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Academic Sisterhood: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Two Asian Mothers, Adult Educators, and Scholars

Maria Liu Wong¹, Aimee Tiu-Wu²

ABSTRACT: In a global context where Western models and theories continue to dominate and influence adult educational research, multi-vocal perspectives of meaning making and learning from educators raised and educated in the East and West can contribute to more nuanced dialogue and exchange. Utilizing collaborative autoethnography, a qualitative research method that explores society through the lens of self in relation to other (Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2013), we provide a window and a mirror into the complexity of East-West learning dynamics as two multicultural Asian immigrant academics educated and raising our children in the West. Together, as mothers, adult educators and emerging scholars, we share our journey of discovery and unpack the influence of our Chinese and Filipino cultural inheritance and North American education. The implications of these stories, and the unique cultural lenses we see through, provide greater insight into the ways of learning, knowing and being at the intersections of our multiple identities.

Introduction

In a global context where the Western paradigm of learning dominates adult educational research, multi-vocal perspectives of meaning making and learning drawing from the intersections of Eastern and Western influences contribute to more nuanced exchange of ideas, knowledge and experience. In this collaborative autoethnography, our shared story of two female academics linked by Asian ethnicity, cultural practices, traditions and motherhood, we explore the tension that lies in the intersectionality of our Eastern cultural heritage and Western education, seen through the lens of Chinese feminist He-Yin Zhen. Through her work, we come to understand the complexity of Chinese feminism in light of sex, gender, culture, tradition and ideology (Liu, Karl & Ko, 2013). We interpret our experience through a new lens, bringing to full circle how our thinking is powerfully shaped by both the East and the West.

Sharing memories and the impact of our past on the present and future, the study focuses on the question:

Raised in Asian immigrant homes, how did we perceive and interact with our cultural heritage against a background of Western education and influence, and how has it shaped our identities and practices as mothers, adult educators, and scholars?

Through journals and reflections on critical incidents around our identities as mothers, adult educators, and emerging scholars - raised, educated and working in multiple geographies - we narrate our journeys and unpack the influences of our British, Hong Kong and Mainland

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Chinese, Filipino and North American heritages. The implications of themes and patterns drawn from this analysis provide insight into ways of learning, knowing and being as multicultural beings embracing intersecting, and at times contradicting, paradigms and identities.

We begin by framing collaborative autoethnography as a qualitative method, and then trace the evolution of Chinese feminism and Zhen's foundational concepts of *nannü* (男女) and *shengji* (生計) in order to guide readers through the key concepts that shaped our study. This is followed by an explanation of our research design, and discussion of our findings. Using Zhen's lens, we offer a Chinese feminist cultural analysis of our experiences, and address the implications in light of our contribution to the dialogue on East-West learning and knowing.

Collaborative Autoethnography: Framing the Process and our Stories

Collaborative autoethnography is a qualitative research method that “utilizes data about self and context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context,” a combination of ethnography, self-analysis and biography (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010). While autoethnography has multiple meanings, we draw from Boylorn and Orbe's (2014) definition: “cultural analysis through personal narrative” (p. 17). Recognizing that research is an extension of the lives of researchers, inextricably linked to experience, familiarity, and personal interest, autoethnography is systematic in its approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation, and the researcher is both subject and object of the research (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010). While this blurred distinction has been a source of criticism with regards to its scientific credibility as a methodology (Anderson, 2006; Holt, 2003), the access it provides to intimate knowledge of sensitive issues provides a powerful argument for its use as a tool for understanding self and society (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang, 2010).

Autoethnography, first labeled as such by anthropologist Hayano in 1979 (Chang, 2013), has been utilized by a variety of researchers to explore personal as well as collaborative topics, examining academic culture (Rodriguez, 2009), emotional experiences including depression (Jago, 2002) and loss and illness (Lee, 2010), identity development within socio-cultural contexts (Alexander, 2004), and family relationships (Poulos, 2009). While it has become increasingly diverse in form and use, three general characteristics may be seen: 1) the researcher's personal experiences are used as primary data; 2) the intent of the research is to expand understanding of social phenomena or realities; and finally, 3) the process may vary and result in a range of writing products (Chang, 2013).

