

A Taoist Intersubjective Becoming of *I* and *Thou*

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ABSTRACT

This is a narrative inquiry of my cross-cultural identity as a teacher in three countries: China, Canada, and the United States of America. Taking an individual approach to cultural studies, I inquired the Chinese-Canadian life experiences of myself and my former student—a Chinese-Canadian woman immigrant. Beyond our similar ethnic and gender backgrounds, we found each other from warring social classes in China. Underneath our differences, we recovered the Taoist intersubjective knowing as our common deep identity with the Chinese culture. I further developed this research with my former student—a Mexican-American male teacher. Underneath our different and opposing gender, social class, and ethnic identities, we reconstructed the Buberian ontology of *I* and *Thou* as our common way of relating to each other, listening to and telling each other's cultural stories. We transcended our differences, and reconstructed our identities as fuller cultural beings. I concluded that individuals from opposing cultures coming into contact intersubjectively generated cultural creativity. My cross-cultural teacher identity was a Taoist intersubjective becoming of *I* and *Thou*.

Introduction

Cultural identification involves at least two sides: how a society perceives a person and how the person relates to the society. Having lived in the society of the United States of America for six years, I have been assigned various cultural identities mostly based on my appearance. The most recent one included my social status—an Asian female scholar in higher education. It is an honor to be one. “Am I?” I asked myself the same question. Coming from a culture of collectivism, which suppresses the personal in favor of the collective aspects, I enjoy the freedom of autonomy and the privilege of choices in a culture of individualism, comparatively speaking. To begin my search for a cultural identity, let me first exercise my hard-earned freedom and privilege to dissect the society assigned term—Asian female scholar in higher education, and to relate it to my cultural experiences.

“Asian” refers to either an inhabitant or a descendent of an inhabitant of Asia. I am not residing in Asia. My parents and ancestors inhabit in a world beyond human limit. Asia is home for many different nations, ethnic groups, religious beliefs, and languages. It is confusing to use the term as an identity marker for any one, even on the most superficial level—skin color and other biological features. It’s only meaningful to apply the term in times of separation and/or exclusion. To describe my nationality legally, I am a Chinese-born Canadian citizen inhabiting in the United State of America as a permanent resident.

I am a “female” only in the narrow sense of biology, over which I have little control. In regard to its social cultural meanings, I was educated to believe in developing both feminine and masculine qualities, such as caring and competitive, cooperative and independent, considerate and decisive, conservative and aggressive, artistic and analytical, multitasked and focused, and

reserved and assertive. I learned to be a follower when necessary and a leader when situations call for. I embodied the cultural stereotypes of both genders, both *Yin* and *Yang*. I wouldn't choose to identify with "female", but a woman with both feminine and masculine qualities.

In the Oxford dictionary, a scholar refers to a learned person in a particular subject or a person who learns. I am more of the latter because I am always learning. The word "learned" carries a definitive and complete connotation, which confines thinking, and prevents multiple interpretations.

Higher education has been my life's pursuit. But I have been in and out of the institution of higher education many times. I was born into a family of professors, and grew up on a university campus. The Chinese Cultural Revolution deprived me of my right to middle school, high school and of course, higher education and exiled me—a 15-turning-to-16-year-old—to a labor camp in remote areas where life was basic and primitive. While receiving "re-education" from the locals who had never been exposed to higher education, I learned to see the sunny side of everything. Backbreaking work in the water-padded rice field for 14-16 hours a day taught me to persevere. Seeing people die of starvation, I learned to conserve. Without electricity, I learned to read under kerosene lamp. When books of any traditions, Chinese and Western, were banned, I rescued some from "enemies of the people" and self-taught my missing middle school and high school lessons. I entered higher education as a student and later a professor in China.

Immigration to Canada took away my higher education for the second time. Learning from the lessons of the past, I persevered, working from the very bottom of the social ladder—a live-in nanny, rebuilding my career in the new cultural environment, and re-entered higher education in Canada and the US.

