

Conversing about ‘self-creation,’ ‘the third space,’ and ‘harmony/control’: an essay review of *The Call from the Stranger on a Journey Home* by Hongyu Wang

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Introduction

In *The Call from the Stranger on a Journey Home*, Hongyu Wang interweaves her own biography, memories, cultural stories and questioning as a woman who travels between China and the U.S., together with her thoughts on the works of Michel Foucault, Confucius, and Julia Kristeva, to meditate on the notions of ‘self,’ ‘home,’ and ‘difference.’ Through this process, Wang articulates a theory of ‘curriculum in a third space,’ with implications for an ethics of teaching.

In excavating the instability of the meanings of commonplace notions of ‘self’ and ‘home’ through her own personal journey, Wang’s project is highly relevant to contemporary biographies and consciousness. By trying to articulate what happens to us when we go on journeys – whether physical, biographical, psychic, and/or intellectual – Wang helps us find nurturing ways to bridge the many ‘differences’ we encounter along the way.

Reflection and refraction

The intellectual and personal struggles that Wang recounts in her book (whose lyrical title we shall henceforth refer to for convenience as ‘*The Call*’) present strong echoes for us, the two authors of this review, who, like Wang, are both women of ethnic Chinese descent who have traveled to the U.S. to study and work in higher education.

Yen Yen Woo, first author, left her home country of Singapore in 1998 to pursue a doctorate in education at Teachers College in Columbia University in New York. She is now an Assistant Professor at Long Island University, where she teaches courses in Curriculum Development and Social Foundations of Education. Dengting Boyanton, second author, left Beijing, China in 2001 to study at the University of Virginia, and has just joined Long Island University, where she teaches Psychological Foundations of Education. Like Wang, we both teach students who are very different from ourselves in terms of race, ethnicity, lived experience and political commitments.

In view of the similarities in the our biographies, ethnic affiliations and languages, but also because of the significant differences in our lived histories, individual journeys and the intellectual traditions in which we have been immersed, we felt it might be illuminating to review *The Call* in the form of a conversation with each other. We have never had any in-depth discussions about our different fields and approaches to education, even though we work across the hallway from each other. We decided to read *The Call* together, write our individual responses, and then engage with each other’s thoughts on, specifically: Wang’s discussion of Foucault and the idea of ‘self-creation’; Kristeva and the concept of ‘the third space’; and the question of harmony or control in Confucius. Thereafter, we conclude our



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review with a few thoughts on the trans-national and trans-cultural voices that Wang has used in the writing of the text, as well as our reflections on how to speak to and across our similarities and differences in this conversation with each other.

Early in the book, Hongyu Wang (2004) invites and challenges the reader 'to bear with [her] through this difficult journey, struggling to make sense of multiple cultural traditions, and thereby envisioning curriculum differently' (p. 20). Conversing through our similarities and differences, we hope to 'make sense of' and query our own and each other's interpretive frameworks. This review thus constitutes a kind of transnational curriculum inquiry, pulled together by similar transnational biographies and a concern that pedagogies should focus on what is 'educational' for students, yet sustained in tension by our multiple differences.

Foucault and self-creation

Dengting:

Wang begins her theoretical survey by introducing Foucault's self-care theory to emphasize that the meaning of the self is to achieve one's own maximal creativity, which Foucault calls 'self-creation.' Based on Foucault's principle of self-care, Wang argues that one should actively take charge of one's life, think for oneself, take good care of oneself (both one's body and soul), and develop a new self based on one's experience and ability (p. 25).

On the basis of Foucault's concept of the 'aesthetic self,' Wang asserts that the goal of self-care and self-creation is to make the self (body, behavior, spirits, feelings) as beautiful as a piece of art. 'Aesthetic' here does not mean that a person should be beautiful in the literal sense, but to achieve one's fullest potential. Take the body, for example, we should take care of our bodies by exercising, eating properly, and having a routine so that the body can be in its best condition. The same applies to our soul. We should frequently take care of our souls by reflecting, questioning, cleansing our foul ideas, strengthening our will, being kind to others, and developing good qualities (p. 25). Wang is concerned, however, that Foucault's ideas may be too extreme in that he encourages the individual to develop the self to the extent of transgressing against the social system. Particularly, Wang takes issue with Foucault's glorification of criminal behavior such as murdering and raping (p. 26).

