was bothered by an ever-growing sense of lack and restlessness in me. I was always on the go, moving from one project to the other, in fear of falling behind in the great competition for new ideas and better approaches to addressing educational problems. My body was tired and I wondered to what extent I could be of help to the world.

> It was a sunny evening in Ambalangoda, a southern town in Sri Lanka, two years after the Indian Ocean tsunami had killed more than 30,000 people in the country. I was walking along the beach with a few Sri Lankan friends whose families had been severely affected by the tsunami. As I watched my young friends holding hands, laughing, and singing freely on the beach that had been badly hit by the 2004 tsunami, something struck me. Even though my post-secondary education gave me many frameworks and theoretical tools to address structural violence and social injustice, it never taught me how to live deeply in the moment and understand the full spectrum of human sufferings (e.g. the sudden death of loved ones, the loss of hope etc). Yet that evening, what my Sri Lankan friends were trying to show me was that instead of stuffing myself with more ideas and linearly chasing after a problem-free, pain-free world, we can give rise to a sense of wellbeing in the midst of suffering without losing ourselves in worries and despair. As humans, we are much more than our suffering. Cultivating our inner capacity to deal with the shadowy sides of life is needed if we want to serve others and the world more effectively.

I am fortunate that whenever I feel the need to choose a different way of living/being in the world, the above image of my Sri Lankan friends always comes to mind. Working in Sri Lanka during the country's civil war and post-disaster recovery awakened me to the fragility of lives, the impact of daily violence, the value of friendship and community, and the need to develop inner strength for the benefit of individuals and societies. Since education for inner transformation was virtually missing in all my schooling and academic training, I sought refuge in Eastern wisdom traditions, especially in the engaged Buddhist teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh (Toh, 2012) and his mindfulness practice community for guidance. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk known for applying ancient Buddhist philosophy and practices to the real-world suffering caused by war, social injustice, and political oppression (Kyte, 2019). Nurturing sanghas or "beloved communities" that practice mindful living, understanding, and loving kindness is central to his engaged Buddhist work. For more than ten years I practiced five mindfulness training (see https://plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice/the-5-mindfulness-train for the Buddhist vision of a global ethic) and mindfulness meditation (walking meditation, sitting meditation, eating meditations, etc.) in a Toronto-based mindfulness practice community under the support of elders and friends. I learned to stop and look deeply into my self and my life situations, heal intergenerational trauma, and apply the insight of interbeing (e.g., the interdependence of all beings, core to the Buddha's teachings) to help remove discrimination, fear, and dualistic way of thinking in my consciousness. The path of self-transformation was slow and bumpy. What gave me hope was to experience an increased sense of peace and freedom in my daily life alongside the capacity to generate a moment of wellbeing in my life so that I can build stamina to transform difficulties inside and around me.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to pause all my family visits and research activities in Asia. Whenever I had time, I practiced walking meditation along the Detroit River where my current university is located. Walking mindfully on Mother Earth, I learn to entrust myself to the earth and

let go of COVID stress and anxiety. I learned to "inter-be" with the sun, the air, the water, the flowers, my spiritual ancestors, blood ancestors, and land ancestors that are all alive in me at the present moment. I also learned to connect with the suffering and the immense strengths of all beings—human and more than human. Practicing walking meditation with the insight of interbeing (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2017), I began to understand why the lands, waters, plants, animals, and rocks, are regarded as sacred and animate by so many Indigenous communities in North America and around the world. Heaven-Human Oneness (天人合一) was no longer an abstract concept appearing only in Asian literature and research papers. It can be practiced and experienced in my daily life to transform colonial habits of being that I have inherited from past generations and society. In many ways, encountering Thich Nhat Hanh and learning from his way of addressing human and socio-ecological sufferings through Asian wisdom has been the most important turning point in my life. It has transformed my being from the inside out and allowed me to embark on decolonial moves in education grounded in a non-dual manner so clearly articulated in Thich Nhat Hanh's words: "There is no way to freedom; freedom is the way. There is no way to peace; peace is the way."

