



# Revisiting ‘Asia as method’ in education research: problems and prospects

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This brief article serves as the introduction for the *Asia Pacific Education Review* Special Issue on “Revisiting ‘Asia as Method’ in Education Research: Toward Ontologies and Epistemologies of Difference”. Educational researchers have long sought insights for domestic education by drawing on lessons learned from abroad (Bereday, 1964; Bickmore et al., 2017; Kandel, 1933; Masemann, 1976). The home context is normalized within these traditions as the centre from which the other is understood. But rarely has the field examined the ontological changes of educators themselves working long-term abroad, and the implications that this holds for challenging and transforming accepted theoretical and pedagogical norms of the field.

As long-term international work provides insights that transcend simple travel abroad or traditional ethnography, this Special Issue explores how university educators working abroad in the long-term experience ontological and epistemological transformations. It is suggested that a longer period of employment and life abroad provides unique insights as the educator goes through personal ontological and epistemological transformations via ‘border thinking’ and ‘foreignness’ that informs his/her analysis (Kim, 2014, 2020; Rappleye & Komatsu, 2017). This change is not always explicit, however. Such transformations may occur silently and slowly over time.

Looking explicitly toward scholarly reflection as a means to examine ontological and epistemological changes more intentionally, this Special Issue draws on insights from 10 transnational scholars who have crossed borders for long-term work in/from Asia to/from Europe and North America. In some cases, the educators have returned “home”, but not without significant changes in their educational assumptions and actions.

Theorizing the borders, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) writes, “the borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where the lower, middle and upper classes touch” (preface). She goes on to illustrate with the US-Mexico border as an example, “The US-Mexico border is an open wound where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (p. 3). Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006) too write, “Border thinking is the epistemology of the exteriority; that is of the outside created from the inside” (p. 206). Educators working in international contexts encounter these ontological and epistemological borders daily—some more severely than others—and are brought to grapple with the role of Otherness in their scholarly practices.

At the same time, the Western gaze in recent years has been critiqued as the hegemonic lens through which education is theorized (Silova et al., 2020; Takayama, 2016; Zhang et al., 2015). Many scholars across Asia and elsewhere have called on Asian and non-Asian educators alike to think beyond Western-centricity and beyond domination-oriented thinking (Alatas, 2000; Chen, 2010; Connell, 2007; Gerrard et al., 2022; Grosfoguel, 2008; Hayhoe, 2001; Kester, 2022; Lee, 2019; Mignolo, 2007; Santos, 2019; Takayama et al., 2018; Tejada et al., 2003). These scholars argue against Western dominance and against the adoption and adaptation of Western (as well as domestic exclusionary) concepts as mechanisms of control by scholars and the political elite (Kim, 2016; Stein & Andreotti, 2016; Vickers, 2020). Turning, then, to learn from Asia is the common unifying point in the authors’ reflective narratives throughout this Special Issue.

Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010), for example, writes:

To confront the long-lasting impact of ‘leaving Asia for America’ (tuōyǎ rùměi) since the end of the Second World War in East Asia in general, and Taiwan in particular, [I] put forward ‘Asia as Method’ as a critical proposition to transform the existing knowledge structure and at the same time to transform ourselves.

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The potential of Asia as method is this: using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. On this basis, the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilized to provide alternative horizons and perspectives. This method of engagement, I believe, has the potential to advance a different understanding of world history. (p. 212)

As a transnational scholar myself who migrated from the “West” to Asia in 2004 for long-term international work in higher education, Chen's (2010) invitation to practice Asia as Method provokes three significant shifts. First, it turns the scholarly gaze from the West to Asia, not simply as a site for data extraction but as a theoretical home—one that offers a counterpoint to normative Western theory. Second, it lays the groundwork for alternative ways of knowing and being, what Chen refers to as “alternative horizons”. Third, it challenges the geopolitics of knowledge production that creates hierarchies of knowledge often prioritizing “Western” scholarship. These three shifts are built upon a moral imperative to right the wrongs of ongoing colonial legacies and an ethical stance in relation to the imperial knowledge project (Connell, 2007; Mackinlay & Barney, 2014; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012).