As a developmental psychologist who is interested in how we as human beings develop psychologically in a healthy and productive way, I am particularly attracted by this concept of self-creation. I believe that the purpose of education is not just to pass the knowledge to our students, but also to guide them become better human beings who are able to think critically, think for themselves, and discover/create a new self. This world is still full of problems as well as opportunities. I agree with Foucault that in order to become a useful individual, one cannot just passively or submissively follow social norms. Otherwise, one will never fully develop his true self or make a real difference in society. Only when one is sufficiently courageous to challenge the norm and question authority, are creation and progress possible.

However, although I like Foucault's idea of self-care and self-creation, I do share Wang's concerns. I am afraid that Foucault's 'enthusiasms for something completely new' (p. 47) and becoming 'absolute other' (p. 47) may be too extreme. I agree with Wang that law is not necessarily bad and it actually provides certain protections for individuals (p. 47). In fact, if wisely used, the social system can be beneficial for self-care and self-creation (p. 77).

Yen Yen:

For me, coming from Singapore, where the education system has been regarded by many in the country as being overly stressful and being overly focused on gaining the correct



academic credentials (Woo, 2008), Foucault's message of self-care against the ways that society disciplines us to be is initially very attractive and liberating. Like Wang, I am troubled by any uncritical embrace of Foucault's language of the 'care of the self' (p. 39), but for a different reason. The language of the care and transformation of the self has also been used within neoliberal discourse for the construction of the neoliberal self (see McGee, 2005; Ong, 1999; Rose, 1999), where the locus for development is conceptualized as being within the self. Works such as Micki McGee's *Self-Help, Inc.* (2005) point out how there is now an entire self-help industry that capitalizes on this very message of the possibility of self-transformation, self re-creation, and working on the body and behavior as an artist would work on his/her material. In curriculum reform in Singapore, it becomes attractive to implement 'critical thinking' and 'creative thinking' classes in schools, focusing on the development of individual selves that can be re-created to become 'entrepreneurial' selves aligned with the needs of a new economy, whilst the school system continues to separate students into somewhat segregated life-worlds, where students' access to cultural and social capital have significant impact on their access to more or less desirable educational tracks or streams (Woo, 2008). Absent in this construction is the self in relation to others, the self as a citizen. In this 'century of the self' (Curtis, 2002), where commercial marketing and policy messages are deliberately constructed to ascribe personal desires, 'care of the self' itself, when embraced uncritically, can become, in Foucauldian terms (1990, 1995), another disciplinary discourse.

Kristeva and the third space

Yen Yen:

Kristeva provides Wang with a more balanced understanding of the self. Wang learns from Kristeva neither to define herself against nor to embrace limitations and strangeness, but to 'take exile, strangeness, and foreignness' as a site of creation (p. 10). While Foucault focuses on the 'surrendering' of the self defined by social and cultural limits in order to 'transform' it (p. 35), Kristeva, for Wang, points to the less dramatic 'intimate revolt' (p. 110), eschewing the simplistic binary of self/other to see differences within herself, with important pedagogical implications for teaching students that we perceive to be strangers to ourselves.

I found the following statement particularly significant for understanding what happens to teachers who are able to work through the silences, resistances and perceived failures in their interactions with students who are different from themselves:

The pedagogical act of working through failures provokes and invites the teacher's own psychic transformation. In this relational noncoincidence of encountering the unknown in students (and ourselves), we as educators are called upon to reach out of ourselves in our im/possible meeting with students so that pedagogical potentialities can be realized for us all (p. 110).

Wang talks about this transformation of the Self and Other without giving up either as happening in 'a loving third space—both psychic and social' (p. 110). Herein lies Wang's central motif, which is also in the title of the book: 'curriculum in a third space.'