These days, when I teach at my local university in Ontario on the land of the Anishinaabe people, I invite my expansive self, my "interbeing," to become the method of my teaching. I try to address individualistic tendencies in the university by creating beloved classroom communities that help transform colonial habits of being built upon our denials of violence, the limits of our planet, and our interconnection with nature and with each other (Andreotti et al., 2021). I also share with students simple meditation techniques that allow us to build our inner capacity to sit with pain and develop our moral compass to transform violence, injustice, and colonial mentality that lie deep in the collective consciousness of Canadian settler society. The world continues to be on fire, but this time, I sense more solidity and peace in me to put out the fire and restore hope in times of emergency. The work of decolonization and transformation continues.

## Jing's narrative

I grew up on a state farm in China, where my parents were state employees with regular salaries. The state farm grew rubber trees and my father was a cadre with a slightly higher salary than other farm workers which gave us a sense of confidence and security. In my childhood, I had no toys, but I also had everything in nature that can be used as my toys. I played with stones, soil, water, little insects in the field, and plants like what we call "touch me not" in Chinese 含羞草 (meaning "I am shy"). I grew up in a very carefree way. We didn't have a lot of money, but we had a lot of care from the family, and there was no pressure from the parents to do whatever. Although we lived a materially limited life, I could feel the profound love from my parents and grandma, especially from my father. My father worked tirelessly for the collective unit he belonged to, and he exuded unconditional love to us children. He did not talk much, but I felt deep love from him, unconditional love, that flowed from his whole being to us. My mother is quite different; she didn't talk with her children too much either, but after a week of very tough physical labor, she would be sewing clothes for us on Sundays (the only day people could take off in a week back then). She had a few close friends; sometimes when they were pregnant, she would use a dowsing needle which would swing on the wrist of the young woman and she would tell her the sex of the baby. She was a rarity among her peers as she would often pick up a storybook and read it when she had some time. She allowed me to be who I was, roaming around or walking with a book in my hand not being bothered by household chores. She was very smart: she spent half a year learning in the evening schools and became literate which was rare among her cohort. My grandma was unconditionally loving and kind. Although she was illiterate and had never stepped outside the county, she had this wisdom that allowed her to see everyone as friends. Her job was to take care of us, and her meager-salary job was to take care of all the newborn babies in our community. Everyday, she poured all her love into those babies, busy cooking for them and swinging the cradles that were strapped together in a row. She would share with neighbors dumplings if we made some, or a few pieces of chicken if the family got a chicken. So, we had a very harmonious family and had no fighting whatsoever. Although I grew up during the chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution, and we went through all kinds of political movements, we did not have to take exams but I learned a lot by myself.

When I was a 7-year-old child, my next-door neighbor was murdered by her husband. Their apartment was right next to ours, the doors were only two meters apart, and I had played with their children and seen them every day. The horrifying screams of the older daughter when she saw her mother in a pool of blood caused my heart to stop, and the murder scene in which I got a peek at was devastating. Their apartment was sealed and deserted, and the husband was sentenced to life imprisonment. It was still during the Cultural Revolution, so a lot of books were confiscated as they were deemed "polluting" or "poisonous" to the public. The Cultural Revolution was a disaster in China when many people were severely persecuted and cultural artifacts were either toppled or burned. On the state farm I lived, books owned by people were all confiscated, and we as young kids literally had nothing to read. So, the confiscated books came in truckloads and were stored in the apartment that this couple used to live in, where the pool of blood from the

murder was still there on the floor. Hungry for knowledge, and incredibly eager to read, I often climbed from the open window or the upper window of the door into this apartment and stood by the blood to read. Although I was scared to death by the scene of horror (I was so traumatized by the murder scene that I slept against the wall and had nightmares many years after the incident), I lost myself in reading novels and books, and even very deep, philosophical work that I did not understand at all. I also sneaked out a few books and hid myself underneath the blanket to read them with a torchlight as they were forbidden during the Cultural Revolution. Many books were ancient Chinese novels and I didn't understand much but I would just read them. They were printed not left to right but in the traditional form from top to bottom. The fonts were tiny and the lines were squeezed tightly together so I would use a ruler to try to separate the lines and read the books. This kind of avid reading helped me to get into the university when Chinese universities, after closing for ten years, began to admit students again through the National University Entrance Exam in 1977.

An interesting fact is that one of my English teachers believed that I had the talent to be a great student of English language and literature, and he insisted on coaching me to get into an English major at a university. Somehow, I bought into his story, and I spent some time studying with him but because I had no foundation in English I did very poorly during the national entrance exam. Still somehow, I got into the university, the top one in the province and I majored in English language and literature. This provided the conditions for me to move out of Asia and to come to study in the United States, and later become a faculty in Canada and then in the United States.