Hitherto, much has been written in the English-language scholarship on alternative knowledge practices drawing on decolonial thinking from Latin America, Africa, and Indigenous communities (e.g., Abdi, 2012; Andreotti et al., 2015; Battiste, 2013; Grande, 2004; Grosfoguel, 2008; Mignolo, 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Zondi, 2016; Peters, 2015; Santos, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012), but less work in education has employed the decolonial thinking of East and Southeast Asian scholars, although there are some notable exceptions (see Park, 2017; Takayama et al., 2016; You, 2020; Zhang et al., 2015). Thus, this issue explores decoloniality and transformative practices from a perspective other than that commonly read within the journals of comparative and international education, a perspective more relevant to the experiences, discourses, and contexts in which the authors of this Special Issue (have) live(d) and work(ed): East and Southeast Asia.

Serrano-Munoz (2021), for example, claims, “exchanges with East Asia on [decolonial intellectual and activist struggles] reflect a somewhat timid response. Calls to incorporate decolonial ideas in the understanding of East Asian experiences do not seem to go much beyond statements expressing resolutions and will” (p. 6); and Moosavi (2020) argues, “one of the most valuable aspects of Chen's contribution is his recognition that Southern scholars often overlook scholarship from other parts of the Global

South” (p. 340). This Special Issue, then, brings together the decolonial scholarship of Kuan-Hsing Chen with that of other Eastern and Southern scholars, such as Syed Hussein Alatas, Syed Farid Alatas, Homi Bhabha, Gurminder Bhambra, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Raewyn Connell, Paulin Hountondji, Walter Dignolo, Edward Said, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, as well as the decolonial ‘border thinking’ of Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa<sup>1</sup>. Importantly, the issue aims to open “alternative (knowledge) horizons” for education research and practice by thinking in/through East and Southeast Asian decolonial thought.

All in all, the papers in the Special Issue offer insights into the ontological and epistemological transformations that transnational educators in and beyond East and Southeast Asia experience through reflecting on their extended periods of international work, and the implications this holds for decolonial practice. The authors are responding to these three questions:

1. How are educators' theoretical and pedagogical practices informed by migration across contexts?
2. What sorts of ontological and epistemological transformations might educators experience during long-term periods abroad?
3. How might these transformations initiate decolonial moves in regard to educational pedagogy, policy and practice?

Importantly, beyond examining Asia as a defined territory or object that is distinct from the West, the authors look toward the ways that Asia, the West, and the Global South co-exist within each other. Specifically, drawing on Kuan-Hsing Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method* and Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands*—works from the discipline of Cultural Studies with a specific pedagogical purpose: to question ontological and epistemological erasures—the scholars re-center East and Southeast Asia within educational discourse, not as an object of analysis but as an agential subject. They especially draw on concepts from Chen and Anzaldúa such as ‘nationalism, nativism, civilizationalism’ (Chen), ‘critical syncretism’ (Chen), ‘inter-referencing’ (Chen), ‘nepantlera’ (Anzaldúa), ‘cultural tyranny, intimate terrorism, tolerance for ambiguity’ (Anzaldúa), and ‘personal anxiety/ies’ (Chen) to make sense of scholarly and pedagogical experiences in transnational contexts. Together, the authors use methods of autoethnography, contemplative

<sup>1</sup> In naming these scholars, the intent here is not to essentialize who/what/when/where is an Eastern and Southern scholar—as such identities are not straightforward and without problem—but to point out the critical/non-mainstream theoretical influences that the authors in this Special Issue draw upon.

inquiry, thinking with theory, and personal narrative to explore Asia as Method and expand the decolonial options available to educators today. But the authors also detail some skepticism and ambivalence toward what they perceive as dualities expressed in Chen's concept.

In the first paper of the issue, "Romanticizing Decolonization and Asian Epistemology: Reflections on Identity and Space", Jack Lee (2023)—writing from the contexts of Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Norway, Singapore, Taiwan, and the UK—problematizes "how epistemology as practice can reveal a colonial mindset even among academics who engage in social justice discourse and international work." To illustrate, in one moment in the paper, he shares a shocking story of a British colleague who claims that *Asia as Method* is not read among decolonial scholars in the UK: "Sorry to burst your bubble", his colleague states, "and expose your echo chamber, but no one has mentioned that book in my field. Perhaps only those working in Asia read this!" Lee explains these words are enveloped within forms of lingering coloniality.

Yet, Lee's critique is equally applied to what he perceives as uncritical knowledge practices in much decolonial education scholarship. He states, "many decolonial scholars and activists continue to view different forms of epistemology as mutually exclusive—a contestation of knowledge that replicates realist thinking in international relations." Continuing his point, he argues, "This antiquated view of knowledge is unhelpful for intellectual progress and prone to the nativism, nationalism, and civilizationalism Chen cautioned against." Lee concludes the paper by calling for more critical interrogation of decolonial thought and for scholarship that avoids reductive categories of identity.