Dengting:

Similar to Wang, I myself had also struggled with this 'third space' issue a great deal as an immigrant from China. I still remember how proud I was of my Chinese ethnicity when I first



moved to the U.S. in 2001. I was constantly fighting against American culture and resisting being Americanized. I felt very disappointed when people (both Chinese and Americans) told me that I was very Americanized. They saw this in my way of talking and walking—what Wang describes as a ‘relational individuality’ change (p. 76). Learning about the ‘loving third space’ (p. 110) made me realize that I do not have to give up either Self (Chinese) or Other (American). I do not have to over-protect my Chinese identity, nor do I have to feel disappointed about being Americanized either. I should not resist American culture but should experience, explore, embrace, and learn from it. It should be an advantage or even a privilege rather than a shame to be familiar with both cultures, to learn from both, and thus to ‘generate a new self of relational individuality’ (p. 76). As the old Chinese saying says: stagnant water becomes stinky, running water stays fresh.

Yen Yen:

Like Dengting, I began my life in a different country. But, I have always experienced ethnic and national identities as contextual and fluid. ‘American,’ ‘Chinese,’ and ‘Singaporean’ are signifiers without fixed referents. In Singapore, I am identified as a Chinese Singaporean; in China and to my Chinese neighbor in Flushing, New York, I am ‘wai di ren’ (someone from the outer lands); in the U.S., I look Chinese but sound a little British (because Singapore used to be a British colony and we retain British pronunciation). I am also perpetually suspicious of feelings of pride about belonging to a certain group, as the political leadership in various countries, including the U.S., Singapore and China, has used the discourse of national pride and a sense of patriotism as a tool for managing dissent. Feelings of national pride are, to me, based on managed and mythologized pasts and futures (Shapiro, 2000), producing memories of heroes, victories and struggles selectively while simultaneously erasing or forgetting inconvenient events, characters and narratives (Popkewitz, 2000, p. 167).

Dengting:

I find it interesting that although Yen Yen and I both identify ourselves as Chinese, and we both came to American at an adult age, our attitudes towards our identity were different. While Yen Yen is uncertain whether she should feel proud of her Singaporean Chinese identity or not, I feel very proud of being Chinese, and fought very hard to protect it after my arrival in the U.S. The question is: *why?* Is it because of the differing historical and political experiences of our two countries? I wonder if the history of Singapore (being a colony of Britain) made Yen Yen’s Singaporean Chinese identity less strong than my Chinese identity? The fact that I had a ‘fixed’ ethnic self while Yen Yen has a ‘fluid’ self is intriguing to me. According to Wang, the self is the base and is also necessary to ‘renew one’s relationship both with oneself and with others’ (p. 26). I wonder how this difference in our ethnic selves affects our journey of self-development in America.

Yen Yen:

It is not that I am ‘uncertain’ of whether I should feel ‘proud’ of my Singaporean Chinese identity. It is that I find all identities – whether ‘Singaporean Chinese’ or ‘American’ – to be fluid and manufactured concepts, which can operate to exclude as much as they can include.

But Dengting reminds me that no matter how I intellectually eschew static categories of identity as constructions, we all experience the desire to be in communication with others like ourselves on a daily basis. For example, I feel quite at home in Flushing, Queens, in New York in large part because of the preponderance of Asian people, cuisines, and stores, which is at once a manifestation of ‘Chinese-ness’ and ‘American’ immigrant culture. There are many immigrant parents who desire to send their children to charter schools with students of

similar ethnic and cultural affiliations because it provides some comfort (Rimer, 2009). I have also been moved by the demonstration of the 'American' mantra of possibilities for any one with the election of the first African-American president. This seems to describe what Stuart Hall calls the 'both the necessity and 'impossibility' of identities' (cited in Ang, 2000, p.2).

Within this context, I understand Wang's invocation of 'the third space' not as a permanent new state but those moments when our various constructed and experienced categories of identity are transcended and we see each other, and ourselves outside of these categories. Questions of 'who am I?' and 'who are you?' become less important than the questions of: how do our stories echo each other? What do others' stories tell us about what we have missed in our own?

Dengting:

Yen Yen's experience with her ethnic identity mirrors very well with Wang's self in 'the third space,' where the self is fluid and continues to grow and develop as one experiences new things in different contexts. As Yen Yen mentioned, Stuart Hall's statement of how identity is both the 'necessity' and the 'impossibility' is a perfect summary of the self in 'the third space.'