Collaborative autoethnography – involving two or more participant-researchers – has become more prevalent in recent years, ranging in expression from co-constructed dialogue to more integrated formats (Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2013; Ngunjiri, et al. 2010). Working together to co-generate story, listen, stir memory, prompt action and reaction, examine and challenge assumptions, researchers have produced rich, nuanced, and varied perspectives (Chang, 2013). Whether following a full or partial model, writing concurrently or sequentially, convergence and divergence characterize the process of collaboration (Ngunjiri, et al. 2010).

While ethics and self-disclosure/exposure may be topics of concern for collaborative autoethnographers, this methodology provides the opportunity to dig deeper into sensitive topics that might *not* otherwise be documented with such openness and vulnerability. Greater empathy

for other is also engendered as this kind of relationship rooted in cognitive and emotional resonance has the potential to increase the understanding of interconnectivity between self and others across socio-cultural differences and “motivate...work toward cross-cultural coalition building” (Chang, 2008, p. 52 in Ngunjiri, et al. 2010).

Recognizing we are not individuals separate from the academic, cultural, societal and political discourses we are a part of (Phillips et. al, 2009), we acknowledge this in our co-generative discourse and writing. Bringing in an analysis of the heritage and traditions that framed our upbringing by immigrant Chinese parents, we mine the treasures of stories that have shaped who we have become as we consider also how they impact our praxis as mothers, educators, and scholars.

Gendered Expectations and Changing Roles of Chinese Women

China’s historical and cultural past are key to understanding the expectations and roles of modern day Chinese women. From the Confucian Era, when women experienced extreme subordination and were dictated to on how to act and behave, through the early Mao Era, when communism, the doctrine of sharing and common ownership, became the cornerstone of existence and survival, the remnants of the ideological tensions between communism and Confucianism continue to linger as women’s roles have shifted dramatically in contemporary times (O’Sullivan, 2012). While Chinese society continues to experience rapid Westernization, the family remains the most central unit of society, and “as such, women should strive to be good mothers, which is a socially desirable female role” (Chan, p. 94). From this perspective, it is expected that a woman take care of her family and their needs, and her ultimate happiness stems from her fulfillment as a mother (Watanabe, 1999).

But China’s unprecedented economic growth has come with a price – urban women are starting to experience tension between their roles as professional women and homemakers, and are considering opting out of the workforce (Chen, 2011). Since the Cultural Revolution, women have always been encouraged to work outside the home, but a survey and subsequent anecdotal evidence in 2005 by the Shanghai Women’s Association found that 10% of the 1,000 respondents were seriously considering leaving their professions without a back-up in mind due to the perceived inability to balance work and family responsibilities (Chen, 2011). It remains to be seen how modern day Chinese society will react to this shift as the country has had a “long history of the state’s full employment policy and the party’s propaganda on women’s roles as ‘holding up half the sky’ social production” (Stockman, Bonney, & Xuewen, 1995).

Evolution of Chinese Feminism

Historical narratives of Chinese women’s experiences point back to the practices of the imperial Confucian Era, when hierarchal authority for men was based on a rigid set of principles called *wu lun*, or “five relations,” composed of sovereign-subject, father-son, elder brother-younger brother, husband-wife and friend-friend (Leung, 2003). The Three Obediences and Four Virtues detailed women’s righteous behavior as moral and virtuous women (Taylor, 2004). The Three Obediences included key relationships in traditional Chinese society: a woman’s relationship with her father as an unmarried woman, her relationship with her husband during marriage, and

her relationship with her adult sons as a widow. Governed by the ideals of the Four Virtues (e.g. moral conduct, proper speech, modest appearances, and diligent work), sustained practices of traditional Confucian ideologies, coupled with feudalism and imperialism, Chinese women's fate as inferior and subservient beings was sealed for thousands of years (Leung, 2003; Taylor, 2004).

In the early Communist years (1915-1921), Chinese feminism was sparked and the term *nü-xing* (the female sex) was introduced during the May Fourth Movement of the Cultural Revolution to signify biological and universal womanhood (Rosenlee, 2006). While early Mao Era politics promoted socialist policies under the guise of championing the women's movement, this state-influenced feminism did nothing to elevate the status of women in China (Leung, 2003). In the succeeding Maoist years, the feminist movement steadily declined, but somewhat resurged under Deng Xiao Ping's "Open Door Policy" (Leung, 2003).

