

# Living Impotentially: An Allegorical Inquiry

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*A pot of cactus  
drew my attention from the hectic practice.  
I began to spin a pencil in the air  
pointing nowhere and everywhere.  
The cactus had stilled spikes  
like lances and sticking pikes;  
growing out from the plump stem  
gently poking the mayhem.*

Schools are usually considered as places for students to *learn*. What underlies this “common-sense” understanding is that schools belong to a “productive regime” (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 857) where students learn towards something, striving to succeed and progress. Teachers, then, are expected to do everything to make it happen. They are held accountable for students’ success as is evidenced in the notorious 2001 U.S. Act of Congress “No Child Left Behind” as well as the billions of dollars of Obama’s government granted of “Race to the Top” in 2009. Of course, such striving for student success and economic development is not only limited to the United States, but has also become a predominant phenomenon worldwide, highlighting the importance of teaching effectiveness and efficiency through high-quality technological pathways that guarantee the pre-set outcomes. What happens in schools has to be useful and geared towards *tomorrow*, achieved through productive means, determined by economic and political demands. However, what we neglect in the enthusiastic pursuit for success is that “a new beginning with our world is ruled out” (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 857). In other words, these futuristic attempts paradoxically reproduce existing mechanisms and maintain the institutional *status quo* as a projection of the present.

To challenge the constrained and reduced understanding of education, this paper discusses Agamben’s conceptualization of “impotentiality” (Agamben, 1998, 1999, 2011a), with particular attention to and implications for education (Lewis, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2018). Agamben contributes to the fields of politics, linguistics, literary theory, aesthetics, philosophy and religious studies. Though not specifically writing for education, Agamben’s works bear great significance for its renewed understanding. In modernity’s hectic pursuit of productivity and efficiency, attending to our “potential to not do” seems to be out of joint. Especially in the schooling systems, we witness the institutional, political and economic forces to actualize students’ potential to the fullest. The very idea of impotentiality may appear unfriendly or even appalling to the schooling systems shadowed by neoliberal



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ideology today. However, these concepts are “fundamentally important for an understanding of the meaning and purposes of education” (Jasinski, 2018, p. v). Recognizing Agamben’s works as relevant for education at all may “require us to question the basic assumptions, not only about the nature of education but about what it means to lead a meaningful life” (Jasinski, 2018, p. v). Agamben calls for our attention to what we cannot do (Agamben, 1999). Critiquing technological and neoliberal rationality, Agamben writes that: “human beings are the living beings that ... are capable of just as much of one thing as its opposite, to do [as well as] to not do...human beings are the animals capable of their own impotentiality” (Agamben, 2011a, p. 44).

In light of Agamben’s and Lewis’ understandings of impotentiality with reference to education, I hope to conduct an allegorical inquiry into my lived educational experiences in the past: allegorizing impotentiality through autobiographical narratives to reveal its educational significance. My lived experiences are to generate a genuine personal twist of the concept and bring it “back to the rough ground” (Dunne, 1993). Impotentiality is concretized and embodied in my lived experiences as well as in my constant quests for a better understanding of myself. Allegory, in its “autobiographical, pedagogical and communicative nature” (Pinar, 2011, p. 50), will be appropriated methodologically in this self-study that could be understood as a montage, a poetic re-encounter of the past. I unpack and reactivate the fragmented, nuanced and autobiographical stories to explore what impotentiality means to me, and analyze or break loose what is involved in living impotentially. The stories are not necessarily chronological and logical; instead, they are overlapped, incomplete, fragmented, and, most of all, allegorical. The stories that I include in this paper are not coherent representations of what I experienced as impotentiality but as a narrative account of it: what is embodied in lived experiences; how I make sense of it; what stories I include, miss or could not recall in light of impotentiality. Through the allegorical re-searching in my own stories in relationship with others, I find that the theme of living impotentially involves overlapping and recursive moments, including yielding and suspending, wondering and wandering and dis/re/connecting, which jointly contribute to one’s becoming/unbecoming and doing/undoing.

Finally, I bring Daoist tradition into a dialogue with impotentiality, suggesting that impotentiality could be compared with and enriched in conversation with “*wu wei*.” (Lao Tzu, 2008). Lao Tzu points out that it is where we perceive nothing (in the void—*wu*) that true efficacy lies, even though people always think that they benefit from perceptible things (the visible). The absence of perceptible qualities characterizes *Dao* (Kaltenmark, 1969). Lao Tzu sees the invisible, perceiving the invisible qualities of the world. The opacity of my stories as living impotentially could reveal that “an awareness of the disorderly and chaotic world we inhabit is a fundamental aspect of being human” (Orr, 2002, p. 16).

### **Concept of impotentiality (with particular reference to education)**

Agamben uses Aristotle’s *De Anima* (Agamben, 1999) to examine two kinds of potentiality denoted by Aristotle: a stronger sense is to indicate how something could be done well and a weaker sense of potential, meaning simply that something might have a chance to happen or not to happen. Agamben writes: “I would like to pause on a figure of potentiality that seems to me to be particularly significant and that appears in *De anima*. I refer to darkness, to shadows” (Agamben, 1999, p. 180). As I understand it, the stronger sense of potentiality points to what we must learn in order to become the person others expect us to become, that is to convert a contingency into a necessity. The weaker sense of potentiality attends to “darkness” and “shadows” which are, nevertheless, inseparable from the light.



Potentiality “is always already accompanied by an equally primordial impotentiality” (Lewis, 2014a, p. 336). The kind of potentiality that especially interests Agamben is the weaker one: to bring knowledge into actuality—or not. Impotentiality refers to someone who can bring his knowledge and capacity into actuality, but would prefer not to. One “suspend[s] the functioning of obedience through ‘preferring not’ to act as such and such a subject within the allotted order of things (Lewis, 2014b, p. 276).

