

A language of the Other and a Zen journey: A response

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When I was invited to respond to Nicholas A-Fook's and Jie Yu's respective papers, I was on a sabbatical leave and staying in Xiamen, a city in the Southern China, where my youngest sister lives. Xiamen is a port city with the beautiful landscape of mountain and water—important themes in traditional Chinese painting and poetry—and I had been exercising along the mountain trail right behind my sister's apartment building. The coincidence of dwelling in the mountain and reading Nicholas' poetics of “deconstructing a postcolonial curriculum of being inhabited and inhabiting a language of the other” and Jie's playful “Zen journey in the living map of curriculum” provides a unique timing and context for writing this response.

It was a time period when I experienced intensely the interconnectedness of life and as a result reached another level of integrity in a Jungian sense (Rosen, 1996). It felt like everything I had gone through in my life was preparing me for such a wondrous encounter, although this coming together was threaded through “a certain amount of biographical alienation,” as Nicholas is so acutely aware, both in a foreign country and in my own native land. This response is also situated in the layers of connections between me and these two authors and their authoring to which I am responding. The intersection between and among the three of us is not only through the intellectual landscape of Louisiana State University but also in our separate yet echoing *currere* of cross-cultural pathways. While Nicholas has had multiple, complicated experiences of migration, including a partial Chinese heritage passed down from older generations in his family, Jie and I both graduated from East China Normal University in Shanghai as master's students. The editorial decision to put our papers in conversation already spins the wheel of connection in the background of the collective experience of migration in a globalized society. Thus my response to their papers is mediated through my four-month stay in China, where I lectured at various universities and finished interviews with four life historians who told tales of their cross-cultural experiences and teaching for a research project following my cross-cultural thought paper published in this volume.

A language of the Other

While I frequently heard the bilingual (Chinese and English) announcements in the public transportation facilities such as airports, subways, and city buses in various Chinese cities, travelling from the north to the south during this China trip, I also heard the public announcements in three tongues in Southern China: Mandarin Standard Chinese, local Chinese dialects, and English. The standard Chinese language in its current spoken and written form has, roughly, only a half century of history compared to the thousands of years of Chinese history. The official status of Mandarin Chinese, together with a simplified version of the written Chinese language, was a result of an effort to unify the language for national unity and to make literacy in its written form more available to common people. It is a double-edged sword, since the official language suppresses the local dialects at the same time as its purpose of providing formal education to the majority Chinese rather than only the



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elite is also served through language reform. I have lost my parents' Fujian mother tongue as I grew up in the North, and they speak in their local dialect only when they return to their hometown, close to Xiamen.

Along with Derrida, Nicholas asserts that “we only ever speak one language (English), and we never only speak or perform one language.” Derrida's alienation from his mother tongue (French) is echoed in the lyrics of Kristeva's (Kristeva, 2000) “Bulgaria, my suffering.” Algeria was a colony of France, so even as a child Derrida already sensed that his native language was actually not his own but a language of the other. For Kristeva, Bulgarian as a language is no longer alive, but its rhythm and intonations still surface in Kristeva's dreams, and in her emotions when the logic of the French language fails her. Kristeva's return to the semiotic maternal memory, however, is not for the purity of language since language is always already heterogeneous, coexistent with “the split subject.” The negotiation within language between the semiotic and the symbolic is crucial for the Kristevian subject. Nicholas's own difficulty with his mother tongue—English—and his school language—French—as he inhabits and is inhabited by “the international, philosophical, curricular, disciplinary, and autobiographical language of the other” unfolds the complexity within and across language and thus with/in/against the post-colonial, migrate subject.

Along the way, Nicholas has lost the Chinese language which had been the language of some of his extended family members. Nicholas's song of language and culture is more poignant, with a stronger sense of struggle, than are Jie's and my papers for this volume. Jie and I, as native Chinese although from different generations, came to the US to start our doctoral studies after we had established our respective Chinese identities situated in the larger historical context of a rising China in the international scene in the 1990s and the 21st century. At least for me, the assumption of cultural equality is the basis of my experiencing of “learning from the other” (Todd, 2003). The depth of racism in its entangled ways in which Nicholas' family and he suffered is beyond the reach of Jie's and my cross-cultural difficulty. It is more painful to be an alien in one's own home, a home that is simultaneously foreign due to the history of colonization. A Zen journey as Jie renders it, on the other hand, requires the wisdom that comes from seeing through suffering and playing with difficulty (I will return to this point later) so that pain leads to enlightenment rather than an over-emphasis on struggles.

In the universe of language, both the juxtaposition of differences (Miller, 2005), as the simultaneous use of different languages displays, and translation in an in-between space offer a migrant subject co-creative and creative opportunities—opportunities, as Kristeva sings, layered through suffering—in his or her trajectory of encountering the other, living biographical alienation, and transforming the potentiality of history into the present of multiple possibilities.