Shifts in Chinese feminism and ideology from the Confucian Era to Post-Mao China took place amidst a backdrop of patriarchy, feudalism, imperialism, and socialism. Chow (2002) remains critical of modern day Chinese feminism for advocates "do not really create avenues for modern Chinese women to come forth on their own terms, but rather compound deep-rooted patriarchal thinking to which 'woman' is now added as the latest proof of...the continuity and persistence of pure indigenous 'tradition'" (p. 97). But Yang (1999) withholds judgment, seeming optimistic:

Chinese feminism today is sprouting from the soil of a more confident sovereign state, which threw out the Westerners and has entered the global capitalist economy on its own terms... Feminism in China today differs both from Western feminism as well as other Third World situations in that it is emerging from a 'state feminism' administered by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). (pp. 36-37)

Feminist Theory of He-Yin Zhen: *Nannü* (男女) and *Shengji* (生計)

He-Yin Zhen (1886-1920), a female theorist whose literary works became central in the revival of Chinese feminism, made bold claims rejecting capitalism and addressing concerns of women in relation to patriarchy, imperialism, capitalism and gender subjugation amidst a background of transnational political and economic changes (Chun, 2014). This set her apart from male feminist writers and progressive intellectuals of her time.

Zhen focused on two foundational concepts, *nannü* (男女) and *shengji* (生計), and a feminist critique of the political economy of her time (Liu, Karl, & Ko, 2013). *Nannü* (男女) goes beyond the normative distinction between man and woman, but is fraught with gendered and even social/hierarchical distinctions "because its function is not only to generate social identities but also to create forms of power and domination based on that distinction" (p. 21). In her "Feminist Manifesto," she argued the futility of the concepts "men" (*nan-xing*) and "women" (*nü-xing*) and critiqued their gendered distinctions and the unequal social customs and education afforded to sons and daughters resulting in unequal responsibilities and stature (2013).

Meanwhile, *shengji* (生計) was directly translated as "livelihood," pertaining to political and social factors that disabled women from making their own livelihood, and economic hardships

women experienced in making a living. Her views on total economic independence from the state, and from men in general, were chronicled in the essays, “On Women’s Labor” and “Economic Revolution and Women’s Revolution” (Liu, Karl, & Ko, 2013). Ultimately, her anarchist/feminist thoughts aimed to “develop a systematic global critique of the political, economic, moral, and ideological bases of patriarchal society in critical responses to the social agendas of progressive Chinese men who also promoted women’s rights” (Liu, Karl, & Ko, 2013, p. 3).

With Zhen’s framework in mind, we take a closer look at our stories of the past – formative experiences influenced by culture, immigration, study and travel – and the present – our practice as parents of children born in the West, adult educators, and researchers/scholars. Utilizing the concepts of *nannü* (男女) and *shengji* (生計) and the implications they have on what it means to be a woman in the family, in the workplace, and in society, we offer a Chinese feminist cultural analysis of East-West dynamics in the interplay of our personal narratives.

Methodology

Using a co-generative dialogue approach similar to Grenier and Burke’s (2008) research in academic motherhood, this paper explores how our perception of our cultural heritage shaped our journeys and contemporary praxis as mothers, adult educators, and emerging scholars. We found that traditional qualitative research methodologies (Creswell, 2006) limited our ability to explore the topic, so we sought a way to provide voice to our personal narratives; connecting self to society in a way did not place the East and West on a binary continuum, but acknowledged the complexity and possibilities of what “Eastern” and “Western” could mean. While both of our families come originally from mainland China, over three generations we have traversed terrains, neither direct nor uni-directional, to find our homes in North America.

Using reflective journals and critical incident questionnaires as well as on-going dialogue over Skype and email, we open-coded in an iterative process to identify emergent themes. Following this analysis, we reviewed each other’s coding matrices for inter-rater reliability and expanded on the patterns drawn from the findings. Writing concurrently and sequentially, we took turns adding to the draft, revising and commenting on our own and each other’s sections. The findings section is written with our distinct voices emphasized in narrative form, while the other sections fuse our voices together.