Agamben references Aristotle to illustrate the non-duality and enabling tension between potentiality and impotentiality: “potentiality be also im-potentiality (*adynamia*)” or “potentiality constitutively be the potentiality not to (do or be)” (Agamben, 1998, p. 45). It is argued that “every potentiality is impotentiality of the same and with respect to the same” (Aristotle, 1984, *Metaphysics*, 1046a32) and “what is potential can both be and not be. For the same is potential as much with respect to being as to not being” (Aristotle, 1984, *Metaphysics*, 1050b10). Impotentiality is not unified into the concept of potentiality, which might risk of the former disappearing into the latter. Rather, impotentiality is always in tension with potentiality. For Agamben, potentiality is not simply a positive capacity to achieve specific goals through specific methods and procedures. Agamben asks us fundamentally: “What does it mean when say ‘I can, I cannot?’” (Agamben, 1999, p. 177). The parallel structure of “I can,” “I cannot?” with a question mark forms a genuine question and invites us to reflect on what we are capable of not doing (instead of we are not capable of doing) together with we are capable of doing at the same time and embrace our “potential not to be” (Agamben, 1999, p. 182).

“I can” is a possibility only as long as one remains in relation to “I cannot.” By conserving itself in the moment before actualization, potential remains impotential. Thus, all theories of potentiality (I am capable of x) must also and equally be theories of the impotential (I am capable of not doing x); otherwise potentiality will be indistinguishable from actualization. (Lewis, 2014a, p. 336)

Lewis interprets Agamben’s impotentiality with particular relevance to education. Education, in a stronger sense, is often concerned with “deadlines—or lines that end with the death of potentiality” (Lewis, 2014b, p. 277). Lewis suggests that potentiality and impotentiality could not be separated from one another; otherwise, the educational system could be stratified where some students are commanded to actualize their potentiality, while others fail the system and are rejected (Lewis, 2014b). Potentiality would pass over into actualization without the possibility of being “able not to pass over into actuality” (Agamben, 1998, p. 45). As soon as the potentiality is actualized (i.e., the students’ potential is realized to the fullest by achieving the highest marks and going to the best universities), it loses its rigor and alternative possibilities. Potentiality and impotentiality are not binary or contradictory concepts, but they are supposed to be reunified, radically transforming a stronger sense of education as efforts to excavate and maximize the potential of the students to a weaker sense of education. A weak understanding of education involves “a weak withdrawal into a state of perpetual study through their gestures of ‘I would prefer not to.’” (Lewis, 2013, p. 62). Melville’s *Bartleby the scrivener*, in a singularly mild, firm voice, asserted that “I would prefer not to” (Melville, 2004), resisting in doing what is required of him. “Would prefer not to” is a choice that defies the given choice between “can do” or “cannot do.” This challenges the fundamental underlying assumptions and taken-for-granted norms. It is a choice that transcends the dichotomies of conformity and subversion, being positive and negative. It “push[es] the aporia of sovereignty to the limit” (Agamben, 1998, p. 48) without immediately



and finally resolving the question at hand. It depends on inoperativeness that could dislodge us from our hectic pursuit of the realization of the goals, where “a generic mode of potentiality ... is not exhausted (like individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*” (Agamben, 1998, p. 62). Agamben points to the significance of “let[ting] erotic behaviors idle, to profane them, by detaching them from their immediate ends” (Agamben, 2007, p. 91). Leaving room to profane the unprofaneable, to idle and wander is not merely a getaway from reduced approach to education where promises of newness in the students are often suppressed in the desperate consumption of subject content knowledge for marks and job markets. Rather, it enables and redefines education in more humane terms.

I believe it is “only when potentiality and impotentiality are seen as mutually constitutive that we can fully theorize the unique experience of study in education” (Lewis, 2014a, p. 335), a much more ambiguous activity compared with learning with an entrepreneurial will and quantifiable objectives. Impotentiality, as I interpret it, is not a noun that implies a state of being, but a verb that dwells resistantly and creatively in the tension of the in-betweenness and holds onto the dynamic space rather than casting a division or opposition.

### **Allegory as method**

“I” am allegorical (Pinar, 2011, p. 52).

Etymologically, allegory means to “speak publicly in an assembly. A speech at once concrete and abstract, through allegory one narrates a specific story which hints at a more general significance” (Pinar, 2011, p. 50). Pinar speaks to the interwoven components of “I”: “it is ‘I’—however much the first-person singular is a term of convenience—who exists, in whom history, culture, and society are personified in singular form” (Pinar, 2011, p. 52). With its “autobiographical, pedagogical, and communicative” (Pinar, 2011, p. 50) characteristics, allegory enables educational experience. Allegory could be understood as montage, “interrelated with ‘reconstruction’, as each reactivates the past in order to find the future” (Pinar, 2011, p. 49). Allegory becomes “a new mode of signification that represents the past in a new, meaningful way as if to guide us in how we can sensibly live with this ‘past in ruins’” (Rauch, 2000, p. 208). The allegorical sensitivity to the past in ruins, with the possibility of recovering and reactivating their meanings, navigates my (re)search. I appropriate allegory as a method of inquiry, which helps me enter the past and reactivate it to make sense of what impotentiality means to me in the embodied and lived experiences. It seems to me that allegorical inquiry, with its attention to both the concrete and the conceptual, the private and the public, the historical and the ethical, is an appropriate method for my purpose of embodying the concept of impotentiality in the past, the present and the future of my life. The creative tension of allegory speaks to the in-betweenness of potentiality and impotentiality. In brief, allegorizing impotentiality will help concretize the conceptual, privatize the public, and interweave the past, present and future.

