

Life History and cross-cultural thought: Engaging an intercultural curriculum

Hongyu Wang

Oklahoma State University

Abstract

This paper provides a cross-cultural reading of two contemporary philosophers' – Feng Youlan (1895-1990) and Alan Watts (1915-1973) – life and thought to inform today's cross-cultural and intercultural education. This paper discusses Feng's and Watts' opening to another culture and their contributions to integrating Eastern and Western thought, and in particular focuses on their intellectual transitional periods when the connections and the tension between life and thought were highlighted. This life history analysis initiates an East/West dialogue at the level of educational thought through an experiential approach.

Introduction

In a rapidly globalized – simultaneously fragmented – society, engaging cross-cultural and inter-civilizational dialogues becomes crucial to vitalizing contemporary education. Although the binary image of the East and the West is problematic (Aoki, 1996/2005), this paper, rather than reinforcing such a dualism, intends to foreground a mutually enhanced relationship and a productive cross-cultural interchange so as to highlight the necessity of working across difference in an internationalized context in which education is implicated. East/West dialogues in the West have (re-)emerged in recent decades but are more visible in philosophy, religion, literature, and sociology than in education. However, the irony is that education lies at the heart of Eastern thought. In-depth cross-cultural dialogue at the level of educational thought is imperative. Educational scholars have begun to pay more attention to it (Aoki, 2005; Eppert & Wang, 2008; Li, 2002; Nakagawa, 2000; Smith, 1996; Wang, 2004), and we need to deepen, enrich, and advance transnational understanding and interchange in the Western education. Situated in these recent moves, this paper adopts a fresh lens for understanding the relationship between life and thought through a cross-cultural approach to inform our efforts to create intercultural educational experiences.¹

This approach is adopted for several reasons. First, personhood situated in history, place, and culture is essential to educational thought in Eastern (particularly Chinese) philosophical traditions. Personal cultivation is the foundation of building harmonious social, communal, and cosmic relationships in Confucianism, but it is a very different notion from the Western individualism (Wang, 2004). An interdependent relationship between self and society makes it important to transform the self in order to mobilize the social, but such a self can never be fully separate from the bigger cultural context. Using an Eastern approach of personhood rather than the Western notion of individualism, the paper intends to decenter the dominance

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Center for the Studies of the Internationalization of Curriculum Studies at the University of British Columbia on September 25, 2007. My thanks to William F. Pinar and participants in the discussion for their helpful feedback.



TO CITE THIS ARTICLE PLEASE INCLUDE ALL OF THE FOLLOWING DETAILS:

Wang, Hongyu (2009). Life History and cross-cultural thought: Engaging an intercultural curriculum. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* 6 (2) <http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci> <access date>

of the neoliberal tendency in globalization (Smith, 2003).

Second, currently a lot of discussions about globalization stay at the macro institutional level (Hershock, Mason, & Hawkins, 2007; Odin & Manicas, 2004), but global transformation cannot be imagined without personal transformation. William F. Pinar (2009) argues for the significance of autobiography over identity politics in the worldliness of cosmopolitanism that privileges the meanings of lived experiences for situated personhood that goes beyond the totalizing abstraction. In the Chinese context, either historically or contemporarily, the link between intellectual development and life history in autobiography or biography has remained strong. A scholar's life journey itself is both intellectual and educational (for instance, see Tu, 1976). So using a life history approach to an East/West dialogue in education embodies an integrated perspective for understanding personal cultivation and global transformation.

Third, this approach of thought in action and action in thought is inherently related to an organic viewpoint in which intellect is not separated from emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of humanity. Yet this non-separation does not mean sameness among the different aspects. Intellectual history may intersect or disrupt life history or vice versa, but what is important is to understand the dynamics between intellectual contour and experiential trajectory. This dynamic is especially meaningful for today's educational task, as experiencing differences is more and more a part of everyday life for most teachers and students: How can we make sense of such an experiencing in a most educative way? In addition, this lens does not follow an instrumental approach to education as an application of philosophical thought but understands education as an inherently intellectual and experiential process of meaning making. As you will see, the unfolding of life history itself is educational.

David Geoffrey Smith (2008) argues that the cross-cultural exchange between the East and the West is not new but became a hidden story after the Western Enlightenment pursuit of science shadowed all other forms of human possibilities. Due to the unequal power relationship that continues today, the cross-cultural exchange has been more uni-directional, from West to East, than mutual. To recover a certain sense of reciprocal relationship, I offer a cross-cultural reading of two contemporary figures – Feng Youlan (1895-1990) and Alan Watts (1915-1973) – whose life, philosophy, and spirituality in their efforts to integrate Eastern and Western thought demonstrate their mutual openness to the other culture. They are also exemplary teachers as they teach in both formal and informal ways. This reading does not provide any comprehensive analysis of Feng's or Watts' thought or life, which would be far beyond the scope of this paper, but highlights several moments when the intersections and disconnections of life and thought in a cross-cultural context are most illuminating in order to inform intercultural education.