Findings

The findings are organized in terms of two major categories, as they relate to the research question. The first category addresses the notion of formation – looking at our past experiences and how they impacted who we have become, and the second category focuses on praxis – how we are living out the meaning we have made of our multiple influences and the implications of this on parenting. Written in narrative form, we explore the home/private and school/public spheres of our lives as Asian immigrants, and then focus on our current praxis as mothers, adult educators, and emerging scholars. We write this section collaboratively in the form of a dialogue, speaking/writing in our own voices as we interact with the themes we have discovered.

Formation: Home/Private and Cultural Heritage

Maria: Reflecting on our families' past collectively was a powerful process. I was struck very much by the similarities in our stories and the way we belonged to a larger, global narrative of immigration. While both of our grandfathers moved to the East and West in the 50s and 60s – the Philippines and the United Kingdom, respectively, they found a way to make a better living for their families, but at cost to family life. Both of our grandmothers were left at home in Hong Kong, with children to care for, and our fathers grew up with absentee fathers in a socio-political, colonial context outside of mainland Communist China.

Like many men of his time, in 1955, my grandfather emigrated alone from Hong Kong to the West in search of economic opportunity. Opening a Chinese restaurant in the UK, he sent money home to my grandmother, who was taking care of my father (11 years old when he left) and his two sisters (2 and 5 years old). Only when my father was going to university was his family reunited. Years later my mother, who had known him in Hong Kong, joined him in the UK, where my sister and I were born.

Aimee: My grandfather, driven by economic imperatives, left China in the early 60's for the Philippines. Then 16, he ventured into an unknown land, with nothing but the clothes on his back... Coming from peasant origins, my grandfather envisioned a better life and leaving home was his only option. After a few years of labor in the Philippines, this sojourner went home to find a bride... Fresh from working abroad, my grandfather's parents arranged a marriage upon his return. The first time he saw my grandmother was when he unveiled her on their wedding night.

My ties to China are ancestrally rooted while my ties to the Philippines are more ethnic, one that tremendously shaped my faith, thinking and identity as an overseas Filipino-Chinese. Unlike my grandparents, who considered the Philippines their adopted home, I find it to be my refuge and comfort, my one and only home. Growing up, I retained the ability to speak Hokkien, a dialect of southern Chinese. My home culture is very Chinese and we were brought up to "be" Chinese and "act" Chinese.

Formation: Immigrant Experience and Expectations

Maria: When we first arrived to New York from England, my family lived in the suburbs – about an hour's drive from Manhattan. The town we lived in was predominantly Jewish and white Catholic, with a handful of Asian families. My sister and I were curiosities because we were immigrant Chinese, but *not* directly from China.

My parents drove us out to Chinatown every Sunday to attend a Chinese church. There, besides worship, we bought groceries, ate decent Chinese food and were socialized in what being "Chinese" was. So during the week, I was a minority – on so many levels – and on Sundays I was presumably amidst "my people" (though it didn't quite feel true).

Growing up in two very different worlds, I learned to code switch, to read people and act and speak depending on the context; by necessity, I had to be adaptable. My role models were not blonde-hair, blue-eyed Hollywood movie stars, but martial arts heroines in Hong Kong videos I snuck into watch and marvel at in my grandmother's room (she moved in with us when my grandfather passed away when I was in grade school).

As expected by my immigrant Asian parents, I studied hard in school, took AP classes, learned the violin and even skipped my lunch period so I could squeeze in orchestra; that said, I also played volleyball and did musical theater. I even married a Chinese man, whom I had met in the church I grew up in (my parents' good intentions), whose family is from a village close to my grandparents!

Aimee: Unlike my grandparents whose immigrant story was driven by economic needs, my immigrant story began in 1990 when crimes against the Filipino Chinese grew into a series of high profile kidnapping, rape and murder. The societal unrest led many Filipino Chinese families, like mine, to migrate abroad. My father decided to move to Canada as it coincided with the mass wave of migration from Hong Kong. We settled in Richmond, B.C., a suburban town adjacent to Vancouver, where most Chinese migrants settled upon their first entry into Canada.