When I came to do my graduate study in the US, I had this burning question in my mind, that is, why people could be so cruel to each other? During the Cultural Revolution, I witnessed a lot of cruelty. My other neighbor whom I called Auntie Qin, was forced to stand on a table while she was 9-month pregnant, and people were screaming at her forcing her to confess her "crimes;" I saw tears streaming down from her face and my little heart felt her pain from the insult. I witnessed the young students, the so-called "Red Guards" putting people into pig cages, swirling them around, and flipping them in the air while people were shouting with excitement and anger at the people in the cage. I heard young people excitingly describing the big hole in the back of a musician who was shot for having been found to possess "secret anti-revolutionary documents" which turned out to be musical notes. Later, I heard more horror stories and I want to understand why people cannot respect each other and love each other. So, I studied with a philosopher who also had a doctoral degree in theology at the University of Michigan. I studied John Dewey and I looked at organizational and socialization theories to try to understand why young people like the Red Guards could suddenly become so violent and torture those people they knew and loved as their teachers, parents, and neighbors. I empathized with the suffering of the people, and I had the determination to finish my degree. So, I finished my doctoral degree in a short time, less than three years, with the great help of my advisor.

After receiving my degree, I landed a job at McGill University in Canada. I started my career as a young faculty teaching courses in comparative education, sociology of education, and gender and education, and I started to publish on many different topics. I learned to write in a certain scholarly manner, boxing myself into the norm of mind-based, objective, rational, and analytical thinking. I pushed really hard, writing for grants and publishing a book almost every year, and got promoted to associate professor ahead of the cohort. At this time, I started to feel very tired, also having two young children to take care of. I started to feel that my mind was very jammed and my stomach and eyes hurt all the time. Most importantly I felt like my creativity had dried up. I was wondering what kind of life I would lead. I had come to the west to seek knowledge in "advanced" countries; I had tried to learn the theories of different fields and fit into the role of a faculty and become a good parent, but I wondered if this was what life was all about. I had no interest in spirituality, and practically, I was thinking maybe my next moves in life would consist of changing into a bigger house, then getting promoted to full professor, and then I would become old, put in an ambulance, and life would be done. I was fulfilling a dream in the West, by trying to fit into what was considered the norms of success in the Western world.

Then a big turning point took place in my life, and this turning point changed the course of my life, taking me back to Asia, and allowing me to find who I truly am. I found that as an Asian person, I should live the philosophy of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and in fact all of the teachings of the world's spiritual traditions. The opening that was brought to me was meditation, a contemplative pathway that I took when I felt I was at an impasse in my career and life.

Hence, my turning point or the second phase of my career was an awareness that brought me back to Asia. The meditation I have since practiced for over 20 years comes from the Chinese tradition, but also incorporates other Southeast, South Asian, and indeed, world's spiritual traditions. It emphasizes breathing and visualization, but more importantly, the cultivation of virtues to align our mind and heart with the cosmic force, Dao. From the meditation, I became open to a whole new universe. I became aware of the vital energy in our life, called Qi in Chinese, in the world, and in the universe. Suddenly, I felt connected to all the forces in my environment, not only by the body but also by heart and spirit. Chinese philosophies came alive; world religions' teaching became real

and literal. I was brought to a lot of books and people, who gave me an explanation, or a new understanding of what I was experiencing. A series of books called *Conversation with God* really opened my horizons for understanding our integrated nature and life's purposes, and many books I read confirmed my new understanding that the universe is intelligent, and that there is a mechanism of virtues that coordinates all existence. In my new spiritual landscape, the solar system works harmoniously following the virtue mechanism, and so does human society. Without cooperation, the stars will collapse into each other; without love and care, humans will not survive. Nature became alive. Animals all became intelligent beings. I sensed their creative design and the spirit exuding from their personality. I sensed interbeing and interare. I learned that we have a higher Self, and love is the energy that governs the universe, the visible and invisible. I tried to learn as much as I could, and I felt I really understood the fundamental ideas of Eastern/Asian philosophies and spiritual traditions. I embraced my Asian identity from a fresh perspective, experiencing my Asian identity as a way of knowing and being. But also, I went beyond Asia and became a global and cosmic citizen. This is a journey to seek truth from a material-based western culture to finding self as internally inhabiting truth in an invisible realm of energy and spirit.