The choices of these two important figures are both purposeful and accidental, so there exists an asymmetrical relationship. Although they lived in a similar time, they were from quite different backgrounds. While Feng was a philosopher who had stayed more or less at university settings, Watts was of popular kind as part of the 1960s counter cultural movement in the U.S.; Feng's study did not have any strong religious bend, but Watts' efforts to integrate Buddhism and Christianity had deep religious and spiritual implications; Feng followed the road of academic training while Watts followed the path of self-study. Western academic philosophers do not seem to have high regard for Watts perspectives (Peter Hershock, 2006, personal communication). Due to the intellectual tradition in China, as I mention earlier, resources on scholars' autobiographical and biographical accounts are not lacking, but in the Western field of philosophy, it is difficult to find a compatible philosopher who lived through the last century and extensively engaged with Eastern thought and, at the same time, whose life histories I have access to in the public domain. Alan Watts is the only

person I can locate currently for the purpose of my study. Perhaps the difficulty in locating such resources itself is telling of how we treat the relationship between intellect and person differently across the ocean.² But their differences are less important than their lessons for us to understand the mutual engagement of East and West in a transnational, global time. Their asymmetrical relationship perhaps can inform more of the complexity of intercultural dynamics that is educational.

My own encounter with Feng's works was incidental as I happened to pick up his autobiography in a Chinese bookstore on a 'homecoming' trip a few years ago. I was interested in knowing the stories of the Chinese intellectual in his generation. It was not his philosophical thought but his life across a century in the dramas of China-West conflict that caught my attention. My interest in Alan Watts began with reading his book (1975), *Tao: The Watercourse Way*. I was most impressed by the flow of the book and the comfort the author takes in blending the Western and the Eastern ways of thought. Particularly, Al Chung-liang Huang's foreword describing Watts as a person and as a teacher with joyous playfulness fascinated me. As a person from another Chinese generation, who is currently working at an American university, I imagine that Feng's and Watts' stories may illuminate the puzzles and paradoxes of my own cross-cultural life and work as an educator and many others who are teaching and learning in today's transnational society.

This paper introduces Feng and Watts' brief biographies first and then discusses what initiated their openness to thought and culture that is dramatically different from their own. Particularly, if Feng's travel to the West was due to the intellectual trend during his time, what made Watts pay attention to Eastern thought when it was highly marginalized in the West in his youth? Next is the analysis of how life and thought influence each other especially at those transitional moments. Both connections and disjunctions will be addressed. Finally, the paper highlights what we as educators can learn from this life history analysis to engage intercultural and cross-cultural education in today's world in which globality and locality interact with each other.

Biographical sketches

I choose Feng and Watts for this study as both had extensively engaged in their counterpart culture and thought even though they did not spend much time in a different country. But their integration of thought and culture that is dramatically different from their own is sustained in their writings and public activities. Both lived through the turbulence of their own times and traveled across national borders intellectually and spiritually. Feng was a Chinese who finished his doctoral studies in the U.S. and his interest in Western thought would have continued his lifetime without the interruption of the Chinese politics after 1949. Watts was born in England and migrated to the U.S. in his youth but was devoted to studying and teaching Eastern thought throughout his lifetime.

Feng Youlan (1895-1990) was a contemporary Chinese philosopher. With wisdom in Chinese thought and formal studies in Western philosophy, he wrote two volumes of *A History of Chinese Philosophy* in the 1930s, six books with the intention to re-create Chinese philosophy in the 1940s, and finished the revised version, seven volumes of *A History of*

² This paper is the first step in my long-term qualitative, life history, project to understand contemporary cross-cultural engagement between Chinese with Western thought and between Americans with Chinese thought and the impacts of such engagements on their teaching in higher education. Relying on publicly available resources to understand the lives and thought of Feng and Watts will be helpful for my design of the fieldwork. What will be particularly interesting about that project will be the stories of American professors, since they are seldom told, and the stories of women, which I did not find enough resources to write in this paper.

Chinese Philosophy in the 1980s. He graduated from Beijing University in 1918 and traveled to the U.S. in 1919 where he finished his doctoral studies at Columbia University, studying with American philosophers including John Dewey. He returned home in 1923 and later traveled back to the U.S. several times and also made academic visits to European countries. Living through the establishment of the two new Chinas in 1911 and in 1949 respectively, both influenced by different branches of Western thought, and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which denounced both capitalism and China's own traditions, he went through all the up-and-downs of the China-West conflicts in the 20th century. The cultural conflict between the East and the West preoccupied his philosophical attention throughout his lifetime, and he responded to it differently in different life stages.

Alan Watts (1915-1973) was a philosopher of the popular kind, a spiritual teacher, and a charismatic public speaker, considered by some as a cultural icon of the 1960s' counter-cultural movement in the US. Watts was born in England but felt more at home with Chinese and Japanese arts than with his English education. Refusing to be confined by institutional constraints, he did not follow a formal academic path but engaged in Buddhist learning from his adolescence. He moved to New York in 1938. As he followed his own path, he gathered and intermingled with a diverse group of people from all over the world who shared his interests in Eastern thought, and he traveled to Japan several times later in his life. He wrote extensively and published prolifically, including 20 books. In particular, he was strongly influenced by Zen Buddhist spirituality, and attempted to integrate the mystical aspect of Christianity with Buddhist insights. His lifelong involvement with and teachings of Eastern thought to a Western audience greatly contributed to building bridges between Eastern and Western philosophy and spirituality.