A Zen journey

Jie's Zen journey came my way at a time when a Taoist and Zenlike approach is emerging in my own life and teaching, as a result of cultivating a sense of flow in a third space (Wang, 2009) to reach a zero space that hosts the all-inclusive energy of life. And the life history project I am currently engaging brought moments of revelation as I interviewed Chinese and American life historians in China. A Chinese (American) professor¹, Song (an anonymous

¹ Song has obtained American citizenship during his 20 years in the US, so officially he is a Chinese-American. However, his cultural identity is evidently Chinese in his current stage of life. Thus, I use the term Chinese (American) to indicate the ambiguity of identity.

name), who lived and taught in the US for two decades and recently returned to China, described how his engaging “a language of other” *from* the West—immersed in scientific reason—has helped him to reach a Zenlike *enlightenment* which connects light with emptiness (the Chinese character 光 has the double meanings of light and emptiness) in his homecoming. At the meantime, this Zenlike approach is not only “a language of other” *to* the West, but also as a somewhat lost language *within* China during the modernization and Westernization of China in the past century as China struggled to deal with the invasion of the West in various forms. Song felt like returning to China now was to return to his spiritual home and get in touch with a lost language of his own. My work with him has touched a part of me usually not visible in the busy routine of everyday life, also existing long before I was born, and in being touched, I have sensed a deeper integration of a cross-cultural subject in the context of a collective unconsciousness and consciousness.

Such timing makes me deeply appreciate Jie’s Zen rendering of cultivating a different consciousness to engage daily lives through meditative imagination and “to find cracks for alternatives,” alternatives to those to which we have become attached in the taken-for-granted assumptions and practices. Yoshiharu Nakagawa (2008) points out that Eastern thought has a multidimensional view of reality, including phenomenal reality, the intermediate realm of imagination, and infinite reality that is the deepest dimension. He also argues that the two folds of a meditative movement in its seeking mode towards the infinite and its returning mode to enlighten daily routine make the infinite permeate the phenomenal and the imaginative in Eastern spirituality. Zen is an exemplar for this double movement. Thus the task of an educator is to lead students to go deeper (or to reach higher, using the metaphor of mountain climbing) towards the ultimate reality and to come out to live life in a full awareness of the infinite. Jie’s journey into achieving a Zen emptiness which is pregnant with all possibilities, in her refusal to occupy the land, plays “the stingless lute of curriculum to get a new key beyond in the living map of the curriculum,” a new key that lingers both upwards and downwards.

Jie asks us, “how can we discriminate among different directions in specific situations without drifting through free flows of information and choices in the living map of curriculum as nomads?” This is an important question. Just as Alan Watts’ abandoning of the discipline of Zen leads to his unfinished project of dissolving the lonely ego into the interconnectedness of life, a Zen journey is not a free flowing walk but a labor of emptying what is already deeply rooted in one’s mind in order to nurture nonaggression. Listening to “the calling of the world,” as Jie phrases it so nicely, does not give travelers a free will to go wherever they choose, but requires an attentiveness to the world as it is, emptying out our pre-set conceptions and our desire to impose a man-made order upon the world. Zen is a highly disciplined exercise for reaching an ultimate reality, and the purpose of unlearning daily routine in its given assumptions is to get in touch with the ultimate in which the illusionary nature of the individual ego or separate object is revealed.

While the connection between Zen and poststructural discourses and practices has been made in the academic literature, I remain skeptical about putting the two on the same plane, since poststructural theories question the foundation of any absolute or ultimate reality. Alan Watts interprets Buddhism and Zen in a more freelance style, but as my essay implies, such a style did not help Watts to eventually live a Zen-enlightened life. The promise of liberation from social constraints and individual biases was deeply appealing to the American youth in the 1960s and 1970s, but if such a liberation stays on the surface of allowing desire to flow without going deeper to illuminate the essence of nonduality, it cannot be truly liberating. A Zen journey of curriculum in the living map offers vibrant opportunities to get in touch with

the pulse of life, and revitalizing requires the devotion of mindfulness and contemplation toward awakening.

A curriculum of hospitality through a Zen emptiness: A playful inteaching

Song comments: “If there is indeed a God that created the world, the reason for such a creation, as I think about it again and again, can be only one reason: that is play. Just look at young children: All they want is to play.” He is not a believer in God, but he believes in the vital breath of life, the spirit as William Doll (1998) depicts it in his three S curriculum (science, story, and spirit). Song prefers a sense of play seen in the messiness of Chinese life, which does not consistently stick to regulations over the orderly structure of the American life that follows certain rules more coherently.