The third phase of my journey was that I felt so expanded in awareness and so deeply connected with everything and everybody, that I wanted to do something like what the Great Learning in Confucian classics discussed (Lin, 2018). The learning process went like this: I started meditation and got into a tranquil state; I felt anchored and had peace of heart; I started to sense and resonate with the universe, its joy, and suffering; eventually with the awareness that we belong to each other and we interare, I wanted to work for peace in the world because I worried about the situation in the world (Lin, 2018). Hence I started to teach courses on peace and environmental education; I established professional groups focusing on peace and holistic learning; I mentored students to work in peace education and sustainability education; I edited and wrote books and I gave numerous talks… I did these because I truly felt that we are all one family, and there is a universal structure that guides the working of the whole universe.

So, I am now in this phase where I'm fully Asian but I'm also fully global and cosmic; I feel interconnected with every being and everything, and everything that I do is embodied. I incorporate my mind, body, heart, spirit, and energy into all the work I do. I have come to the realization that our thoughts and intentions are energies, and we live in a vibrating universe, and that love is the most powerful energy, so when we love, we change the world.

## Correlating themes: "Asia as method" as a quest of the spirit and finding we-togetherness

Listening to each other's life stories, we realized that even though we grew up in different Asian countries during different geo-political eras, we shared similar turning points in our life as Asian (or Chinese heritage) educators working in North America. These turning points are points of ontological and epistemological changes. They took place as the result of our decision to leave Asia for North America and our choice to re-engage Eastern/Asian knowledges in our educational work. Each turning point turned us away from a limited, isolated, and egoistic sense of self. Each turning allowed us to reconnect with Asia; develop alternative frames of reference within our psyche, subjectivity, and worldview; and live out our "best-loved self" (Craig, 2013), without our selves succumbing to an obsession with Western knowledges and the division of body, mind, heart, and spirit, and the division of humans and nature so characterized Western cultures and colonial mindsets. In the next section, we look more deeply into those turning points in our life to derive correlating themes. In the concluding section, we discuss these emerging themes and explore their relevance to educational scholars and practitioners.

### Phase 1: Leaving home looking for western mind and heart

Both of us left Asia driven by a belief that there was something superior in Western knowledge that we ought to learn from. In Yishin's case, studying in an international school founded by a German school reformer opened her eyes to an experiential way of learning and a sense of cosmopolitanism that she had never experienced before in Malaysia. She came to see Chinese knowledge as parochial and local without universal values. To become an active global citizen was to be educated in Western institutions and immersed in progressive and liberal Western thoughts. Her parents' decision to immigrate to Canada eventually firmed her mind to pursue an undergraduate degree in Canada.

Jing, on the other hand, regarded the Chinese environment she grew up in as "backward" technologically and culturally, so she wanted to get a good education and a great future from her education in the West. The violence of the Cultural Revolution rocked her to the core, and she thought that solutions for peace would come from Western democracy and the more advanced Western way of thinking. During her doctoral study in the U.S., she continued

to be impressed by Asian authors who harshly criticized East Asian cultures and especially Confucian culture as completely backward denying the self and killing individualities. In this period, she denied her cultural self and saw the West as the center of progressive thoughts. She believed that social goodness comes from institutions that put people at the center, and life was a short journey in which one climbed stages of hierarchies through personal striving.

### Phase 2: Heart on the margin while the western mind dominates

In the West, both of us studied hard like most others and became very competitive without really asking what our heart was telling us. For Jing, she learned to see the world as a mechanism, nature as resources, and education as providing tools for the mind to control nature. She embraced the Western mindset which is positivistic, separating the inner and the outer world. And she was fulfilling the capitalist values for life success and did not question whether they led to the realization of our higher Self. In Jing's words:

> I thought I was exercising critical thinking in my teaching and research, but seldom did I spend time looking inward to see how we could change ourselves and the world fundamentally to be more equal and peaceful. I remember when I was little, I thought about where we would go after we die, and the thought of becoming completely nothing scared me. I shut down any thoughts about this question after that. I had chosen to avoid the most fundamental existential question.