One of the most important lessons I learned from life outside of higher education was to make meaning of every day life experiences. Such learning was further developed in my narrative inquiry research later in my graduate studies in a Canadian higher education institute. Based on Dewey's theory of experience, "... narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.20). Narrative inquirers consider their life experiences as their curricula. Through telling and living, retelling and reliving the stories of experiences, narrative inquirers "reorganize, reconstruct, and transform their life experiences" (Dewey, 1916/1966, p. 18). They use life stories as their research data, research method and the final form of research report all in one. This article is a narrative inquiry about my cross-cultural identity. Stories—research data—were collected during the past 14 years about the life experiences of a Chinese-Canadian woman immigrant, a Mexican-American male immigrant, and myself in China, Canada, and the United States of America. I examined, reorganized, and reconstructed them in an attempt to answer my research question: What is my cultural identity? Research methodology and theoretical framework developed through the research were interwoven into two stories. The first story was about my cross-cultural experience with the Chinese-Canadian woman, and the second with the Mexican-American man. The first story was briefer on the methodology. Elaborations can be found in my book entitled: _____.

A Chinese-Canadian Story of the Taoist Intersubjective Becoming

Taoism, the philosophy of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, has been studied by many people in over two thousand years of its existence in China and later all over the world. Next to the Bible and *Bhagavad Gita*, Tao Te Ching is the most translated book in the world, well over a hundred different renditions in English alone, not to mention the dozens in German, French, Italian,

Dutch, Latin, and other European languages. Versions upon versions of interpretations of the works of Lao Tzu can be found in libraries of all kinds in every corner of the planet. However, unlike the philosophy of Confucianism, Taoism has seldom been adopted as an official philosophy by any emperor in any dynasty in the Chinese history. On the contrary, it has suffered many years of oppression, suppression, and prohibition. Nevertheless, like water in Lao Tzu's analogy (Lao Tzu, Chapter 78, p. 54), Taoism has permeated into the very fabric of the Chinese way of life, even in its opposing school of thought—the Confucianism, especially the School of New Confucianism.

I grew up in China during the notorious Mao's era when Taoism went through severe, if not the most severe, suppression in Chinese history. Schools were not allowed to teach about it; books in libraries were shuffled into the corner of "banned" if not burned or destroyed by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Scholars of Taoism either re-taught themselves or were re-educated to work with other subjects in government's favor at the time, if they did not want to be completely erased physically and/or intellectually. Taoism was never heard of.

Under the post Mao government, Taoism made its way back to universities, which were considered by many as institutes for intellectual elites, and it mostly stayed within the departments of philosophy and Chinese literature. I majored in English. All my higher education was about the Western world. Taoism was something removed from our daily life, belonging to the long past dead.

It was in Canada in my graduate studies in education, when I first realized the importance of Taoism in my life. In a curriculum foundation class, I studied narrative inquiry. As narrative inquirers, we were telling our life stories to the class in order to make curriculum meanings. I

was the only Chinese in class, and struggled to tell my humble life story experienced in the Chinese context to my audience who did not know the Chinese language. They had very limited knowledge about what happened to ordinary people's lives under a government of dictatorship, especially during the Cultural Revolution when China was in a state of self-isolation.

In this context, my life story telling became a series of explanation and clarification about historical and cultural backgrounds. Now, almost everything I had known about my Chinese history and culture became questionable, and almost everything I had personally experienced seemed to call for different interpretations. It is in such a process that Taoism came alive. I found that Taoism had played pivotal roles in my ways of living and teaching. All of a sudden, my seemingly modest life ceased to be humble anymore. I began to enter a relationship with Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu—the two masters of Taoism.

Lao Tzu was Confucius' contemporary. His only work that had been found so far was the 5000-word Tao Te Ching, which "is considered to be the fundamental text of both philosophical and religious Taoism. ... the Tao, or Way, which is at the heart of Tao Te Ching, is also the centerpiece of all Chinese religion and thought. Naturally, different schools and sects bring somewhat different slants to the Tao, but all subscribe to the notion that there is a single, overarching Way ("Tao" is the phonetic translation, my addition) that encompasses everything in the universe." (Mair, 1990, p. xi). About two hundred years after Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu developed the philosophy of Lao Tzu in his collections of essays, tales, and anecdotes all written in a fascinating poetic style. Although Chuang Tzu is less known in the West except in the circle of sinologists, he has been considered by many as superior to Lao Tzu both in his philosophical profoundness and poetic style of writing. He challenges our conventional knowledge and

assumption “with a divine sense of humor” (Mair, 1994, p.xiv). As a philosophy, Taoism by Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu has made various unique contributions to the great civilizations of the world. One essential Taoist thought is the ontology of intersubjective interplay between opposites, which I found to have played an important role in the narrative inquiry about my Chinese-Canadian cross-cultural experiences (Li, 1998).