It is this tensioned reciprocity between subjectivity and history that structures allegory (Pinar, 2011). In terms of allegory’s connection to autobiography, Pinar adds that “[h]istorical facts are primary, but it is facts’ capacity to invoke our imagination that marks them as allegorical...[H]istory becomes accessible through allegory” (Pinar, 2011, p. 54). The meanings are no longer confined and contained in the past. They transcend time and space to “spill into our experience of the present” (Pinar, 2011, p. 54). Without allegorical imagination, historical facts and autobiographical narratives, though interesting, carry little



significance and relevance. My allegorical re-search focuses on the theme of impotentiality, complicated simultaneously by the specific and general, literal and analogical conversation, a conversation with myself, others, texts and my memories. Ultimately, I hope to allegorize impotentiality in my nuanced autobiographical narratives. Pinar notes, complicated conversations serve as a “conversation with oneself [as a ‘private person’] and with others threaded through academic knowledge, an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engagement in the world” (Pinar, 2011, p. 47). I attend to intertwining multiple dimensions of culture, society, politics and history in a webbed allegorical inquiry, including, but not limited to, the generational conversations between my parents, my grandmother and myself, the institutional development of teacher education programs in China and my own experiences unfolding both in it and despite it, the hint of the social and economic injustice between urban and rural education, the opening-up policy of China and internationalization of higher education along with my own struggles for self-understanding across *borders*. It is both inward and outward, simultaneously horizontal and vertical, and at once concrete and abstract. The allegorical search is to break with linear grand narratives or merely appropriate empirical evidence to support the hypotheses. It is a fragmented, recursive and dialogic process, burdened with my own historicity and shadowed by my own ignorance. Hence, this allegorical inquiry ends in what the educators, including myself, could “make of such conversation” (Pinar, 2011, p. 55). It is more of an exploration than a targeted, well-thought-out plan, as what might come out of the allegorical inquiry could not be foreseen in the province. Allegory “underscores that our individual lives are structured by ever-widening circles of influence: from family through friends to strangers, each of whom personify culture, symbolize society, embody history” (Pinar, 2011, p. 51).

Again, allegorical inquiry assembles fragmentary pieces in collage and reconstructs with lived structures through subjectivity (Pinar, 2011). Through allegory, I narrate my stories in their particularity and situatedness in a broader historical, cultural and political context, acknowledging that the concrete is at the same time general. I allegorize impotentiality in the stories of my immature love during high school, in the tension of my successful launching a teaching career and the inner struggles and wonders in the process, in what was/is expected of me and what was/is meaningful to me. Retrieving my own stories, I enliven impotentiality, generating new understandings and significance rooted in the allegorical “I.” I

do not do [this allegorical inquiry] for the sake of a future in which such information will ... become usable. Rather, [I] self-reflexively articulate what is at hand, reactivating the past so as to render the present, including ourselves, intelligible. (Pinar, 2011, p. 50)

The theme of impotentiality will guide my story but will not contain it: allegorical meanings will spill outside the conceptual scope of impotentiality. With imaginations and openings, I attend to the jagged edge of becoming: what is revealed and what could be missing in my lived personal stories, which are at the same time personal, historical and political forming the “civic square and room of one’s own” (Pinar, 2004, p. 38). My life is not merely “a flat line between what is no more and can never be, the present becomes a vivid “palimpsest” (Pinar, 2011, pp. 47, 51), a manuscript that original traces remain yet leave room for new later writings. Re-entering the past could help me witness with a distance and hence make a better sense of today’s schooling system in the estrangement, detachment and re-attachment. The re-entry will also empower me to dislodge myself from the fantasyland of “Race to the Top” with neoliberal underpinnings.



Autobiography or allegorical inquiry exists as circular movements, yet may unveil something previously hidden in its nuanced remembering and reactivating process. I dialogue with theory, myself, and others, I connect my present self with my past, threaded through allegory, which in turn promises to enlighten my experience of the present. The claim that “we find the future not in the present, ... , but in the past” (Pinar, 2011, p. 49) is not merely metaphorical but methodological. I could shape and reshape my particular stance and lived experiences in the world with historical and subjective structures. Impotentiality becomes embodied and historical in the allegorical search, that is to personify the abstract and conceptual.

## **Prelude one: yielding and suspending**

### *My “Immature” Love*

*In 2000, I was 18 years old. I was supposed to prepare diligently for Gaokao, the MOST important exam in China. It is considered a fate-determining exam by most families in China. However, I must confess that I did not spend the “due” amount of time on coursework. I went to the “little forest” behind the school, the bank of the Hucheng River with Xi, my boyfriend. He and I were so different: I was then a “well-behaved” student who often got the first place in exams, while Xi was not much into the schooling “game”. He never went to the library to study coursework, but he had a collection of books that I had never read before; he didn’t do homework that he didn’t like, yet he dedicated much time to pole climbing until his palm blistered; in a class gathering, most classmates talked about how to improve their marks, while he confessed to the whole class what he didn’t like about school due to “good” reasons. Not out of expectations, my headteacher approached me to deal with the issue of “immature love,” which was considered “inappropriate” during high school. When my parents learned about it, they told me to focus on my study which was THE most important thing for me at that stage. I thought I was to blame until my grandmother, with whom my parents and I lived for over two decades, told me that “He must be very special for you. Tell me more about him...” My grandmother invited him to lunch a few months prior to Gaokao, and we chatted and laughed together in an afternoon with golden sunshine poured into the living room.*

In China, Gaokao, the College Entrance Examination, is “THE EXAM.” Two days, nine hours and four exams determine the future of each student. Since the Republic of China was founded in 1949, Gaokao has undergone many policy reforms. My father, born in 1953, was assigned to the countryside as Zhiqing (the “educated” youth) to live and work in rural areas as part of the “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement” after graduating from middle school. He never got a chance to go to university. My mother, two years younger than my father, “escaped” (quoting my mother here) the involuntary fate of being away from home to work in the countryside for a few years. When Gaokao resumed after the Cultural Revolution in 1977, my mother finally took it after she had been teaching in a middle school for a few years with only a middle-school diploma. She was admitted to Beijing Normal University in the late seventies. For my generation, born as the only child in the early 1980s in Beijing, China, I was made to believe that succeeding in Gaokao was a familial duty. Of course, this was surely considered as a privilege or advantage for the students with Beijing Hukou compared with the students in economically disadvantaged rural areas in China, as my teachers and family always candidly reminded me.