Yishin resonated with Jing's experience. When studying in Canada and the U.S., she continued to see her education as a means to competing, succeeding, and surviving in a world of scarcity and lack. Her mind was wired to see the lack in herself and the lack in society—a habit of mind she later associated with the symptoms of capitalism that ended up reaching different corners of the globe through colonialism (Bhambra, 2020). Yishin believed that life is a struggle for a dignified existence, so she became busily involved in all sorts of community projects promoting recognition, representation, and redistribution to make sure that she and others from different marginalized groups can live a better life in a broken world. But interestingly, doing more social justice projects, pursuing more critical theories, and earning more degrees, did not address the feeling of lack (often turned into feelings of restlessness, despair, anxiety, anger, and resentment) she experienced in her. While busy understanding the reality of society she forgot to turn inward and understand the reality that is going on within herself, the fact that there is not much stability and capacity within her to listen to her own voice and suffering.

### Phase 3: "Asia as a method" taking on lived, embodied meaning through contemplative practices

Under the support of teachers, friends, and family members, both of us returned to Asia physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually to re-center Asia in our knowing and being while continuing our work in North America. In Yishin's case, upon returning from her job placement in post-disaster Sri Lanka and experiencing the life of Sri Lankan youth, she became a student of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and started re-engaging Chinese philosophies—Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism—in her daily life through the practices of mindfulness and meditation. She learned from elders in Thich Nhat Hanh's Engaged Buddhist tradition (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000) ways of building beloved communities where diverse people can develop siblinghood, rediscover and restore their cultural strengths, and practice for the transformation and healing of self and society (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2002). She also learned to develop mindful discernment that allowed her to recognize, understand and transform sufferings within her and around her. Over time, she realized that one of the biggest differences between Western and Chinese theories of knowledge is that the latter emphasizes the knowledge of metaphysical reality, in particular, how one's knowledge could lead to the attainment of wisdom, i.e., the understanding of ultimate reality, embodied in terms like "Dao" in Daoism and "emptiness" in Chinese Mahayana Buddhism ("Chinese philosophy: Metaphysics and epistemology", 2022). Different from the Western understanding of wisdom which has a stronger focus on intelligence, traditional Chinese wisdom has a moral dimension and cannot be achieved through the eradication of mystery, predictive validity; an assumption of rectilinear time; anthropocentrism; Cartesian dualism; reductionism (in most cases); and quantification, which characterize Eurocentric ways of knowing (Aikenhead & Ogawa, 2007). In her experience, wisdom/insight into ultimate reality can only be sought through holistic thinking, intuitive perception, and inner self transformation (Wang et al., 2021). Contemplative practices like meditation, qigong, tai chi, yoga, and chanting are Asian methods that cultivate the heart, mind, body, and spirit. When practiced individually and collectively, they can help one to search for meanings and wisdom in life.

For Jing, engaging in contemplative practices from the Eastern traditions of Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, Asian cultures come back alive, and enter her heart and soul. An effort on the body (she started meditation mainly to lose weight) opens up the heart and spirit. Asia as method takes on embodied meaning, helping her to gain heightened awareness that allows her to see how we have been colonized in the mind and heart of materialism, capitalism, and scientism, neglecting the profound meaning and purpose of life.

Incorporating the new understanding of self and the world, Jing found that the Eastern way of knowing does not come from the point of view of an atomic self, rather the self is a continuum, connected to family, community, country, all living things in nature, and the universe. We are all linked by Qi, the primordial energy that creates the universe. We are not separate beings but are linked spiritually and energetically, by a mechanism of virtue which we name as love, compassion, cooperation, and reconciliation (Culham & Lin, 2020).

### Phase 4: Convergence—integrating body, mind, heart, and spirit; integrating east and west; inhabiting the world and acting from a place of interconnectedness