Openings to a different thought

The paths onto which Feng and Watts opened to another thought and another culture were different. Western learning in China has had a long history since the 17th century due to religious missionaries and Western advancements in science and technology (Hu, 2005). At the turn of the 20th century, however, it took an intensified turn due to internal turbulence including the collapse of the Qing dynasty, the establishment of the Republic of China, the subsequent frequently-changing warlord governments, and the external forces of colonization by the West. It was a historical period when clashes of culture, politics, thought, and religion asked imperative questions about Western learning and Chinese learning, tradition and advancement, universal truth and national salvation. Despite and perhaps because of the turbulence, it became an active period for intellectual hybridity and freedom. Situated in such a background, Feng's attention to Western thought was hardly surprising. In a sense, as an intellectual of his time, he had to travel across the ocean in order to learn something new.

However, Feng started with Chinese learning since his father firmly believed that Chinese language and thought should be the basis of children's education, before engaging Western learning. Feng studied classical Chinese literature first with his mother and private teachers before his formal studies. At his time private tutoring of siblings at home was a common form of education although schools were also established either publically or privately. As he states in his autobiography (Feng, 1984/2004³), private learning at home also included a mixture of Chinese and Western knowledge since new knowledge such as geography was included. His father passed away when he was a teenager. Two years after his

³ I read and quote from the Chinese version of Feng's autobiography. An English translation of Feng's autobiography is available (translated by Mair, 2000). I list both books in the reference list.

father's death, with his mother's support (his mother not only supported her sons' education but also sent her daughter to the highest level of school, which was radical at the time), Feng went to public schools including a high school where English was the working language of teaching and learning, and later he passed the examination to enter Beijing University in 1915. When he was a student at Beijing University under Chancellor Cai Yuanpei's leadership, scholars from various schools of thought were invited to teach, and students had opportunities to study with professors ranging from the most conservative to the most radical. Influenced by German philosophy and the pre-industrialization Germany university model, Cai emphasized academic freedom and 'the independent development of the university as a center of a new culture, which was a synthesis of both Chinese and Western knowledge' (Lin, 2005, p. 49). Students were allowed maximum freedom to choose what they wanted to learn and how they could learn, and three student newspapers were published from Left, neutral, and Right positions respectively (Feng, 1984/2004). According to Feng, Cai's policy of channeling between the old and the new and integrating Chinese and Western learning served the purpose of paving new pathways. With the variety of thoughts present both within faculty and students, the clash between traditional Chinese culture and Western culture was evident at all levels, and the efforts to mediate between the two gave birth to new intellectual and cultural movements.

After his graduation in 1918 on the eve of the May Fourth Movement, it was a natural move for Feng to join in the tide of studying abroad and passed the exam for oversea students sponsored by his provincial government. He became a graduate student at Columbia University in 1919. In his autobiography (1984/2004), Feng described the event of going abroad in a similar tone as his description of leaving his hometown to go to another school in China. The intellectual climate of his time built a bridge for his transnational and cross-cultural move, but his continuous pursuit of new ideas and knowledge played an important role as the conservative force of sticking to the traditional way was equally strong.

Watts' interest in Eastern thought started with his childhood, but he went against the trend of his time as the world of the early days of 20th century was very much dominated by the West. Historically, there had been the Western encounters with Buddhism due to missionary works, commercial exchanges such as along the Silk Road, and fascinations with Eastern culture (Sutin, 2006). However, with the increasing power of the West over the world such an interest had seldom reached a broad audience and only had small groups of followers. The first Buddhist Society in England was established in 1907 (Humphreys, 1968) with 25 people attending the meeting; the first Buddhist organization in the U.S. was established in 1899, but it was organized by Japanese-Americans; and the First Zen Institute of New York was formed in 1930, but it attracted only a small group at the time (Layman, 1976). Not until the 1950s and 1960s did Buddhism and Zen attract much more attention among intellectuals, youth who rebelled against institutions and authorities, and common American people. Watts was certainly ahead of his time; in fact, he was credited as an influential leader in shaping an American approach to Zen in the middle of the last century, along with Japanese Zen master, D. T. Sukuzi and the Beats movement (Layman, 1976; Seager, 1999).

Watts did not feel at home with his English upbringing during his childhood, particularly the denial of sensuality and the body in fundamental Christianity. Although his mother's taste for Chinese and Japanese antiques and her marvelous embroidery skills made a great impression on him, he somehow felt distanced from her due to her fundamental Christian heritage. His father read to him the tales and poems about the East in the room where his mother showcased all her Oriental treasures. It was in that magic room where Watts claimed that he 'acquired an interior compass which led me to the East through the West' (Watts, 1971, p. 29). He found an affirmation of the body in Eastern thought to escape the alienation

of Western dualism and therefore ‘took refuge in Buddhism’ as ‘a method for clarifying and liberating one’s state of consciousness’ (p. 71) rather than as a religion. His close relationship with nature – birds, trees, flowers, stone, and sky – from his childhood also found resonance in Asian philosophies, art, and calligraphy which seemed to him to capture the flowing and sensual nature of life.

Thus as a 15 year old schoolboy, Watts declared himself a Buddhist and wrote to the founder of the Buddhist Lodge in London, Christmas Humphreys. (As an interesting side note, Christmas Humphreys himself was introduced to Buddhism when he was 17 and another Englishman pioneer before him, Ananda Metteyya, found a new world of Buddhism when he was 18 in 1890 reading *The Light of Asia* [Humphreys, 1968].) He regularly participated in the Lodge’s activities through commuting by train, learned from various mentors including those from other countries, and engaged in self-study through readings and meditations. He had distaste for discipline, institutions, and authority, rebelled against the formal educational system in England, and never attended any university. Watts’ university was certainly a different kind, and when he wrote his first book, *The Spirit of Zen*, he was only nineteen. This was the beginning of his lifelong journey to introduce Buddhism to a Western audience.