In the second paper, "'Asia as Method' as a Quest of the Spirit and Finding We Togetherness: A Collaborative Autoethnography", Yishin Khoo and Jing Lin (2023) continue the critique of the dangers of binary thinking in decolonial research. They write from the contexts of Canada, China, Malaysia, Taiwan, and the United States, seeking to draw on intercultural lessons and Chinese spiritual and holistic traditions. They state, "our ontological and epistemological transformations brought about by Eastern contemplative practices have enabled us to see that there is not such a thing as 'Asia' or 'North America'. Rather, we interare and we are Earth citizens." Lin, for example, shares a moving narrative of border crossing from China to the United States, Canada, and back to China throughout her career, where she has sought to reengage spiritual wisdom practices. Together, Khoo and Lin draw on many years of transnational and transdisciplinary education work across diverse settings.

At one point in the paper, they reference meditation, tai chi, and Qigong as contemplative pathways to help undo

ingrained dominant patterns of knowing and being. They conclude the paper by calling for further engagement with spiritual and meditative practices in comparative and international education, stating "compassion and love are to be treated as the highest skills we should learn and practice... these require turning to ourselves, our vital life energy, and our innermost purpose living on this earth." Their paper seeks to disrupt strict East/West dichotomies and challenge the mind/body and human/nature dualities of Cartesian thought.

In the third paper, Nhài Thi Nguyen and Yeow-Tong Chia (2023)—from Vietnam and Singapore, respectively—reflect on their experiences as transnational comparative educators working in Australia. In their paper, "Decolonizing Research Imagination: A Journey of Reshaping Research Epistemology and Ontology", they suggest that decolonizing one's research imagination contributes to regaining scholarly agency through transforming ontology and epistemology. In particular, they argue for transnational educators to overcome "Western colonized 'imaginaries' and a compliant research imagination" that "traps the researchers into deploying secondary imagination, which is purely 'reproductive, imitative, or combination imagination' (Kenway and Fahey 2008, p. 9)." Nguyen, for example, shares a story that the learning of English in youth helped contribute to her later opportunities to study in English-speaking universities. She credits this with providing her key life chances. But Nguyen shares uncertainty on whether the Vietnamese or Western imaginary prevails in her thinking. Nguyen and Chia both state that they struggle with this in-betweenness as scholars who work across national and disciplinary spaces. In the end, they argue—drawing on Zhang et al. (2015)—that to overcome a colonized mind one should develop a "defiant" imagination.

The fourth paper is Ayaka Yoshimizu's (2023) "Student-Centered, 'Embodied Inter-referencing' as Antiracist and Anticolonial Pedagogy". Yoshimizu writes of an experimental pedagogical approach that she developed and implemented in her classes in a university in Vancouver in order to address epistemic forms of injustice. She works largely with Asian heritage students teaching a course on Japanese literature. In the course, many of her students requested more classroom space to learn and reflect on their Asian identities. Yoshimizu put this request into action. She details how she pedagogically responded through a form of 'embodied inter-referencing' drawing on the thinking of Kuan-Hsing Chen in *Asia as Method*. For her, 'embodied inter-referencing' entails students discussing what they have learned from the course content together in reflection on their own and each other's experiences as Asian heritage students. She explains, the aim is "to move beyond the convention of studying Asian culture by referencing Euro-(North-) American theory, knowledge, and experience."

The objective is to look Eastward. Before concluding, she shares stories from the students indicating that the approach is received positively.

In the fifth paper, “Unraveling the EFL Expat: Challenging Privilege through Borderlands and Asia as Method”, Brandon Sherman (2023) employs Chen’s *Asia as Method* and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* to interrogate his identity as a past American EFL expat in Korea. His analysis aims to disrupt dualistic perspectives of West/East yet he grapples with the dilemmas in attempting to do so when crossing theoretical borders. In the paper, he writes that “theoretical expatriates [i.e., non-Asian scholars using Asian theory] recognize that they are operating in a sphere that did not emerge for them, does not belong to them, and does not center them. They work with theories in the sense of working together alongside theories and the scholars that they center.” Sherman continues, theoretical expatriates “contribute to the theory, enriching it without claiming it. They avoid operating with a colonizer logic, or in other words working with theory in the sense of using it, by claiming, appropriating, self-insulating, and self-centering. They don’t plant flags in theory, reassert colonial frames of reference, or treat theory as a resource to be mined.” Sherman’s critical reflexivity as a White scholar and hesitance to employ Asia as Method to think with/through theory reveals the complexities of aiming to de-center the West, especially as critical theoretical work encounters rigid categories of geography/space, nationality/belonging, and race/ethnicity.