Practicing meditation and traditional wisdom of Asia has been a key turning point for both Yishin and Jing while working abroad in North America. It allows us to resist Cartesian dualistic thinking and integrate both the West and the East, the inner and the outer, self and collective, including non-human species, in our consciousness, and find a sense of home anywhere in the world as we are grounded in our authentic inner selves. Critical syncretism (Chen, 2010), or the practice of becoming others who are more marginalized in society, becomes possible when we see ourselves and the "others" as interconnected and non-separate. What happens to the poor affects all of us. As we see more deeply into ourselves and our conditionings under the forces of colonialism and capitalism, we recognize that the seeds of violence, greed, and ignorance are all alive in us and there is no such dualism as the colonizers vs. the colonized, imperialists vs. non-imperialists. We are all equal in that we have all been affected by the history of the world and the harmful impact of globalization and modernization. Depending on our environment and the societies we are in, the unwholesome seeds we have inherited from the past will manifest and affect ourselves and society. What is important for us is to be aware of the ongoing colonization and various forms of exploitation that are still happening in the world, stop and reject them, and transform all the negative seeds we have inherited from our ancestors—both Asian and non-Asian—and decolonize our heart and mind, so that our selves do not become the problem in the world. Through opening our hearts, shedding labels, and letting go of our habitual, often incorrect, perceptions and interpretations of reality, we become much more aware of who we are as interconnected earth citizens and cosmic citizens. This is the Asian knowledge or reference point we strive to bring to our educational work and spaces, whether we are in Asia or outside of Asia.

At our current workplace, we have tried to integrate the East and the West, our body, mind, heart, and spirit, while working towards de-colonization, de-imperialization, and de-cold war from a place of integrity, We-ness, and interconnectedness. This is not an easy endeavor for both of us, but the door that is once opened will not close again. For Jing, she now sees life as an integral process. Her work, her life all have an inherent, underlying purpose. She is now here to learn and share. Seeing all people and things as sacred spirits and energy, depending on each other and supporting each other allows a new way to engage in the world, and she hopes to help decolonize the world. She works with Indigenous peoples to help decolonize higher education, being a core member of an Indigenous people and higher education alliance. She publishes articles that call for ecological justice and love for nature. Daily she realizes how much of what she has come from the work of others and the blessing of nature. She feels embarrassed about how little she can pay back. She is also seeing a merge of Western science with spirituality, debunking the universe and nature as unconscious, and she is learning avidly.

For Yishin, an important component of her pedagogy focuses on connecting different epistemic communities (Western, Indigenous, Eastern) within and beyond Turtle Island (colonially known as North America) where university educators, school teachers, and community partners can engage in reciprocal learning and collaboration while multiplying our frames of references to strengthen school education and teacher education for more regenerative and sustainable futures (Connelly & Xu, 2019; Khoo, 2017, 2022; Xu & Connelly, 2017). She continues to look for relevant and practical ways of engaging Asian wisdom traditions and contemplative practices in classrooms to address imperialist inequality and capitalist materialism that characterize Western modernity. This includes promoting intercultural knowledge collaboration and knowledge communities where learners and educators of diverse backgrounds and nationalities can work together to go beyond Euro-centric ways of knowing, transform colonial habits of being, and interweave different knowledge systems in our lifestyles and learning inquiries.

## Discussion and conclusion: Incorporating and transcending Asia as method

As we approached the end of our dialogues and inquiries, we were once again intrigued by how easy and tempting it was for us, at the beginning of our academic journey in North America, to use Western knowledge as our sole frame of reference when trying to find answers and solutions to our often Asian related educational puzzles and dilemmas. Ng, (2018), an Asian scholar who brought Chinese TCM and Qigong practices to the academy, used Fanon's work on the psychological dimension of colonization and Gramsci's notion of hegemony to explain why scholars tend to normalize dominant ways of being and act in ways that sustain and

reproduce structures of violence. According to Ng, once the colonized internalizes the ideas and behavior of the colonizer and acts, or regulates herself, according to the norms of colonial society and once hegemonic ideas become common sense, they are condensed in our emotional and physical beings. Unless we examine our bodily experiences and patterns of behavior objectively, without attachment, guilt, and judgment, it is hard for us to change.

In our experience, learning to objectively examine our bodily experiences—e.g., thoughts and emotions—as well as patterns of behavior and habits takes practice and time. While applying critical reflexivity (Ryan & Walsh, 2018) in our educational research and practices has allowed us to become more aware of ourselves vis à vis others within certain contextual and historical processes and power dynamics, we found that this exercise mostly engaged our intellect and did not tap into our deeper, embodied understanding of interconnectedness and interbeing and our yearning for a sense of (epistemological) balance, wholeness and wellbeing in the academy. It was only when we started examining different aspects of our being/bodies through contemplative practices, especially Eastern meditation techniques, that we experienced the most transformative ontological and epistemological changes in our life. Through meditation, we learned to observe, accept, trust, and use our bodily but also spiritual experiences as reference points to listen to and examine our Asian selves, understand and heal childhood traumas entangled with the legacy of Western modernity and coloniality in Asia, overcome separations between our bodies and Earth bodies, and transform ourselves. It was our increased ability to experience reality in a larger context (e.g. the reality of the interconnectedness) and transform our narrow vision of life, pains, trauma, and sense of lack through contemplative inquiries and meditation that ultimately gave us the courage and confidence to return to our Asian roots, transform ourselves, and contribute to epistemological diversity and transformation in the academy.