Cross-cultural engagements: From China to the West and back

According to Feng’s (1984/2004) own summary in his speech at Columbia University in 1982, his intellectual development went through three stages: in the first stage, he considered cultural difference as the difference between the East and the West; in the second stage, he considered cultural difference as a historical difference between the ancient and the modern; and in the third stage, he understood cultural difference as the difference between types of society.

Engaging in a critical analysis of Feng’s three interpretations is beyond the focus of this paper; I am most interested in the transitions between stages because they may highlight and dramatize both the link and the tension between life and thought. The transition from the first stage to the second stage happened during his study at Columbia University. The direct contact with American culture made him think more about what caused the prosperity of the West and the downfall of China. In 1922 he presented and published a paper on cultural difference as the difference between the East and the West, arguing that the underdevelopment of modern science in China, influenced by Chinese philosophy, was the weakness. However, as he further studied the history of philosophy and experienced American society on a first hand basis, he began to think that what was regarded as existing only in Eastern philosophy actually existed also in the history of Western philosophy, and vice versa, even though their emphases are different. In his doctoral dissertation published in 1924 in English (by a Chinese publisher in Shanghai), he discussed such a discovery. He began to formulate cultural difference as the historical difference between the medieval and the modern, with the industrial revolution as one symbol of such a distinction. He argued in the first edition of *A History of Chinese Philosophy* in early 1930s that Chinese philosophy had never reached its modern stage.

While we can critique this understanding from today’s post-colonial and poststructuralist approaches as centering on the West, his perspective emerged from a particular historical period when many Chinese intellectuals – most of whom traveled back and forth between China and the West – were interested in learning from the West for national salvation both from the internal turbulence and the external threat. They believed that ‘the confrontation between Eastern and Western cultures was a difference not of kind but of degree, between the

new and the old, tradition and modernity' (Lin, 2005, p. 69). As Ge (2006) points out, while criticizing the universal is becoming another masternarrative today, the Chinese intellectual of that generation searched for universal truth as a way to advance society out of internal and external difficulty. They did not blindly follow the West, however, and criticized the materialism and the colonialization mentality of the West, while advocating science and democracy as a means to engage social and cultural transformation of the traditional China.

Feng did not stay with this position for long, though, and shifted his angle in the late 1930s when he started to think that neither geography nor history could point out the path forward as societal development could. After he returned to China in 1923, he took professorship positions at different universities and then settled at Qinghua University in Beijing until 1952. These decades witnessed dramatic changes in China. Feng's new focus on societal type began to take form during the time of the Sino-Japanese war (1938-1945), and he wrote six books reflecting on the traditional Chinese spiritual life when he was exiled to a remote place along with his colleagues from Qinghua University (which joined with Beijing University and Nankai University to form a wartime united university called Southwest Union University) after the Japanese's invasion and occupation of China in the 1940s. As he (1984/2004) states in his autobiography,

The exile and turmoil did not prevent me from writing. The rise and fall of a nation and historical change had actually given me inspirations and excitement. Without these inspirations, I would not have written these books. Even if I had written them, they would not have been the same as what they were. (p. 187)

That period of difficult wartime, even though filled with bombs, constant threats, and internal conflicts, left Feng many fond memories of teaching and learning and mutual inspiration among faculty who were from many diverse backgrounds and held different perspectives about life and philosophy.

However, political, cultural, and national turmoil did not always have such a positive impact. After the 1949 Revolution, he could not continue his intellectual work and the Marxist re-formation was imposed on him. He started to write a new version of *A History of Chinese Philosophy* but was not able to continue because of both historical and intellectual confusion. New China had launched various political movements to not only break away from the Chinese traditional philosophy and way of life but also to oppose the capitalism of the industrial West in the Cold War period. Intellectuals were forced to adopt a uniform ideology and frequently became the target of political attacks. As Feng's traditional Chinese heritage and Western learning had to be reformed, it is not difficult to imagine his difficult position. Only after the ending of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 could he more fully formulate the idea that cultural conflict is an issue of how to deal with historical legacies to create new types of society, integrating vertical and horizontal lines of analysis. He raised these issues in the early 1950s but soon was under attack. He was able to finish the new edition of *A History of Chinese Philosophy* in the 1980s when he had lost much of his eyesight, but he relied on his internal resources, insights, and wisdom to complete this revision work. His hope was to provide nourishment for the future of Chinese philosophy, forming a comprehensive system to bring cultural conflicts back to the organic whole.

I suspect, however, that the dominance of Marxism during that period must have left indelible marks on his intellectual development, even in his final works. His autobiography was finished in 1981; what might have happened to his thought in his last decade when there was much more intellectual freedom? Feng was first influenced by Pragmatism and then became more aligned with Neo-realism in Western philosophy, while he leaned more towards

the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism in Chinese philosophy. I cannot help but wonder whether, without the intellectual setback and hibernation after 1949, he would have formulated his own philosophical thought as a modern philosopher. In the 1940s, he aspired to become a philosopher, rather than a historian of philosophy, but what he left behind is another series of *A History of Chinese Philosophy*. If he had any regret, it would also have been a historical loss for the Chinese philosophical field.