Gaokao is compared to thousands of “soldiers” going across the single-plank bridge. It seems to be a “win or lose” game: while some might succeed, many others are doomed to fail



(or fall). The whole country seems to seethe with enthusiasm about the Gaokao each year. Indeed, Gaokao is not merely a standardized test in China, but traverses generations in China with eagerness, regret, opportunity, competition, hesitation, success or failure. It seems to become a ritual that everyone piously follows, a wave that pushes everyone in the same direction. It seems that everyone “has to” cross the single-plank bridge and win the battle. In preparation for the “sacred” time of the Gaokao, we often spent weekends in cram schools and studied from six a.m. to midnight each day; my parents, like many other concerned parents, nourished us with vitamin supplements; policemen blocked roads near the exam locations to ensure an absolutely quiet environment for us Gaokao students.

I did feel an intense calling to survive and excel in Gaokao; however, the determination was unexpectedly suspended by my unexpected “immature love.” I surrendered to my complex feelings about Xi, the “unruly” boy in my class. He seemed very special to me that he wasn’t as “well-behaved” as me. The fact that he read novels during math class, he would not do the homework he judged neither challenging nor enjoyable was fascinating to me. For me, Xi was not an ill-behaved student; he was just so different from me. His ultimate otherness drew my attention *away* from the Gaokao imperative. I yielded myself to these moments, intrigued by our differences. Yet I found myself in awe of the possibility of not doing what I was “supposed to do”: the possibility of living impotentially, making claims that “I would prefer not to”. Xi’s presence enabled me to loosen my armor, which would have safeguarded me as I crossed the single-plank bridge. Together, we went to the Little Forest to eat watermelon; we caught dragonflies by the Hucheng River, for the whole afternoon. I was able to suspend the worries about the test temporarily. My yielding to the moment and suspending the to-do list generated and expanded the impotential space for me. I attended to each moment with more sensitivity: the sunshine, the dew on the leaves, and the spinning bicycle wheels could tickle my senses and seemed to allow meanings to overflow from those moments. Seated on the moist moss in the little forest with someone, a different other, enabled me to stretch my self-understanding as I listened to beautiful birds chirping, gazing at mushrooms sprouting by the rotten tree root, intoxicated by the earthly fragrance around me. I experienced everything around me more keenly and intensely. As these experiences deepened for me, I became more inward searching in connection with an othering other despite the hectic and always solo pursuit of higher scores on Gaokao. As Sadhguru tells us:

If I see a leaf, I could just sit there looking at the leaf, just staring at it, for hours.... This attention brought a completely different level of involvement and interaction with just about anything and everything around me, animate or inanimate. (2018)

I struggled to “figure out what is what” (Sadhguru, 2018). The presence of Xi made me start to question many things; I began to feel more and more uneasy about the schooling system I had always succeeded in. Generations of myths around Gaokao and its utmost importance became suspended and reinterpreted in those empowering emotions, confusion and questions, all of which generated room for renewed self-understanding. I seemed to discover and recover part of me, rebellious and challenging, unseen to myself before: “for the first time, I did not know which is me and which is not me” (Sadhguru, 2018).

These experiences were simultaneously blissful and disturbing. On the one hand, they raised my awareness and sensitivity to things around me. On the other hand, they were distractions from my diligent “exercise book” routine. I seemed to make an adventurous, even risky exploration of myself through unspeakable and intense feelings, through my time in the forest, away from the classrooms. These experiences were able to transform the script of



Gaokao to “palimpsest” (Pinar, 2011, pp. 47, 51) of self-discovery in relation to others, in the noncoincidence with the present. Of course, not all times were emotionally joyful. Sometimes they were difficult and intensified into an emotional swirl, especially as I felt it was in constant tension with what was “appropriate”.

My grandmother acted unlike everyone else around me. I lived with my parents, my grandparents, my uncles and aunts and my cousin together in a 700-square-foot apartment for almost twenty years. My grandmother did not finish elementary school. Yet, she was very wise and always brought joy and harmony to the big family. The noises of Mahjong mingled with her big laughs were music to my ears. The presence of my grandmother helped me witness my thoughts and emotions in more disarmed and at-ease ways. The emotional swirl eventually washed through me and made my inner space more spacious and more welcome to the impotentiality of “what I am capable of not doing”. In those moments, I was awake and alive, returning to myself, my wonders, worries, passions and thoughts in more open and imaginative ways.

For me, the “immature love” was also a pedagogical gift: it produced the conditions for my emergence from out of the ordinary: a sphere of suspension where everything except for the subject matter (the object of love) was temporarily bracketed out (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017). “Immature love” and “impotentiality” are alike as each is unformed at first; each carries risks of being hurt or being negated, and each carves crevices for noncoincidences among what it was, is now, and what can be. The noncoincidence derives from an inner empty space wherein I come to form as an individual through relationships with self and others (including non-human animals and objects) (Pinar, 2021).