My mom was a classic tiger mom. While I did not engage in a million extra-curricular activities, I was pushed hard to succeed academically. I had tutors for subjects that I was weak in. I was drilled to rehearse for declamation and singing competitions. I was tired but happy. I never questioned this growing up, but when I went to college and started meeting a lot of Filipinos and foreign students, I started to ask my parents why dating non-Chinese was forbidden. While I was not threatened with being disowned (which many of my peers experienced), I was lectured about the importance of keeping our heritage and culture.

Formation: School/Public and External Perceptions

Aimee: As a sixth grader, the move to the West was exciting, but I struggled to fit in at school. This was the “mean girls” stage, but the 12 year old me felt lost and isolated. While the experience was mind opening, I was happy to be back in the Philippines three years later, when peace and order were somewhat restored. Going back to my old school, I had difficulty fitting in once again. My childhood friends and I had drifted apart emotionally, and I was entering high school as “that” western-educated girl. My academic experience in the West gave me a voice to question cultural assumptions, practices, tradition and beliefs. And I found myself opening up to new ideas and being challenged to think outside my normative path of culturally biased mindset.

Years ago, when I was studying Mandarin in Beijing, I was confronted with my “Chineseness”. Native Chinese did not consider me a “real” Chinese since I grew up overseas (and spoke/looked different from them). And the funny thing was, living in the Philippines all of my life, I was never considered a “real” Filipino either, since I have Chinese blood. I find it interesting that both my home and adopted culture consider me a muggle (half-blood).

I think that overseas Chinese cling on to traditional cultural practices more so than native Chinese, and this is in part due to fear of loss of identity. Overseas Chinese always feel and act superior over the natives of their adopted country, and for me this signifies they never really fully integrated into their adopted cultures.

Maria: From my childhood code switching between Long Island during the week and Chinatown

on the weekends, to being called “China, China” in Ethiopia and “not being Chinese” enough (because of my Western- influenced cultural norms and limited language skills) in Hong Kong and China, I have struggled to find the right balance in articulating how “Chinese” and “American” I really am.

Having studied, lived and worked mainly in North America, with stints in South America, Africa and Asia, I find that I am constantly negotiating who I am and how others perceive me. My identity has always been assumed, based first on what I look like and then on how I speak – with an American accent that contradicts my “immigrant” or “foreign” appearance.

On a weekly basis, I learn how “Chinese” or not I am, in conversations (in Cantonese dialect) with my in-laws, who also from southern China and Hong Kong, hold onto particular cultural ways of doing things, like the month of seclusion and eating vinegar egg and pig’s feet after childbirth, and not going to bed with wet hair. Perhaps because my parents were Christians and raised me in the West, they left behind a lot of cultural traditions that had Buddhist ties.

Praxis: Parenting and Motherhood

Maria: I have never read Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, but I am pretty sure I am familiar with the themes she raised. I told myself as a child, I would never be *that* mom, forcing my kids to learn an instrument and go to Chinese school. But here I am – with my older son going to Saturday morning Chinese school and piano lessons every week, and my younger son enrolled in a public dual language Mandarin school. My daughter will also follow her brothers’ footsteps, but maybe play a different instrument. What changed my mind as an adult, knowing what I experienced as a child? Hard work, discipline and sacrifice (and the grace of God) provide the freedoms of choice and opportunity.

As “mom”, I am holder of traditions. I am the one who goes to the bank for fresh bills for Chinese New Year lucky money, and the one who makes sure that my children have their traditional outfits ready. The expectation from both the Chinese and non-Chinese community is that my children speak the language, know the culture, and can be successful in both contexts. I know this from being called a “jook sing” (derogatory term for ABCs). There is richness and opportunity in having multiple languages and cultural resources, but will they appreciate this? As their mother, I need to prepare them for the realities they will face, as my parents also did their best to.

Aimee: Growing up, we witnessed how important it was to be good to one's parents.... Now, as a married woman, I am expected to love and honor my husband’s family like my own (or more than my own). As a young parent, I expect my children to do their best academically, but I try not to do overdo it (as much as there is a tendency to do so). I realized early on that each child is unique and has his/her own personality and interest, and as a parent my job is to help each child foster their strengths and build on their interests and skills.

In terms of expectations, to this day, I struggle to balance cultural and family expectations

with the overpowering desire to blaze my own path and find who I truly am. I have been criticized for being individualistic (short of being told selfish) and Western. Deviating from traditional values has been particularly challenging particularly in a multigenerational household.