Feng's life experiences during the transitional periods enabled or constrained his intellectual pursuits. His exile both abroad (to Columbia) and at home (to a remote place within China) marked the most dynamic and creative times for him. But turbulence may not lead to new thought as the thirty years of intellectual setback later demonstrated. The most generative thought comes from the freedom to work *with* and *through* confusion. He did not have such freedom to work through under political and ideological control. Conflict and how to deal with it is central to his life and also central to his thought. The conflict between the past and the present, between East and West, both experientially and intellectually laid out a major task for his work on culture, history, and society.

As Feng reflects (1984/2000) on his life and his work, he finds himself usually in a position that does not cling to either extreme and thus gets criticized from both sides. Another major philosopher of his time, Liang Shuming (2006), commented that Feng seemed to be a Confucian in thought but acted like a Taoist in political turbulence. While Liang implies that Feng did not stand up to his Confucian principles, a student in Southwest Union University fondly remembered him as a professor with the pedagogical wisdom of reaching students by explaining the profound in simple terms (Wang, 2007), and another graduate of Qinghua University commented that Feng was well-known not only for his scholarship but also for his openness to different perspectives and his diplomatic organization talents (Zi, 2008). Feng's life and thought was marked by the historical task of negotiating between the ancient and the modern and between China and West, which is still pretty much present in today's China, and his mediation among and through conflicts to integrate different elements into his own is inspiring for a new generation's own efforts to walk transnational and cross-cultural pathways.

Cross-cultural engagements: The inner compass between the West and the East

Watts' experience was different from Feng's, although dealing with conflict is also important to him. Watts (1972) argues that cultural renewal comes from the mixture of highly differentiated cultures. This also applied to his own life as he made persistent efforts to bring together different spiritualities, philosophies, and cultures. Rather than analyzing Watts' life and thought through different stages, I highlight several transitional moments in his lifelong concern with what his biographer Furlong (2001) describes as 'the synthesis of Buddhism and Christianity, and the links of both with healing, particularly in the form of psychoanalysis' (p. 66). When Watts was 17 and still at school, he was in the middle of trying to figure out what Zen is:

What is THE EXPERIENCE which these Oriental masters are talking about? The different ideas of it which I had in mind seemed to be approaching me like little dogs wanting to be petted, and suddenly I shouted at all of them to go away. I annihilated and bawled out every theory and concept of what should be my properly spiritual state of mind, or of what should be meant by ME. And instantly my weight vanished. I owned nothing. All hang-ups disappeared. I walked on air. (Watts, 1972, p. 97)

Such a walking into the unknown in one's own style is unique to Alan Watts' pioneering spirit, but his pursuit of something different was based upon his devoted studies and exercises. This rebellion against authority, theory, and institution – of both his own tradition and Eastern tradition – is a constant theme of his life, a rebellion which might have been too strong, as he admitted later. Not surprisingly, this rebellious spirit made him a hero for the U.S. counter-cultural movement in the 1960s when Western thought was in crisis.

He declared he was a Buddhist at the age of 15 (an age coinciding with Confucius' age to set his heart on learning) but came back to Christianity at the age of 26. But such a comeback was not a simple 'homecoming.' With the growing realization that 'Christianity might be understood as a form of that mystical and perennial philosophy which has appeared in almost all times and places' and that such an understanding positioned him as 'a misfit and an oddity in Western society' (p. 180), he nevertheless took a sharp turn to become a Christian minister. As Furlong (2001) comments, his ambition to uncover the vitality and mystical meanings of Christianity was ahead of his time; it was also 'an attempt at healing the great divide of East and West, as well as, maybe, the great divide within Alan Watts' (p. 86). Similar to Feng, Watts was also concerned with differences between the East and the West and their integration, and his understandings of another thought were intimately related to his studies of his own tradition. This move into priesthood, although seemingly surprising, does not surprise me much since Christianity, as his native soil, would have remained as the background for his venture outside of it. Coming to term with it through immersion back into it – yet from another angle – could have been part of a further movement to integrate Christianity and Buddhism. And such a homecoming brought fresh air.

Watts' five years of being a formal Episcopal priest at Northwestern University in Chicago was anything but conventional. He introduced into the chapel a sense of magic and held open house, tea parties, and cocktail hours filled with lively discussions among faculty, students, and invited guests. During that time, he wrote the book *Behold the Spirit* which won him a Master's degree in theology. But his life in the church was not long, and he left it in a dramatic way. Not wishing to go into the details, especially of the controversial personal reasons, I only want to point out that those years made him dive more deeply into Christian mysticism in its 'Word made Flesh,' a side of Christianity which had been pushed away by the modern churches. He wrote *Wisdom of Insecurity* afterwards, returning to Buddhism. It is interesting to note here that to the degree that the East and the West are different, the differences become the shadow to each other, so that the full realization of humanity relies on our ability to recognize and integrate the shadow within ourselves through encounter with the other. Watts accomplished that by exposing the flesh of Christianity. Feng's early argument that the West is within the East and the East is within the West can be re-read here as the need for uncovering one's own shadow in order to bridge relationship between cultural differences.