Drawing upon Paul North’s notion of yielding as a humble alternative to resistance, transformation, and constitution, Lewis advocates for a “weak philosophy of education” (Lewis, 2018, p. 8), which involves an idling process that suspends and yields. The idling, unsettling and inoperative process generated creative, aesthetic and resistant energies which could “turn potentiality back upon itself in order to give itself to itself” (Agamben, 1998, p. 46) and mediate the external force with subjective spaciousness. Hence, potentiality maintains itself in relation to actuality in the form of its suspension. It is capable of the act of not realizing it, and it is sovereignly capable of its own impotentiality (Agamben, 1998).

## **Prelude two: Wondering and wandering**

### *Twist and Turns in my Schooling and Career Trajectories*

*I was a proud member of the Science cohort in my high school thanks to my outstanding performance in math, chemistry and physics. There was a popular saying among my teachers and peers: “You will have no trouble throughout your life once you’ve learned math, physics and chemistry well.” There was an implicit rule in my high school that if you could not perform well in these “core” subjects, you would be advised to go to the Arts cohort.*

*Though I performed well in core subjects, I was not passionate about them. English and Business were, back then, very job-promising subjects in Chinese universities. English was considered a much-needed communicative tool in China’s modernization and internationalization. Doing business seemed to be an exciting adventure for me, having grown up in my family of teachers and factory workers who had never stepped into the field of business. Therefore, I applied for the Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) with double majors in English and Business. At BFSU, the most attractive place was the little garden beside the library. Grabbing a book from the library and sitting on the bench in the little garden, facing my back to the sun, I found the garden was transformed into a*



*wonderland where I wondered and wandered. I randomly came across Marcus Aurelius' book titled "Meditations" one day on a shelf where it was misplaced when I hoped to find a language book. It altered my focused reading on business and linguistics, moving me towards intriguing philosophical texts.*

*I imagined myself dressing in professional business suits and high-heeled shoes, sitting in front of the computer, dealing with all kinds of forms, numbers and customers all day for many years to come. Unfortunately, I did not find it attractive. In a visit to my high school prior to my graduation, I found myself so nostalgic: the familiar noises of the school bells and energetic scenes of students running and chatting were lingering in me for days and days after the visit. I decided to apply for a teaching post. Since I was not enrolled in a normal (teacher-preparation) university, I did not have a teaching certificate upon graduation. I spent a few weeks passing two tests on educational psychology and educational theory in order to be certified. I finally became a teacher, like my mother, who also didn't have "official" teacher education training when she became a teacher three decades ago.*

I was often overwhelmed by the wondering, confusion and uncertainties during my study and in my career choices. Re-entering those indecisive moments of making decisions that could have moved me to take "the next step" is no effort to eliminate the confusion and help me make "the best choice". Rather, remembering and reactivating those moments help me listen to them once more and bring their remainders and spills to the present moments. I am not content with choosing among the options. Rather, I hope to understand the possibility of "idling, that is, in its possible profanatory potential" (Agamben, 2007, p. 88).

The scientific paradigm has defined educational institutions in China since the May Fourth Movement at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Science has held its supremacy over humanities for decades. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I chose to, or rather, I was chosen to study science, having performed excellently in all core subjects. However, I always seemed to leave room for deviation and distraction. I profaned the potential to pursue further in the scientific realm by applying for a double major in English and Business. Pursuing degrees in English and Business seemed to be a well-informed choice at that moment. However, I did not anticipate where that choice would take me: I did not expect bathing in the sunshine in the little garden beside the library, encountering the lovely book of "Meditations" that imprinted me, leaving its mark on me for so many years to come. My undergraduate study did not steer me towards ambitious entrepreneurship. I profaned it again by falling in love with reading philosophical texts in a lovely garden. I decided to become a teacher when visiting my high school teachers. Was that aspiration secretly planted in me by my mother long ago? When I was little, I often waited for my mother in her teachers' office, listening to the cheerful noises of the students in the hallway during recess or peeking into her classroom through the backdoor window.

I profaned what I was "supposed-to-be" by experiencing certain lacks, distractions, and deviations while hoping for something "not yet" (Pinar, 2005). I kept wondering what I would otherwise be. I entered my teaching post without formal training from a teacher education program at a normal university. Since my middle school years, the teacher certification system has gradually become an integrated part of the teacher professionalization movement in China. In 1993, the National Teacher Law put forward for the first time "The National Teachers' Certification System" And "Teacher Certification Regulations" was promulgated in 1995, considered as the official launch of China's teacher certification, with more detailed "Measures for Implementation" circulated in 2000 (Siri & Li, 2010) a few years prior to my graduation with an English and Business degree at BFSU. Thanks to the newly



inaugurated teacher certification policy, I was, without a degree from a Normal University, then “certified” as a teacher after having taken two written tests of teaching theory and psychology together with the Putonghua (Standard Spoken Chinese) oral test. I prepared for the tests for a few nights. Prior to this certification policy, a degree from an accredited normal university was almost considered a must for getting a teaching job in a secondary school in Beijing, China. Interestingly, thanks to the new certification system, I was able to be certified after merely taking two written and one oral tests. I was then offered a teaching post at my alma mater. Ironically, though the discourse of “teacher professionalization” (Siri & Li, 2010) was prevalent during the days when I became a teacher, I was minimally “professionalized” prior to the entry into my teaching career. What I experienced seemed to “fall short of” what was demanded in policies. “Teacher Education Curriculum Standard in China” (2011) stipulates that teachers should “master the knowledge of student psychological developmental stages and learning to deal with common behavioral and mental problems” (2.2.6) and to “improve language skills, communication and collaboration skills and be able to use modern educational technologies” (2.2.7). Like my mother decades ago, I became a teacher without formal training. However, I felt no regret for that (and I hope my students would not feel sorry for that as well). To some extent, the lack of professional training in teacher education programs and the qualified competence and confidence somehow gave me “advantages”—despite and due to not mastering the “core competencies” (Zhang, 2016)—namely humbleness and the capacity to wonder. I knew that I did not know, so I always raised questions. I was not as enthusiastically modelling “best practices” as teacher education programs in China: from the Japanese training model in the late nineteenth century, American pragmatism in the 1920s to the widespread adoption of a rigid and oppressive Soviet model in the 1950s (Lu, 2008). Not until the 1980s did teacher education begin a search specifically for a Chinese model. Too often, however, home-grown teacher education in China still embraced instrumental approaches to teaching, and the practice of teaching was reduced to generalized descriptions of what teachers should know and be able to do.