Reflecting on my own journey, I believe my personal struggle with the 'third space' crisis is not just an individual struggle but also a national one. Historically and politically, China had a strong sense of self as a nation and strived to instill this sense of pride in its citizens, as clearly manifested in me when I first arrived in the U.S. This 'fixed' identity has caused great clashes as China has become more and more heavily influenced by Western culture, especially American culture (e.g., music, language, culture, architecture, food, business, literature, clothes). China is currently experiencing a cultural crisis. Many Chinese are worried that if we keep absorbing American culture like this, China will lose its own identity. How should we deal with this 'identity crisis?' Or is it really a 'crisis' in the first place? Again, Wang's concept of 'third space' provides great insight for us. On the one hand, China is moving in a new direction towards America by bringing diversity (e.g., allowing different kinds of culture and style to co-exist with each other) to the attention of the public. On the other hand, China will not lose its identity or become America. China's dance in the third space between these two cultures 'has its own unique style,' which is different from that of America (p. 78).

Yen Yen:

Talking about a country uniformly in the psychological terms of achieving its 'identity' is difficult for me because different groups of citizens experience this journey of change differently. For some, the tension of economic 'progress' is framed as being between being Chinese and American, for others it might be between capitalism and socialism, or between the rich and the poor, or the politically connected and those without political connections. Each framing has political implications, privileging certain voices over others.

How do we talk across our differences, our different framings of national identity, change, our problems and their solutions? Wang talks about how, when we communicate through stories and narratives (the semiotic rather than the symbolic), rather than begin from static categories of identity, we are more likely to find what Wang calls, 'harmony in differences'. This is particularly important for teacher education within a political context where ideologues and ideologies call out for an individual's identification. For instance, I keep finding in the teacher education classes that I teach in the U.S., how the labels of being left/right, from a blue/red state, liberal/conservative, Democrat/Republican, urban/suburban, pro-war/anti-war, often have the effect of shutting down meaningful dialogue. Instead, Wang



calls for teacher education classrooms to be spaces of education beyond these seemingly irreconcilable differences and to be spaces where we dare to listen to each other and engage in dialogue. She wants us to utilize and not resist silences and clashes, and not to be completely debilitated by them, but to respond with ‘compassionate intelligence’ (p. 176) and to have ‘an unyielding pedagogical faith in students’ potential for change’ (p. 178). This is an important call for educators to commit themselves to making a ‘polyphonic curriculum,’ i.e. one where teachers/students seek less to convert students/teachers to their point of view, but more on building a democratic classroom where consideration of everyone’s differences helps both teachers and students on their individual and collective journeys:

In a polyphonic curriculum ... harmony in differences is also needed to promote a communal inquiry with the trust that, however different we might be, we still can connect with one another. In such an inquiry, students are more willing to journey into new territories, unafraid of mistakes or dead ends. And so are teachers (p. 175).

I recall a recent incident in my teacher education classroom, which is predominantly middle-class and white. A teacher had asked how to address the topic of death in her elementary classroom, which is located in a poor, urban and mainly African-American neighborhood, where children see and hear about deaths regularly. Several students objected to talk about death in their classrooms, citing reasons such as sensitivity, religion, protecting the innocence of children, and the differences between ‘those children’ and ‘our children.’ The conversation took a different turn when a white suburban mom revealed how grateful she was when her child contracted a deadly illness, that the child’s teacher engaged the class in a frank discussion on death and illness, and enabled her classmates to ask questions in their own terms, such as ‘Will her hair grow back?’ A number of the students in this teacher education class were then able to engage in the kind of ‘communal inquiry’ through narrative that Wang talks about, by recalling the stories of death in their own families and in the families of the children in their classrooms, when some of us had assumed previously that it did not happen to ‘our children’ and therefore could not be addressed in the curriculum.

Dengting:

Like Yen Yen, I am also fascinated by the concept of a ‘polyphonic curriculum.’ It is my strong belief that Wang’s implementation of the ‘curriculum in the third space’ will bring some fundamental changes to our current educational system in the U.S. Wang’s curriculum in the ‘third space’ reminds us that learning is a process, is on-going, is open-ended, is an inquiry, is individual, is about understanding and creating (p. 156) and not memorization or finding the correct answer. The ‘third space’ raises our awareness of the purpose of education, which is not about memorization, high test scores, or obtaining educational degrees, but understanding, inquiring, critical thinking, sense of responsibility, and citizenship (p. 158).