What is unique about Alan Watts is his embodied, sensual, and playful spirit, and he believes that 'real religion is to transform anxiety into laughter' (Watts, 1972, p. 69). Watts' estrangement from his childhood religion was due to the dominance of fear and anxiety and the absence of sensuality and play. The first-hand experiencing of life in its aliveness in Zen devoid of theorization or dogmatic beliefs was appealing to him and he wrote in his first book, *The Spirit of Zen* (1960/1935), that

Zen is to move with life without trying to arrest and interrupt its flow; it is an immediate awareness of things as they live and move, as distinct from the mere grasp of ideas and feelings *about* things which are the dead symbols of a living reality. (p. 52; italics in

original).

There are different schools of thought in Buddhism and Zen both internationally and in the West, but what Alan Watts took from Zen was peculiar to his own life history and his concerns to reach higher wisdom and consciousness beyond the control of logic, theory, or law. As he suggests in his last unfinished work (Watts, 1975), Tao as the unity of opposite forces or duality is a watercourse way that does not control but move through and nurture the joyful growth of life. He left empty pages as he did not finish the last two chapters on ‘fun and surprises’ – themes important not only to his work but also to his life. To embrace a sense of joyfulness and humor in philosophy and spirituality is indeed important but is usually neglected in formal intellectual and religious training. Alan Watts builds such bridges first through intellectual and spiritual traveling to the East and then by fleshing out the mystical sensuality of Christianity within home.

As a pioneer in introducing Buddhism to the mainstream American society beyond the small circle of Western orientalist, Alan Watts was not merely influenced by his time as Feng was, he also contributed to forming the turning points of the American imagination, academic or popular alike, in the 1950s and 1960s. Through Watts’ speeches and prolific writings, together with the influential lectures D. T. Suzuki delivered at Columbia University in the 1960s and the changes in the popular culture of that time, Buddhism was no longer treated as an alien way of life but became a common knowledge in the American society. As Seager (1999) argues, ‘The individualistic, upbeat, and humanistic quality of [Watts’] version of Buddhism and its emphasis on creative self-expression fit well with the expansive idealism of the early 1960s’ (p. 41). Here we can see the blending of the personal and the social at a matching historical time to lead to the meeting of individual and cultural transformation.

Life and thought, however, are not always in harmony, but can contradict with each other. While Watts’ central concern was healing Western man’s alienation through the Buddhist dissolution of dualism, he was not fully successful in moving beyond a sense of separateness in his life. According to Furlong (2001), it was his inability to handle loneliness that intensified his alcoholism, which contributed to his early death. Moreover, his refusal to engage almost anything formal does not match the rigor required by cultivating Buddhist wisdom. He failed the Oxford entrance exam, he could not finish his formal Zen study with a Zen master, and he did not want to experience the discipline of psychoanalysis. It was his rebellious spirit that enabled him to pave out alternative pathways, but it was also this rebellion against any constraints that turned around to constrain him. Disjuncture in Feng’s case is more historical: He was not allowed to follow the line of his intellectual development, and his efforts to integrate Western and Chinese thought were swept away by the dominance of Marxism after 1949. But he was also criticized for his actions during Cultural Revolution as not living up to his own Confucian ideals (Liang, 2006; Zi, 2008). His political accommodation to the demands of authorities at that time was not lofty. The relationship between life and thought cannot be linear and direct; I argue, though, the gap between thought and life can shed light on the paradoxical human condition that one must live in, with, and through, and the gap between life and text opens up rather than closes down an ongoing process of authoring personhood in polyphony.

Feng and Watts’ stories tell us that engagement with the other is intertwined with understanding the self more fully and opens the door to those aspects of one’s own culture that are little known. In cross-cultural inquiry, opposite to the common tendency of assimilating the other into the self, it is easy to fall into the trap of romanticizing the other and using the other’s perspective as a way to cure one’s own problems. In the beginning of cross-cultural engagement, sometimes it is difficult to avoid such a tendency; one is



interested in the other because the other can provide something different from oneself. Such a tendency was not fully absent in Feng and Watts' initial openings, but as their engagement with the other was deepened, they negotiated between self and difference in such a way that did not negate either but integrated different horizons to broaden landscape for both self and other. As a result, the unknown potential of both self and other can be brought forth to meet in an interactive space for individual and cultural creativity. Such an interplay between self and other is important in today's transnational inquiry which works through the complexity and richness of intercultural space (Wang, 2004) and spirals to another level of understanding, awareness, and relationships.

It is important to point out that such a life history analysis does not attempt to lay out any cause-effect relationship which is both impossible and undesirable. The intertwining relationship between life and thought is complex, dynamic, and unpredictable, but such a relationship is deeply pedagogical as today's education needs to provide intercultural learning opportunities for students. The focus of this paper is not the specific schools of thought that Feng and Watts followed or what caused such choices, as we have learned from Cai Yuanpei's academic freedom policy that allowing different schools of thoughts (whether they were labeled as 'old' or 'new') to coexist and interact among one another is beneficial to hybrid intellectual creativity. But educators can benefit from understanding what enabled Feng's and Watts' initiatives to learn from the other, what sustained their engagement with the other, and what conditions were most conducive to their cross-cultural journeys. While their efforts to integrate different thoughts led to intellectual advancement, experiential complexity, and cultural creativity, their entrances to and engagement with different cultures were not the same: Feng was schooled in formal learning while Watts was schooled in self-study and experience. They channeled through diverse life experiences and concerns but their messages echoed each other across the ocean. Feng and Watts demonstrate multiple ways of cross-cultural engagement and diverse paths for advancing intercultural education.