Over time, I found myself raising more questions and refining some of them. I moved forward and backward, dislocating myself “at the margins of the system, when situation of danger or exception arise” (Agamben, 2007, p. 88). I practiced being “inoperative” (Lewis, 2018) in my schooling journey by not immediately acting upon taken-for-granted choices but rather took turns and twists in my trajectories. There would be turns and twists only if one noticed the possibility of turning around or turning away. Otherwise, one would be on a fast-forward galloping train whose path has already been paved. Of course, the books that I encountered in the BFSU’s library did not suddenly draw my attention; they responded to vague and formless ideas that could have been lingering in my mind for some time. It was my wondering, in my feebly yet stubborn ways, that brought me to the little garden and the misplaced book.

It is helpful to recall schools in its original Greek meaning “*scholé* (free time)”. Etymologically, school is meant to provide free time and space to recount and recapitulate our common world. During such free time, I would be permitted and even invited to wonder about my “reality”. I would be encouraged to renew my “reality” by wandering near and afar, recollecting my stories in relation to myself and others. As Agamben would approve, what we need to “reconfigure is not an ideological narrative, a discourse, a political strategy, social institution or a rule of law. Instead, we need to build the conditions for this other experience of time to emerge” (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017, p. 857).



### Prelude three: Dis/re/connecting

#### *Being unable to respond*

*Without going through a “formal” teacher education program at a university, I did not expect my teaching career to go very smoothly. I achieved first place in the district model lesson; was awarded first place in the national teaching competency contest; my students earned higher marks than those in other classes. Yet, after a few years of feeling complacent, I felt something missing from my teaching. At first, I could not articulate what was missing. But when I saw my students burying their heads behind big piles of exercise books, working diligently towards better scores, I remembered my own schooling years. I could finally re-see my worries, frustrations and emotional rollercoasters well hidden behind my glossy scores. I found myself unable to respond to the quests from the worried parents to deal with the “immature love” issue of their child.*

*Having worked seven years as a middle school teacher, I resigned in 2011 due to a family decision: immigration to Canada. I returned to school as a graduate student at the University of British Columbia. I can still remember my very first course in the Department of Educational Studies. I felt so frustrated after the first lesson: even after translating the whole article into my native language, I still could not understand it. My peers seemed to participate in the class discussion enthusiastically, while I hardly knew what they were talking about. I found myself clumsy and awkward. After a few classes, I finally mustered the courage to ask Michelle, a professor who always wore a big smile, whether I could withdraw from the course. She just looked at me and paused for a while. She responded to me gently, still wearing a big smile: “I don’t know what to say...But I hope you could stay.”*

*In the fall of 2019, a few days prior to my Ph.D. defense, I met with my supervisors, David and Anne, at the Waves Café in Steveston near my home. I told them that I was reluctant to leave the space in which “I could have coffee with them regularly”. They laughed and assured me that we could have coffee together after graduation. With the quarantine policy during the pandemic, ironically, it was for a very long time impossible for us to have coffee together at Waves, unimaginable months ago. Of course, we still connect with one another via email, zoom and phone calls.*

The decision to leave the secondary school where I studied and later worked as a teacher for more than a decade was not an easy decision to make. Nor was it easy to think about the familiar Hutong in Beijing where I grew up and where my dear families and friends still live. I also have to admit that it was a privilege for me to be able to make the change: the financial support from family, China’s opening-up policy, the internationalization trend in higher education and many other factors were interwoven, creating the conditions for the move.

Leaving the familiar and comfortable gave me a chance to not only connect with people on the other side of the planet, but also to reconnect myself with my past in renewed and reimagined ways. I cannot recall the exact moment I made the decision to go to Canada. The decision seemed to arrive in its due course as I became eager to disturb my stability and wondered about the otherwise. I bid farewell to my hometown and flew to Canada with my husband and my two-year-old son during the beautiful fall of 2011. With leaving and returning, leaving my hometown and teaching post and returning to school as a graduate student with my teachers and colleagues, I became simultaneously attached to and detached from teaching, creating a gap between the social pretense and true aspiration of teaching: an ironic existence as a tension, not a simple opposition:



The possibility of irony arises when a gap opens between pretense as it is made possible in a social practice and an aspiration or ideal which ... seems to transcend the life and social practice in which that pretense is made. The pretense seems at once to capture and miss the aspiration. (Lear, 2011, p. 11)

I understand that responding to this ironic gap requires a dynamic and open process of “dis/re/connecting”. I dis/connect from the familiar (e.g., my successful teaching) and simultaneously re/connect with it to complicate it in different dimensions, including ethical concerns (e.g., What are the differences between good teaching and successful teaching?) and political questions (e.g., Who determines whose success?). The dis/connecting process is not a total breakaway from constraints, but a loosening process, leaving a gap where I can breathe. Disconnecting is always mitigated by re/connecting in renewed ways. I gave second thoughts about and took an enduring look at the fantasies of the formal teacher education program. I reimagined teaching beyond being successful and effective measured against students’ performance. In the enduring moments, I created possibilities of connecting and reconnecting anew to challenge and transcend dominant discourses around teaching. With leaving and returning, I started to re-see the podium that I stood behind too protective of my authority; I re-saw the exercise books mounted on the table of each student bizarre and excessive; I re-saw the possibility of sharing my own story of “immature love” with the worried parents. The root language of dis/re/connecting is *connect*: we are always connected with the past, with others, and with ourselves, yet in reimagined ways. Indeed, my particular location in the world is always nourished, informed, constrained or haunted by the ghost of the past (Doll, 2017).