This sense of play can be strangled by the deadly seriousness of scientific reason, which has had its overwhelming triumph for the last several centuries in the West, and moral reason, which controlled China for a thousand years. Derrida’s project to deconstruct modern Western philosophy and thought is to see through the fragility of its foundation to deconstruct “the apparent firmness, hardness, durability, or resistance” of systems and institutions, a hardness that is forged by the logocentrism of scientific reason, a hardness Song sees as the problem of the West in its desire for only *yang* (without *yin*). In Nicholas’ play with language and culture, he breathes life into the movement of a post-colonial subject in time and place, and across time and space, and subsequently disrupts the seriousness of clear-cut boundaries in both traditional curricula and some social justice curricula. In Jie’s father’s humor and her own poetic play, the metaphor of a living map empties out the deadly rigidity of a preset map.

Nicholas tells us, “Derrida asks us to learn how to listen carefully, and open ourselves toward hosting unconditionally, the language of the other as both a potential host and enemy.” If the Derridian hospitality hosts both unconditional generosity and a hostile tendency, then a Zen of emptiness opens up an all-inclusive energy that does not set up any dualistic camp for friend versus enemy. The endless possibility of a zero space hosts the generativeness of one, the tensionality of two (like *yin* and *yang* are open to each other through tensionality but not hostility as *yin* is within *yang* while *yang* is within *yin*), and the creativity of three (the dynamics of *yin* and *yang* giving birth to something new), and in such a space hostility is already integrated into an inclusive breath that does not generate aggression but compassion. A Zenlike nonaggression is more appealing to me than the over-emphasis on struggle in much contemporary literature, including some postmodern discourses.

In this sense, a Zen journey becomes “a language of the other” to overusing “post” in its anxiety to overcome its opposite, a language of the other from the other horizon to which Nicholas alludes in his footnote and which is, paradoxically, made visible in the West through a post-logic including post-colonial and post-structural intellectual and cultural movements. I would argue that a deconstructed post-colonial curriculum can benefit from a Zenlike approach to cultivate nonviolence through nonviolence. At the same time, the influence of Derridian deconstruction also leads me to question the underlying foundation of an ultimate reality in Zen. Here living with the aporia between a Zen devotion to the final enlightenment and a questioning spirit of deconstructing metanarratives becomes important for playing a Derridian curriculum of hospitality *with* a Zen emptiness of inclusive generosity.

Jie’s notion of inteaching is particularly illuminating for educators. There are three aspects of such an inteaching, which she elaborates: first, inteaching requires the teacher’s attentive listening to students and reflecting on “how our teaching affects our students in their

learning” as a healing for the effects of aggressive teaching, which is so common in the classroom. Second, to get away from an impositional mode of teaching, teachers need to be aware when they have said enough so as to leave room for students’ own awareness. Third, the role of the teacher is to enable learning to happen and not to be the dictator. Such teaching is indeed an art of enabling, although I think in this mode the teacher is more than a helper or facilitator, as if the student is innocent and free from aggression, but is a playful teacher of wisdom and compassion who enlightens students without forcing their change. Jie’s inteaching echoes Nicholas’ “double movement of teaching and learning” that “involves a listening, a curricular movement of heading unconditionally and conditionally toward each other.” To infuse the spirit of inteaching, we open up the teaching space of hospitality and emptiness.

In my last time of climbing the mountain in Xiamen, a ten-year-old girl jumped ahead of me and called to her mother behind: “Hurry up, mom! It is a most beautiful scene to watch the sunrise or sunset on the top of the mountain!” It was a sunset time and the girl was eager to lead her mother to the most beautiful scene. While the younger one was eager to get to the top, I was lingering in the midst of the mountain anticipating and experiencing the vital energy of a zero space from the top. It is in the middle of the mountain that one can admire the fuller shapes of other mountains and can see in more detail the beauty of the valleys. The mountain trail is winding and leads in various directions, and if one is willing, one can follow different pathways each time, and one can walk out one’s own pathway without following the existing paths, as Jie calls upon us to do. While the top of the mountain alludes to an all-inclusive energy, the dwelling within the mountain unfolds various complicated and tangled pathways to different scenery.

In different ways, all my life historians tell me: “My past prepared me for the present in such a way that has been beyond what I could have anticipated.” To reach a different consciousness is the motif of *currere*, unfolding the pathways of each teacher in being educated and educating others. This motif permeates three papers published in this volume in their ongoing projects without definite endings—Jie’s nonconclusion to “what is not yet,” Nicholas’s unfinished farewell, and my own continuous engagement with cross-cultural studies and teaching. Along a similar vein, this response ends as a prelude that invites and inspires other projects of subjectivity and education.

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