Engaging a cross-cultural and intercultural curriculum

What do Feng and Watts' life histories of engaging cross-cultural thought say to contemporary education? As we listen to the sounds of their footsteps, we are already on the path of engaging a cross-cultural and intercultural curriculum. Here I use 'cross-cultural curriculum' and 'intercultural curriculum' simultaneously because both border-crossing and a 'third space' (Aoki, 2005; Wang, 2004) are needed for curriculum dynamics. Aoki (2005) critiques the use of 'cross-cultural' in the identity-oriented imaginary of East and West as separate and essentialized entities. He further evokes the image of a non-bridge bridge to set into motion the demarcation of boundary and calls for dwelling in an inter-space in which the tensionality of conjunction and disjuncture upholds the emergence of newness. Following his effort to deconstruct the East/West binary, I nevertheless think crossing and dwelling are interdependent. Without crossing into another world (and coming back), an inter-space does not embody what exists on the other side; without dwelling on the bridge, crossing pushes away the interactive potentiality of an in-between space. To allow newness to emerge, both crossing and dwelling are necessary, as Feng's and Watts' life histories demonstrate. In today's mobile society in which migration, immigration, and globalization continue to disrupt the homogeneous picture of locality, crossing can be imminent within the border, and dwelling gestures towards what is beyond the landscape.

The creativity of intercultural dynamics lies in our capacity to engage cross-cultural educational work on a daily basis. The added-on approach to diversifying curriculum in today's schools, although necessary as the first step, runs the risk of objectifying and

disembodying what is different and thus leaving the privileged site of the self intact and refusing to risk self-transformation. Feng (1984/2004) discusses the difference between his academic visit in the U.S. from 1946 to 1948 and his travel to the U.S. in 1982. He says that in the 1940s he felt like Chinese culture was treated as dead artifacts displayed in a museum, but in 1982 he felt that the vitality of Chinese culture was beginning to be present. The spirit of a culture cannot be displayed in a frozen, static, disembodied way but must be felt as if touching the pulse of lifeblood.

Today a cross-cultural intellectual and educational landscape at an existential level is no longer only accessible to elites but to many teachers and students within their classrooms through both face-to-face interaction and virtual reality. This landscape provides a rich soil for inter-civilizational and intercultural dialogue through the daily lived experiencing of transnational dynamics. As Noel Gough (2004) points out, 'The challenge to the *curricular* imagination is to envisage how we might build transnational networks of curriculum workers who share these senses of [global] solidarity and are willing to enact them in curriculum inquiry' (p. 5; italics original). Such a sense of global solidarity is not for cultural sameness but is built upon the interaction between and among the local, national, regional, and global curriculum work which questions both the neoliberal, market-driven, homogeneous aspects of globalization and cultural isolation or ethnocentrism. Under the current move towards the internationalization of curriculum studies (Pinar, 2003; Gough, 2004), transnational, cross-cultural, and intercultural imagination becomes important for daily educational praxis, although such a possibility is largely limited by the current push for standardization and accountability in the U.S. education. If we want to sustain a vital and meaningful educational life that we share, we as educators have to find openings for the watercourse of cross-cultural interplay to erode the constraining line of the official boundary.

U.S. education's current drive to maintain international superiority by imposing high-stakes testing and conformity is an example of official efforts to contain difference and fluidity by hardening the educational structure and system. There is an opposite tendency among scholars, although it is seldom in the spotlight. In recent decades, the crisis of the West caused some to look far into the East for possible solutions. While it is an understandable shift, I question the logic of crisis: if we sustain everyday engagement with difference in an open-minded, wide-awake manner, would it be possible to soften the edge of crisis before it erupts? Is not the lure to contain crisis and cure our problems the very root of the problem itself? Nor can this direction lead to creative education. The other horizon cannot rescue us but invites us to engage the self differently on a daily basis to create a more sustainable life. The East is no longer far away but is already in the midst of our presence, although it remains at the margin (as the West is already in the midst of the East although the West is much more centered there). We can cross borders into the stranger's land within our own boundary, and now it is time to engage in the daily educational praxis of transnational and intercultural encounters.

As we can learn from Feng's and Watts' life histories, the awareness of the need to learn from the other initiates a cross-cultural education, persistent engagement with the other encourages reciprocal intercultural exchanges, and subsequently enlightenment and wisdom emerge through the process of experiencing and making sense of intercultural intersections and disjuncture. Ways of initiating and sustaining such an education are different, contextualized, and multilayered; but creating a stimulating educational environment that encourages 'polyphonic lines of movements' (Aoki, 2005) and allows time and space to work through confusion and conflict is crucial. Today's society is much more complicated, with new problems, challenges, and possibilities, while students of all ages have unprecedented access across borders to different knowledge, relationships, and ways of life. If we encourage

critical thinking throughout the educational process and bring refreshing or even controversial lenses into classrooms, if we nurture students' cross-cultural imagination and intercultural capacities, new generations will be more likely to work together across difference to enact living a good life together in their own worldly conditions. The tensionality of crossing and dwelling can be transformed into a generative site for opening up the multiple educational potentialities.