This dynamic and embodied dis/re/connecting process subjectivizes impotentiality, carving space for tensions and new connections. In impotentiality, there are elements of disconnecting from the prescribed, which enables a distance for us to witness and hence reconnect in fresh ways. I relived the moments of my not being able to respond to the worried parents. I felt the tension between the connection with my own past and the dominant norms that usually prescribed that situation to “deal with the issue”. The disconnection from the dominant discourse contributed to my reconnection with the past. At the same time, the reconnection with the past empowered me to dis/re/connect with the present while undergoing the dominant discourse: I remained silent in front of the worried parents. My refraining from dealing with the issue of the “immature love” of their child is similar to Michelle’s advice to me that “I don’t know what to say”. Michelle and I both resisted the temptation to “move here to there” or to cater for what was expected or demanded of us: me assuring the parents to help them “solve” the problem (i.e., making their child focused on the schoolwork) or Michelle providing me quick and effective advice (i.e., how to get an A in her course). Our non-action happened to hold an impotential space, a space that allowed us to disconnect temporarily from the prescribed goals or the next steps, and simultaneously reconnected us to ourselves in the particular situated moments, historically, culturally and (inter)subjectively with imaginations. Dis/re/connecting process is poetically and creatively transforming one’s subjectivity in the “/” in-between moment and space, a place for study. Impotentiality emerges in those moments and spaces and we are enabled to “move beyond problematic formulations of learning and rediscover the uniqueness of studying” (Lewis, 2014a, p. 334). Studying dwells in the tension between isolation and relation, disconnection and reconnection. They are not contrary moments, yet they always coexist and enable one another.



Dis/re/connecting creates an impotential space to make a claim “I would prefer not to” (Melville, 2004) possible. I “would prefer not to” read the required books during my undergraduate study; I “would prefer not to” take up a profession in business which could promise a financial reward; during my Ph.D. study, I “would prefer not to” do empirical researches which are considered as the orthodox research paradigm. After graduation, when securing a stable job at university was the goal of most Ph.D. graduates, I did not just do it. For me, a decent university job is indeed appealing, yet it is not as important, urgent or as mysterious and interesting as self-understanding. I gave talks on education to the public, built collaborative relationships with Chinese universities, organized workshops for high school teachers and tutored students by designing a course on philosophical and critical thinking, formed a “Decameron Today” with two friends to share feelings, thoughts with each other on a weekly basis in the pandemic. During my post-doctoral appointment as a moderator for the Curriculum Studies in Canada Seminar series (2020-2021). I was intrigued by the talks, pondering what had been shared for days after, bathing in intellectual light. The blissful moments for me were talking with Dr. Pinar over the phone, chatting with David and Anne via skype and zoom in “off the record” ways without particular agendas or imminent tasks. Sometimes, I sat in the backyard for the whole morning, walked deep into the forest, and practiced yoga. In doing and undoing, action and non-action, I seemed to effortlessly hold an impotential place for study, an endless study about myself and the world.

These moments are always connected back to the past with my unaccomplished aspirations, unanswered puzzles and unfinished conversations. I do not hope to resolve this incompleteness. In these moments of incompleteness and unfinishedness, I live impotentially. I enliven the concept: I do not overcome my potential to achieve impotentiality. Instead, impotentiality brings wholeness and wholeness to potentiality. This creative tension reclaims my educational freedom and helps me resist the commodifying and homogenizing forces of “harness[ing] and actual[izing] in the name of neoliberal entrepreneurialism” (Lewis, 2014a, p. 334). It is not the result of criticizing, negating or overcoming, but a process of re-describing, recounting and recapitulating. Returning to where and what I was, I reimagine it for a renewed future. Returning to what it means to be human is to become a human.

Agamben recently criticized quarantine during the pandemic as being “in a perverse vicious circle, the limitation of freedom imposed by governments is accepted in the name of a desire for safety, which has been created by the same governments who now intervene to satisfy it” (Agamben, 2020). This is where I depart from Agamben’s thoughts. I appreciate alternative ways of (re)connecting, transforming this impossible situation into more possibilities. The social distance policy during the pandemic indeed delimits mobility, but it might create new understandings and opportunities for people to reconnect in and to our own stillness, in reverence for life. Quarantine makes ordinary travelling and moving extraordinary. However, if we come into more reflective and sensitive connections as a result of the crisis, we are being encouraged to go deeper into ourselves and at the same time be more aware of and in awe of the unpredictable world we dwell in, rather than being trapped in a hectic mode of constant “moving” from here to there: job promotions, graduations, next steps and next destinations. We constantly negotiate what it means to be free in a relationship with one another during the most uncertain and unprecedented occurrences. Our freedom is not merely constrained by the quarantine policy, but reimaged and reconnected to our moving and not moving. Isn’t that being impotential?

## The dynamic stillness of *Dao*



This autobiographical-allegorical inquiry into impotentiality returns me to my own heritage—Daoism in China. In the preceding preludes of yielding and suspending, wondering and wandering, dis/re/connecting, I allegorize the concept of impotentiality. I find that reactivating my lived experiences seems to thicken the notion of impotentiality with nuances and subtleties. In this section, I will briefly discuss Laozi's *dao* and how it might speak to impotentiality in *dao*'s "dynamic stillness" (Lao Tzu, 2008, p. 53).