In the sixth paper, “At the Borderlands of Higher Education in Japan and Korea: A Duoethnography”, Jonathan Damiani and Peter Ghazarian (2023) draw on Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* to theorize their experiences working for many years in international higher education in East Asia. They share their personal narratives reflecting on their time teaching in Japan and Korea, respectively, and the challenges they faced when reintegrating into American higher education after returning to the US. Damiani writes, “Within weeks of my arrival [back] in The United States, I learned first-hand that just as many foreign faculty’s international academic experiences were disregarded in the Asia–Pacific, that my experiences as an international scholar were met with distrust.” Ghazarian echoes, “I was surprised by the lack of respect with which faculty were treated in the US... the actions of administrators in the US suggested a view of faculty members as a disposable resource... This treatment... contrasted sharply with the sense of being a respected professional that I felt in Korea.” They conclude, “While both authors’ foreign institutions valued a US doctoral degree and experience, both returned home to some hostility and locals that did not trust or value an international presence.” For Damiani and Ghazarian, navigating between cultures “means resisting the cultural

tyranny of both their native and host cultures and having the tolerance of ambiguity to explore and develop a new third way that exists somewhere between those cultures.” This positions the paper together with those before in the Special Issue that lean toward cultural hybridity.

The papers in the Special Issue conclude with Le Ha Phan’s (2023) “Re-opening an *Asia-Scar*: Engaging (Troubled) Emotions in Knowing, Knowledge Production and Scholarly Endeavors”. This paper offers a nuanced analysis and narrative of working within and across the educational cultures of Vietnam, the US, and Brunei. Unlike the other authors in the Special Issue, Phan is the only one (aside from Kester and Takayama, in the collective response paper) currently working in a higher education institution in Asia. Phan argues that “Asian countries’ and their institutions’ increased aspirations for and adherence to the idea of *the West*... is intellectually and emotionally challenging to the decoloniality and decolonization endeavor in academia.” She draws on her personal reflections, notes, and email exchanges with others concerning her emotional response to a previous debate that she was a part of regarding the practice of Asia as Method. Turning to Chen’s concept, she states, “articulating the interrelationships between emotion, aspirations and demand for change is pivotal in many scholars’ scholarship; and I can see Chen (2010) as one” but “I do not treat inter-Asian referencing as the golden rule, as I am of the view that knowledge production is intermixing and organically generative by any encounters, and hence should be nurtured as such. Importantly, my approach is dialectic whereby I see both Asia and the West being their full selves with all possible complexities.”

Thus, Phan’s paper brings the Special Issue back to the earlier theoretical critiques of decoloniality and distrust of binaries. Phan’s paper re-centres the ambivalence of embracing decoloniality yet questioning essentialist claims of “the West” in the literature and as practiced by East and Southeast Asian institutions that reify the notions of Western superiority. It is an emotional, anxious, and critical paper that illustrates the complexities (often fraught with emotional unresolve) when initiating decolonial moves in educational pedagogy, policy and practice. A special feature of her paper—which was composed last in the timeline of the papers—is her inter-referencing with the debates and arguments of the earlier papers. Readers will notice this inter-referencing throughout.

Finally, the Special Issue comes to a close with a response paper titled “Learning from Asia: An APER Collective Response to the Special Issue on ‘Asia as Method’” (Kester et al., 2023). The paper offers reflections, critiques, and insights from three renowned international scholars—Vandra Masemann, Keita Takayama, and Ruth Hayhoe—who provide their unique perspectives on the issue to further the debates on Asia as Method, decoloniality in education,

Western-centricity, and transnational academic mobilities. These debates are further put into conversation with those discussions on Asia as Method happening in other scholarly journals today.

In conclusion, this Special Issue has come together in a period of intersecting global crises: the Covid-19 pandemic, Ukraine War, global energy crisis, anti-Asian racism, and climate crisis, to name but a few. The present moment, then, offers a critical juncture for reflecting on the problems and prospects of knowing and being differently in an ever-changing world. In the end, as the authors in this Special Issue have demonstrated, revisiting Asia as Method (and border thinking) may offer one further avenue through which to theorize and practice research and pedagogy in a different key. As decolonization is an ongoing intellectual project, this Special Issue is an invitation to (re)imagine alternative knowledge possibilities in/with/for Asia.

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