In order to do so, we also need to question the conventional notion of learning as mastering knowledge and materials. To form a productive relationship with the text does not mean exhausting its meanings, just as a productive self-other relationship must allow the surprise of the other to bring something new on an ongoing basis. The otherness of the text needs to be respected in order to allow a creative interplay with it (Huebner, 1999). The demand for students to understand everything (or the demand from students for the teacher to make everything understandable) drains the vitality, imagination, and creativity out of learning. Learning is not for mastery but for transforming learners and leading to more possibilities. The forms of learning can be various, but the openness to allow difference to teach is crucial, which also means the capacity for living with ambiguity and being comfortable with the unknown. The cultivation of such open-mindedness needs to start early as the stories of Feng and Watts (and Humphreys or Metteyya) tell us. Actually, as Dwayne Huebner (1999) argues, schooling usually suppresses children's creativity, so the task of educators is to allow children's creative potential to come into play. This vision in the cross-cultural context requires educators to become transnational thinkers and learners themselves.

Feng and Watts' life histories and cross-cultural thoughts do not provide direct answers to our problems today, but their voices, their footsteps, and their bridge-building efforts invite our own unique responses to engaging intercultural thought in educational praxis. May this invitation evoke our commitment to engaging cross-cultural imagination and intercultural creativity in our daily educational work.....

References

- Aoki, Ted T. (2005). *Curriculum in a new key* (William F. Pinar & Rita L. Irwin Eds.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Eppert, Claudia, & Wang, Hongyu (Eds.) (2008). *Cross-cultural studies in curriculum* (pp. 1–33). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Feng, Youlan (2000). *The hall of three pines* (Denis C. Mair Trans.). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Feng, Youlan (2004). *A memoir of Feng Youlan*. Beijing: People's University Press (Original work published 1984).
- Furlong, Monica (2001). *Zen effects: Life of Alan Watts*. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths.
- Ge Zhaoguang (2006). Becoming a Chinese intellectual of that generation. *Reading Books* [读书], 6, 47–56.
- Gough, Noel (2004). A vision for transnational curriculum inquiry. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry*, 1 (1). Retrieved June 16, 2007, from <http://www.deakin.edu.au/tci>
- Hattam, Robert (2008). Socially-engaged Buddhism as a provocation for critical pedagogy in unsettling times. In Claudia Eppert & Hongyu Wang (Eds.), *Cross-cultural studies in curriculum* (pp. 109–136). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hershock, Peter, Peter D., Mason, Mark, & Hawkins, John N. (2007). *Changing education*. Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong Press.
- Hu, Minghui (2005). From Latin West to the Qing dynasty China. *Reading Books* [读书], 11,



21–25.

- Huebner, Dwayne (1999). *The lure of the transcendent*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Humphreys, Christmas (1968). *Sixty years of Buddhism in England (1907 – 1967)*. London: The Buddhist Society.
- Layman, Emma McCloy (1976). *Buddhism in America*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Li, Xin (2002). *The Tao of life stories*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Liang, Shuming (2006). Interview with Liang in his late years. *Reading Books*[读书], 7, 34–38.
- Lin, Xiaoqing (2005). *Peking University: Chinese scholarship and intellectuals (1898 – 1937)*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Nakagawa, Yoshiharu (2000). *Education for awakening*. Brandon, VT: Foundation for Educational Renewal.
- Odin, Jaishree K., & Manicas, Peter T. (Eds.) (2004). *Globalization and higher education*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Pinar, William F. (2003). *International handbook of curriculum research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Pinar, William F. (2009). *The worldliness of a cosmopolitan education*. New York: Routledge.
- Seager, Richard Hughes (1999). *Buddhism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Smith, David Geoffrey (1996). Identity, self and other in the conduct of pedagogical action. *JCT: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 12, 6–11.
- Smith, David Geoffrey (2003). Curriculum and teaching facing globalization. In William F. Pinar (Ed.), *International handbook of curriculum research* (pp. 35-52). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Smith, David Geoffrey (2008). ‘The farthest West is but the farthest East.’ In Claudia Eppert & Hongyu Wang (Eds.), *Cross-cultural studies in curriculum* (pp. 1–33). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sutin, Lawrence (2006). *All is change: The two-thousand-year journey of Buddhism to the West*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Tu, Wei-ming (1976). *Neo-Confucian thought in action: Wang Yang-ming’s youth (1472 – 1509)*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wang, Hongyu (2004). *The call from the stranger on a journey home*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Wang, Zihao (2007). *Not only for the sake of memory*. Shanghai: Life, Reading, New Knowledge.
- Watts, Alan (1960). *The spirit of Zen*. New York: Grove Press. (Original published 1935)
- Watts, Alan (1972). *In my own way: An autobiography (1915 – 1965)*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Watts, Alan (1975). *Tao: The watercourse way*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Zi, Zhongjun (2008). *About Feng You-lan* [实说冯友兰]. Beijing: Beijing University Press.

Author

Hongyu Wang is Associate Professor in the School of Teaching and Curriculum Leadership at Oklahoma State University. Her research interests include post-structural and Asian philosophies, cross-cultural life histories and thought, autobiography and curriculum, international studies, gender issues, psychoanalysis and culture, chaos and complexity theory, and multicultural education. Email hongyu.wang@okstate.edu