Like impotentiality, *dao* does not dichotomize. I believe it is worth citing Laozi in length here:

Everyone recognizes beauty  
     only because of ugliness  
 Everyone recognizes virtue  
     only because of sin

Life and death are born together  
 Difficult and easy  
 Long and short  
 High and low—  
     all these exist together  
 Sound and silence blend as one  
 Before and after arrive as one

The sage acts without action  
     and teaches without talking  
 All things flourish around him  
     and he does not refuse any one of them  
 (Lao Tzu, 2008, p. 3)

As Laozi suggests, clay is molded to form a cup only because the void space within could allow it to hold water (Lao Tzu, 2008). Action and non-action do not contradict each other. Rather, a bowl does not have contrary parts or sharp angles; the space and the wall make one another possible. On the one hand, *dao* is the wall of a bowl, endless and incomprehensible, disturbing and defying the binary between stillness and movement. The wall seems to define the still bowl, while the wall is formed by the never-ending circling movement of every bit of the clay particles. On the other hand, *dao* is also the voidness in the wall of a bowl. The ontological *dao* is located in the nothingness, emptiness and non-existence.

*Dao* is doing not and doing everything (Lao Tzu, 2008). As Lin Yutang interprets *dao*, it does not plan or design; it usually does nothing. However, everything has grown from it. Hence, *dao* does everything by not doing it (Lin, 2009). Stephen Mitchell also suggests that *dao* does nothing, yet through it all things are done (Lao Tzu, 1999). I believe *dao* aligns with impotentiality as they both lie in the tension between making an effort to actualize one's potential and refraining from the compulsion to realize that potential. With *dao*'s dynamic stillness, both *yang* and *yin* are immanently underway all the time and in harmonious confrontation with each other. Daoist *yin-yang* wisdom could be compared with study and learning: study-*yin* transcends learning-*yang* by letting it idle in their tensioned impotential space.



[B]oth learning-*yang* and study-*yin* are immanently happening all the time and in confrontation with each other, allowing for the happening of study-*yin* to ascend and let idle the dominant learning-*yang* at certain moments. It is the weak study-*yin* that sustains and overcomes the strong learning-*yang*. (Zhao, 2019, p. 272)

Laozi emphasizes the effortlessness of *dao* and says that *dao* never strives, yet nothing is left undone (Lao Tzu, 2008). It seems to allow and invite the impotential space: suspending the planned and designed, yielding to the void space within, creatively enlivening nothingness with wondering and wandering, and dis/re/connecting with people and nature in courageous genuineness and dynamic stillness. The dynamic stillness seems to be comparable to the character of the cactus sitting quietly on windowsill beside piles of exercise books in my classroom more than twenty years ago. It appealed to me because of its contrast to the hectic classroom environment: it seemed quiet and still, pointing nowhere but everywhere like the pen between my fingers. It grew in every direction without moving, gently, but most determinately. Cactus profaned its surroundings with a determined manner of defiance; it generated and renewed meanings by “poking the mayhem”—awakening me inwardly, forming the spaciousness or voidness in me. As Laozi observes when a thing has existence alone, it is a mere deadweight. Only when it has *wu* (voidness), in its very spaciousness, does it have life (Lao Tzu, 2008).

### Lingering thoughts

Re-searching my stories autobiographically, I allegorize Agamben’s radical conception of impotentiality. I embed and enrich the concept in my nuanced lived experiences. Understanding allegorically implies self-consciously incorporating the past into the present, gesturing towards the educational significance of what is studied. I point to the moments that I “would prefer not to” (Melville, 2004), that is, to hold my impotential space by yielding and suspending, wondering and wandering, and dis/re/connecting. I “inquire into them... [to] move beyond regarding stories as fixed entities... , restory [myself] and perhaps begin to shift the institution, social and cultural narratives in which we are embedded” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 34).

Agamben’s conception of impotentiality, I believe, defies the sense of actualization and dwells in the space of “would prefer not to”. The inoperativeness and effortlessness are often negated and criticized in today’s schooling system which predominantly emphasizes targets, measures and competitions. Impotentiality, in contrast, lets go of a sense of ending in a playful and at-ease manner. To live at ease is “to live without any vocation, without any desire for mastery, without any desire to reach an end, beyond ease itself” (Lewis, 2018, p. 346). One could then temporarily suspend the forces of the “economic, social, cultural, religious, or political pervading institutions that would influence, cajole, or direct students” (Phelan et al., 2015, p. 31). Attending to the space of impotentiality is not only to challenge existing norms: it involves withdrawing from them to allow distance from them, enabling the inner spaciousness that profanes them in playfulness and newness. The potentiality that exists is precisely the potentiality that is “able *not* to pass over into actuality” (Agamben, 1998, p. 40). Impotentiality is “an ‘ambiguity’ or an ‘undifferentiated chaos’ that resists any clear distinction between wanting and not wanting, affirmation and negation, occurrence and non-occurrence that keeps open the ‘luminous spiral of the possible’” (Agamben, 1999, pp. 254–257). Impotentiality dynamically rests on a life of ease, writes Agamben, is a life “which contemplates its (own) power to act” (Agamben, 2011b, p. 251)—or not.



Impotentiality could provide a space for education that acknowledges “your wildness could not be contained in my poem” (Leggo, 2016, p. 36). Impotentiality highlights an “open relationality, a relation or potential to, where the infinitive is not governed by anything that already is... [we embrace] a future of open, unimpeded becoming” (Colebrook, 2008, p. 112). What has to be noted here is that despite its yearning for openness, impotentiality is not absolute freedom as if every day is “a fresh new start”. Rather, it is always, and has to be, constrained in our ethical engagement with others, situated in our historicity and particularity. Such a constraint itself allows the meanings to be (re)generated allegorically. *Skhole*, a place originally meant for free time, yearns for a space of impotentiality, inviting each one of us to return to ourselves, to understand ourselves as a human being.

## Notes

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