Chen (2010) mentioned that the goal of "Asia as method" is to de-imperialize Western narratives and allow Asian societies and individuals to find their own anchoring points again. He showed how by using "Asia as method," the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilized to provide alternative horizons and perspectives to advance a different understanding of world history, transform the understanding of the self and rebuild subjectivity. We argue that the transformation pathway we have followed, while engaging Asian historical experiences and social practices, is actually an inner path that is universal among all societies, that is, the search is ultimately an inner search for our true self, for true knowledge. For both of us, this begins with training ourselves methodologically to look at everything with a lens of interconnection, openness, and gentleness; removing wrong perceptions of ourselves and the world (e.g. seeing ourselves as separate from others and the earth); letting go of the accumulation of intellectual knowledge, and looking deeply into life inside us and around us in each moment of our daily life, not shying away from facing and transforming pain and suffering within and outside ourselves. Miller (2006) called this transformation pathway "timeless learning," a kind of powerful learning that all educators can bring to their classroom through undergoing inner work, being fully present, honoring silence, developing a rhythm, remembering the body, living our truth, acknowledging mystery and letting humanity come through. Since everyone, Asian and non-Asians, can experience timeless learning, we believe that what we have used as methods can be relevant for educators from different ethnic backgrounds, including Anglo-European ancestries. Without prisoning ourselves in the past, the future, and present worries and thinking, we can start turning inward, listening to, and examining all aspects of ourselves. Individuals could start seeing what is true to them, paying attention to the voices of their ancestors, re-searching their own indigenous or ancestral histories and traditions, healing intergenerational pains and trauma resulting from discriminative and partial understandings of themselves and others, and taking actions that do not reproduce structures of violence and oppression. In the process, they may discover their own method to undertake deimperialization movement and widen decolonization movement, especially in the domains of psyche, culture and knowledge production (Chen, 2010, p. vii).

We are currently living in multiple crises—health, climate, economic, and racial. We are also facing the catastrophic consequence of a world more divided than ever, of global species extinction, of the loss of traditional knowledges, and of wars and conflicts. How do we find a way to live in peace with each other and in love with nature? Where do we find a balance of working with the world we live in, not exploiting it but co-existing?

We believe that "Asia as method," with its task to multiply frames of references in our subjectivity and worldview, can offer a lot of insight for achieving the balance. However, this will require educators and scholars to go beyond a regional and intellectual interpretation of "Asia" and see "Asia as method" as a quest of the spirit and finding we-togetherness in a segregated and divided world. This positions "Asia as method" as a method to attain wisdom and seek truth not as an abstract, but as specific, concrete, and embodied knowledge, understood in a larger context that transcends disciplinary and geopolitical boundaries. From our perspectives as Chinese/American/Canadian educators, it necessarily goes beyond asking a question like "what is the truth" central to Western philosophy to finding other ways of seeking truth, such as enquiring about how to be true "—how as educators, we can behave in a true manner in the world by following the Dao or the proper path," and how to make true "how we

can extend this path for oneself and others" (Hall, 2001). As we try to embody truth and make truth, we learn that we are not above, or even equal to, nature; we interare. We interexist with all people and species. Without love for all existence and wisdom to know our place in the universe, our scientific and technological advances could only lead to devastating consequences. The buildup of weapons of mass destruction, the spending of trillions of dollars on military competition, the signs of climate change are all indicators that we need a fundamental remaking and transformation of who we are. If there is Asia as method, for us it is about exploring and unearthing the treasure we have within. We need to put our being into the cosmic consciousness of unity and interdependence. We need wisdom to know what we do comes back to us, and that we are all linked, so no one can hope that he or she could be well while many others are suffering. Compassion and love are to be treated as the highest skills we should learn and practice. All of these require tuning to our selves, our vital life energy, and our innermost purpose living on this earth.

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