Curriculum in the ‘third space’ also reinforces student-centered pedagogy by stressing the importance of teachers’ understanding students’ thoughts, perspectives, backgrounds, and cultures (p. 162). After all, our education is about the student. In order for students to learn, we have to really listen to them, know them, understand them, and find ways to reach them or to guide them to learn. Curriculum in the ‘third space’ draws a beautiful picture of how teachers and students co-teach and co-learn together by engaging in an interactive, on-going, and ever-changing process (p. 180).

Yen Yen:

I am, however, uncomfortable with any invocation of ‘harmony,’ as it is ultimately utopian and impracticable. In my classroom, I regularly come across instances where identity



categories are momentarily transcended, but I have rarely, if ever, encountered fluid narratives of deliverance and transformation. As Elizabeth Ellsworth (1994, 1997) reminds us, all of us, whether teachers or students, continue to be engaged in relations and practices of domination, even in a classroom that prioritizes critical pedagogy and dialogue. In the example I raised earlier, did I recognize the situation as ‘communal inquiry’ because the discussion about death in the curriculum was moving in a direction I wanted it to? I cannot help but wonder what I would have thought if the discussion had instead moved away from my own inclinations; would I still recognize it as ‘harmony,’ ‘communal inquiry,’ or the enactment of a ‘polyphonic curriculum’?

Confucius: harmony or control?

Dengting:

Through exploring Confucius’ ideas on human relationships, Wang further examines the ‘third space’ between the self and the society. Wang sees Confucius’ emphasis on ‘harmony’ in the self-society relationship as an emphasis on the importance of the individual serving the society. In spite of the primacy given to society, Wang argues that Confucius also encouraged individualism through the form of self-cultivation. The goal of self-cultivation is to become a noble man (*junzi*), who is supposed to be righteous, rationale, calm, and wise. The noble man is supposed to stand by his principles even when the whole society is corrupt or his own life or family is endangered. Thus, Wang argues, the Confucian self is not completely subsumed by its social duties but is, in fact, encouraged to develop independently of the society, which it, nevertheless, continues to serve (p. 58).

Yen Yen:

Wang’s discussion of Confucianist teachings is especially intriguing to me, as I hail originally from Singapore, whose political leadership has come to espouse an interpretation of Confucianism that emphasizes control and order (see Zakaria, 1994). Wang explains this neo-Confucianism, but also quotes from *The Analects* to discuss how Confucianist thought emphasizes ‘harmony’ and not ‘conformity,’ and argues that accordingly, it is right for the individual to ‘criticize the ruler’ when the ruler ‘deviates from the way’ (p. 60). Thus, she notes how Confucius’ original conception of harmony never precluded critique, yet, through neo-Confucianism, it has become ‘a dogma which has suppressed individual freedom’ (p. 55).

Dengting:

I found Wang’s argument on how Confucius encourages independence interesting but unconvincing. It is true that Confucian thought emphasizes ‘harmony’ and not ‘conformity,’ and even encourages individuals to ‘criticize the ruler’ if he ‘deviates from the way’ (p. 60). However, if one reads closely, one can see that the purpose of personal cultivation was to develop individuals who would do the socially correct thing and support a harmonious social order:

When the person is cultivated, the family life can be regulated. When the family life is regulated, the State can be rightly governed. When the State is rightly governed, the whole world can be made peaceful (p. 58).

According to Confucius, individuals are supposed to be governed, regulated, and cultivated. There is always a ‘right’ way to guide individual behavior, and the individual is not encouraged to discover and develop a unique true self as in Foucault’s concept of self-

creation. Therefore, in many ways, the purpose of Confucian personal cultivation is more about the individual better fitting into society and better serving society. The essence of the Confucian self is to behave and interact properly in different contexts. In this sense, I believe Confucian personal cultivation is more about how a person can be cultivated so that family can be easily regulated, the state can be easily governed, and the world can be in order. This, I believe, is the key feature which distinguishes Confucian personal cultivation from Foucault's self-creation.