Praxis: Educating and Education

Aimee: While the sage on the stage mentality was deeply ingrained in me for many years, I now see the value and significance of adult educators as being the guide on the side, helping students discover for themselves the value of learning, fostering and scaffolding learning in a way that is meaningful to individual students and most importantly, creating learning opportunities that are of practical significance to the learners. I see education not just as a milestone to be achieved, but a journey to be taken and planned with careful thought and guidance.

In the academic world, I consider myself very Western in my views and scholarship; but in my home life, I am very Asian in thought and in practice. I struggle to maintain equilibrium between these cultures- my original home culture (Asian) and my adopted home culture (Canada/US). Both have contributed significantly to my growth, thinking and life trajectory. But instead of choosing one over the other, I am empowered to find my voice within each culture and take pride in my being multicultural.

Maria: Beyond growing up in the West as an immigrant with Hong Kong Chinese parents, my travels – studying, living and working in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America – shaped my experience of the world and affirmed my values of appreciating difference and mutuality, advocating for the marginalized who don't have a voice because of their lack of access to the “center,” and having a learner versus judge mindset.

I am on the quiet side to be sure, and my instinct is always to anticipate others' needs – as the obedient Chinese daughter I was raised to be, but I am learning that I can and need to speak up, in order to push back and find myself in the scholarship of adult and theological education. While my education was in the West, my schooling was at home with my parents and grandmother, and on the streets of Chinatown as a youth. So I am keenly aware of, and embrace, the multiplicities of identity I bring into my practice as an Asian-American educator.

Praxis: Research and Scholarship

Aimee: My immigrant experience has significantly shaped how I view myself as a scholar and education in general. Having a bicultural identity, I seek ways to align myself in the field by looking at the experiences of other bicultural women in academia. My training and background in AEGIS have also prompted me to seek literature outside the West to find out who I am as a minority female scholar hoping to find myself and my voice in the field of adult education.

Maria: In my scholarship and dissertation research, I have chosen to pursue topics relevant to an activist and participatory stance. From our research with the Diversity Divas (2012) in raising cross-cultural awareness, and a study on teaching and diversity in the AEGIS doctoral program, to my dissertation on women leaders in Christian theological education

in Africa, Asia and North America, I am interested in speaking up – for myself, for those who have not traditionally had a voice in the mainstream, and for those who cannot speak due to lack of access. This is because I have experienced as a student and as an educator – silence and being silenced.

Discussion

While both of our families left China for colonial Hong Kong before the evolution of Chinese feminism, we consider it apt to re-frame our experiences and narratives in view of our cultural roots engaging in the contemporary context. This heritage of patriarchy, imperialism, capitalism and gender subjugation finds expression in the ways that our grandparents and parents were raised, and in turn how we were raised. In this discussion, we work with Zhen's foundational concepts of *nannü* (男女) and *shengji* (生計) in considering how we were raised as daughters of immigrant Chinese in the Philippines, the United Kingdom and North America, and how these ideas influence our own understandings of identity, multicultural upbringing and parenting.

***Nannü* (男女) and Formative Experiences**

Interaction with the West may have influenced the home/private sphere to a degree, as indicated in our own parenting practices, but our fundamental values have not necessarily changed. In a study by Kim, Atkinson and Yang (1999), more than a dozen common Asian values were identified, including respect for elders, self-effacement, avoidance of family shame, restraint, deference to authority figures, and placing others' needs ahead of one's own. These values did not change substantially across generations after immigration overseas. So, while Asian-American descendants might assimilate and adapt to Western ways of living, they maintain certain Asian values.

In contrast to more traditional views, which our families inherited, with regard to family, Zhen foresaw complete freedom for women – even in the areas of sexual relations and equality between men and women (Liu, Karl, & Ko, 2013). Arranged marriages did not lead to true happiness, and a truly liberated woman could have many lovers (Zarrow, 1988). Zhen critiqued polygamy, concubinage, and the authority of the mother-in-law, as well as seeing the freedom of women from the burden of raising children was an element of achieving equality (Zarrow, 1988). She advocated for Western practices of monogamy, civil marriage and divorce, and approved of co-education and mixed gender social contexts (Zarrow, 1988).