Wang's voice/s

Yen Yen:

The Call contributes significantly to the field of curriculum studies as it demonstrates a new way of doing thoughtful and situated transnational curriculum comparisons. What I find particularly intriguing is how Wang's perspective presents us with an East-West perspective that is neither imperialistic, nor colonized, nor post-colonial. These categories cannot describe her perspective because her comparison of the theories of the East and the West never comes from the simplistic understanding of an insider or an outsider, which might sometimes veer towards either over-romanticizing or being overly critical. Rather, Wang is simultaneously a local and a foreigner, in both the U.S. and China. Always hovering over her analysis is what Benedict Anderson calls, the 'spectre of comparisons' (1998), a sense of seeing places and things simultaneously in the now and seeing through the experiences, ghosts and stories from far away, both having equal power over her consciousness.

The following extracts show the difference between Wang's struggle with language and sentiments about the English language, and those of postcolonial literary greats like R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, who have both mastered the English language yet seem to manifest an unease in so doing:

We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as a part of us. English both is and isn't 'an alien language'; it is the language of Indians' 'intellectual make-up' but not of 'their emotional make-up' (Narayan, 1988, p. 53)

One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before- but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians (Rao, 1938).

Chinese words and English words mingle together, mostly English words, since I have learned to think in English. Reading what I have written down, I feel Chinese and English fit together nicely, while translation is impossible and not necessary. Chinese comes out naturally when English fails me. English commands me with its own structure and rhythm, but it is more like a game. Before I finish my practice, though, I am back to the World, in which I must express myself either in Chinese or in English. In my mind, however, the two languages are already mingled, sometimes in honeymoon, sometimes in conflict, with, unsurprisingly, many English grammatical errors (Wang, 2004, p. 113, italics author's own).



While the postcolonial sentiment of those like Rao and Narayan is an assertion against the colonizers – a distinction between ‘my’ thinking and ‘their’ thinking – Wang demonstrates a sensibility that positions East and West and English and Chinese equally, and equally problematic as well. There are no barriers to referring to Chinese and Western academic and literary writers, as well as to writing in different forms. It demonstrates what McCarthy calls, ‘a kind of poetics of a curriculum without borders’ (1998, p. 26).

There is no center and no periphery. It is a perspective that leads us to see across national borders, to de-center our canon of scholars and literary writers, parsed through one’s personal journey. It is also a pragmatic position. Throughout the book, Wang seems to be less concerned about being angry about inequalities or being an insider/outsider than she is about the sustainability of a critical pedagogical practice. Throughout the text, Wang’s concern seems to be with being ‘back to the World’ and engaging with her students again the next day.

Dengting:

Although I highly recommend this book to all administrators, school principals, and teachers, I do, however, have some reservations about it. When I was reading the book, I couldn’t help asking myself: What is the purpose of this book? Who is the intended audience? Is it intended to reach anyone who is interested in education, or is it intended to be a very academic and scholarly book for well-educated people only? Because of the way it was written, I doubt lay people will have the time or the patience to read it.

The main difficulty is the writing style. I personally found this book very difficult to read and I often encountered long sentences, difficult terminology, abstract ideas, and confusing sentence structures. One thing that made it difficult for me to follow is that many ideas are not meaningfully connected but seem randomly piled together. For example, Wang started her book with her journey back to China, which I was excited to read about since I was curious to know what her experiences were like. To my great disappointment and surprise, however, Wang seemed to totally forget about this story and did not mention it again till the very end of the book, leaving me hanging throughout the entire book.

Also, Wang tends to jump from one idea to another without clear connections between the ideas. This gave me the impression that she simply jotted down her thoughts randomly without organizing them together in a meaningful way around one specific theme. For instance, she was talking about the role of *mother* in China (p. 2), changed to the topic of *silence* (p. 3), and then suddenly jumped to *language* (p. 3). This fragmented style of writing fails to articulate a comprehensible overarching thesis and makes it difficult to see what her point was exactly.

Another issue I had with the book is that although I like the fact that Wang shared many of her own experiences and stories in the book, most of the stories were not related to the topic she was addressing. I often wondered why she added a particular story in a particular place.

Finally, for a reader like myself, new to the writings of Foucault and Kristeva, these two philosophers’ ideas can be difficult to understand. When Wang introduced these theories, she almost never used any examples nor provided any explanations to help the audience better understand them, which only made it more challenging for me.

Yen Yen:

It is an imperfect writing experiment, and Wang acknowledges this early in the book:



Overall, theoretical and narrative voices, which are not separate in life, are mingled in the book.... Such is my experimental effort to mingle theoretical and literary writing so that a space open to differences is created through languages. This experiment may not be as satisfactory as I hope, but it is a risk worth taking (p. 19).

The blending of these styles reflects the different influences and voices that speak to Wang simultaneously, and it is illustrative of the many hybrid cultural and intellectual encounters that are characteristic of an age of the global movement of people and ideas. I also feel that, at times, it came at the expense of drawing me, the reader, into this journey. In Chapter 4, for instance, Wang provides some of her most moving, perceptive, and thought-provoking autobiographical vignettes, exploring her own complex process of teaching and learning. However, the connections between vignette and theoretical discussion were often tenuously articulated and her use of italics was also confusing; sometimes they are used to signal vignettes while at others, they represent Wang's own ponderings on theory. The problem in the end is that in trying to be both an act of 'self reflection' (p. 51) and a statement on curriculum, *The Call* at times tipped too far in the direction of the former, and made distilling the latter a sometimes laborious task.

Still, it is undeniable that the mixing of voices and the interweaving of personal narrative and cultural stories will be deeply provocative for readers, as it has been for the two of us.

Final thoughts

Dengting:

After finishing the book, I began to understand why Wang started her long journey with the exploration of herself as a foreigner in the U.S. and her position as a minority, female professor in an American university. I also began to understand her need to explore these three philosophers and bring their theories together. It was through this long, contradictory, and even painful journey that Wang developed a deep understanding of self, education, teaching, learning which became her 'curriculum in the third space.'

Wang's 'curriculum in the third space' has very profound and revolutionary applications in today's educational system. Although she did not provide specific methods that teachers can apply directly to their classroom, she does provide many insights on education. Wang's 'curriculum in the third space' upholds the idea that the real purpose of education should be to better understand/create the self/others and better relate to the self/society. It redefines the role for both the teacher and the student. It creates a new relationship between the students and the teacher. It offers a new level of understanding of teaching and learning. It provides a new approach towards curriculum. Most importantly, it gives us guidance on how we can live and learn from each other in harmony despite all the differences of race, ethnicity, gender, nation, language, background, or experience. In modern education, developing a renewed and deep understanding of all these key concepts is not merely desirable but critically necessary.

To renew our understanding of self, community, and creativity, complicated by the discourse of Foucault, Kristeva, and Confucius, it becomes crucial to rethink the important issues of curriculum and education. (p. 121-122)

Although this book has limitations in writing style and some of the questions Wang poses remain unanswered, I highly recommend that all educators read this book carefully and try to implement the 'curriculum in the third space' in their schools and classrooms. I believe Wang's '*call from a stranger on a journey home*' will wake up many educators who are either afraid to change, afraid to lose themselves, or afraid to take the risk. Likewise, those who are



in a foreign land but uncertain if they are in the right place, who are confused about who they are, who have lost their direction, or feel guilty about having left their homes can benefit from reading this book.

Yen Yen:

The Call is a vital text for curriculum scholars, as it contributes a very new and relevant cross-cultural perspective to transnational curriculum studies. It also introduces and analyzes writings that are conspicuously absent in the field of curriculum studies in the English language, such as that of Confucius. Wang's journey towards 'curriculum in the third space' also teaches us what it means to engage in the building of a democratic classroom – not with any instant prescription of methodology to be 'implemented,' but its call for commitment to the daily labor, pains and pleasures of journeying towards 'harmony in differences' (p. 175).

For the two of us, Wang's text and narrative has provided the material and occasion to articulate our different understandings of home, national and ethnic identity, social relations of domination through voices that have very different disciplinary influences. It has also demonstrated the opportunities and challenges of conversing through our similarities and across our differences: we sometimes push each towards greater clarity, help each other articulate something that we could not articulate before, we are sometimes too careful with each other, sometimes make assumptions about each other, sometimes ignore each other's points because one person's concerns are invisible to the other, and sometimes try to pave over our differences in order to move on. Yet, Wang's provocations in *The Call* push us to begin a much larger and longer conversation about our intellectual pathways and our pedagogies that we would otherwise not engage in, even though we all work in the field of education, or like Dengting and myself, might have the similar biography of being women of Chinese descent from China and Singapore, and work just across the hallway from each other.

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