When we consider the notion of *nannü* (男女) with regard to the ways that we were brought up, it is evident that the Confucian ideals expressed earlier as well as our own mothers' and grandmothers' experiences had an impact on the cultural expectations of how we should behave as daughters and who we should become as wives and mothers. Even perceptions of others in the home/school and private/public divide were formative in our identity struggles growing up, studying and working in a Western context. The idea of being neither here nor there, having to “code switch,” placed us in an interstitial space of not quite being “at home.” As adults, like Zhen, we embrace the Western practices of monogamy and critique the authority of the mother-in-law; but unlike Zhen, complete freedom for women is qualified by our religious faith practices in regards to multiple lovers and sexual freedom at large.

***Shengji* (生計) and Praxis**

Zhen expected women to be able to free themselves, asserting that they allowed themselves to be mistreated because of dependence on others for sustenance (Zarrow, 1988). Ultimately, it was the unequal distribution of wealth rather than male dominance that was the cause of women's hardships, and to become independent, women should learn trades, daughters should be sent to school, and those from poor families sent to work in factories (Liu, Karl, & Ko, 2013). Communism, as a doctrine of sharing, was the answer to inequality, and liberation was linked to revolution (Zarrow, 1988).

We use the ideas of *shengji* (生計) here to refer to our ideals of gender equality and equal opportunity regardless of gender/color/class. Zhen saw the problem of *shengji* (生計) as the “commodification of women's bodies...[which] has effectively crushed the possibility for any reimagining of the futurity of labor” (Liu, Karl, & Ko, 2013, p. 25). Through our praxis, we imagine a growing ontological space where theories and ideologies of gender, sexuality, positionality, and intersectionality are rooted in our collective desire for global dialogue on human equality, unity and sustainability.

While we do not necessarily embrace a politically communist state, we agree with the ideology of sharing, and envision praxis where all voices are heard and celebrated, and lifelong learning and education are means to achieve a truly sustainable livelihood. We bring this into our homes as we raise our children to appreciate and value diversity and advocacy of a just world, where people regardless of age, color, gender and ability, can lead balanced, meaningful, and fulfilling lives. In our classrooms and in our scholarship, we cultivate an appreciation for “other,” raising awareness of the contributions that all may bring to the table, challenging hegemonic ideologies and advocate knowledge construction and power have multiple centers, rather than a monopoly in the West.

Implications and Conclusion

The results of the study provide insight into ways “collaborative interrogation could enable researchers to explore self in the presence of others to gain a collective understanding of their shared experiences,” as well as provide evidence of the power of this particular qualitative approach (Ngunjiri, et al. 2010, para. 37). Our hope also is for our reflections and analysis to contribute to much-needed discourse on the dynamics of East-West learning and knowing, and Asian/ Asian North American women's holistic development in their journey of lifelong learning.

As Coryell (2013) argues, “American adult educators must first understand that their practices and beliefs are steeped in Western values and culture while recognizing other communities around the world adhere to cultural value systems that may influence ways of knowing and learning very differently” (p. 300). If multi-cultural adult educators are self-aware of the various elements of their identities and influences on their practice, this can contribute to a greater sensitivity to those in their classrooms coming from diverse backgrounds. Alternatively, in the context of more “homogeneous” settings, intentionally bringing in and valuing diverse perspectives raises the awareness that Western values and cultures are *not* a global norm, but part of a broader, cosmopolitan society.

The significance of having a better understanding of East-West dynamics is related very much to the reality of globalization's impact on knowledge production and the expansion of the field of adult education in its depth and breadth. Coryell (2013) suggests it is necessary to transcend Western cultural influences in order to embrace a global educator narrative "because knowledge is transforming through global intersections of society, the workplace, politics, economics and lifelong learning" (p. 300). For those with roots from the East and raised in the West, unpacking the elements of multiplicity and identities can enable one to be more effective and culturally competent to engage with diverse learners and prepare the next generation – whether as parents or educators – to foster a fairer, more just global society, flourishing in multiple centers of power and knowledge.

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¹“Diversity Divas” is the name of a collaborative inquiry research group adopted for the purposes of group publication. Members of the group include Maria Liu Wong, Naya Mondo, Ramona Sharpe, Aimee Tiu-Wu, Connie Watson and Rosie Williams.