Working over four years in Canada with a few first-generation Chinese women immigrants who had been my adult English as a Second Language (ESL) students, I developed a unique relationship with one of them—Jenning. Jennings and I were both born in China and grew up in the same historical period of time. When we were sharing our life stories as part of the research, we realized that the social classes to which we belonged had been enemies in various times in China. We experienced the same historical events from opposite perspectives. For example, during the Cultural Revolution when we were both in our teenage years, Red Guards ransacked people’s homes under the name of protecting Maoism and the proletarian dictatorship from the influence of feudalism (Chinese tradition), capitalism (Western tradition), and revisionism (the revised Marxism practiced by the Soviet Union under Khrushchev). I witnessed my home ransacked by Red Guards—university students of my father, whereas Jennings was a Red Guard, who ransacked people’s homes. Beyond the similarity in the Canadian cultural context about our appearance, food, and language, we identified our warring social class backgrounds.

Working with Jennings, unlike the narrative inquiry in my graduate class, my struggle was not in how to provide background knowledge or to respond to questions from a Western frame of thinking. Because of our warring social class backgrounds, my tension was on how to suspend and overcome my emotion-laden, pre-conceived notion about Red Guards, at the same time not

to give up myself. Jennings's tension was on how to remain truthful to her experiences at the same time not to be judged unfavorably by me—her former teacher and researcher. Even worse, revealing her real experiences might put herself in a very dangerous situation with Canadian immigration authorities. She would be risking a loss of her political refugee status.

We did not follow the “Either-Or” dichotomy, nor did we compromise ourselves in order to please each other. We remained truthful to the selves and the others. We plunged deeply into our lived worlds and offered full versions of our experiences in narrating—the act of telling (Conle, 2003, p.6). We followed each other into the opposite extremes of our experienced worlds by listening without judging.

When Jennings told me about her experience of ransacking people's homes, I did not interrupt with my judgment. I listened to her entire story, appreciating her trust, truthfulness, and respecting her particular feelings of being proud of herself. When I told her about my experience of witnessing my own home ransacked, she did not disrupt with her apology or any expression of feeling pity for me. She listened to my full story, appreciating my truthfulness and respecting my particular pains in the experience. No more a dehumanized Red Guard, but an innocent teenager who truly believed in what she was doing due to the political and social influence of the government. No more victimized Black Bastard (the term used by Red Guards to refer to a child of “the enemy of people”), but a 13-year-old who was confused about who she was in relation to the “people” and shocked by the Red Guards' actions. Such listening to the details of our life experiences helped us put ourselves into each other's shoes, and recognize each other's points of view.

Beyond the two points of view from each of us, we created a third point—a unity, which is not the combination of the two, but more. We humanized each other. Such humanization taught us the tragedy of the finitude of one's cultural experiences and the infinite hopefulness in learning intersubjectively (Li, 2002a). We recovered the Taoist intersubjective way of sharing life stories, and of relating to each other as our deeper Chinese identity.

Intersubjectivity could be found throughout Lao Tzu. It is an ontological interplay between and beyond opposing concepts. I could relate to such concepts more personally and experientially in the following poem by Lao Tzu:

When all under heaven know beauty as beauty,

already there is ugliness;

When everyone knows goodness,

This accounts for badness.

Being and nonbeing give birth to each other,

Difficult and easy complete each other,

Long and short form each other,

High and low fulfill each other,

Tone and voice harmonize with each other—

It is ever thus.

Lao Tzu, Chapter Two, p.60.

My understanding of this message is that all concepts arise in comparison and contrast. Human understanding about the world in which we are a part is forever partial. We should

remind ourselves often that driving directions are not the roads and a map is not the territory. A concept about a person is not the whole person, both you and me.

Therefore

Always be without desire

in order to observe its wondrous subtleties;

Always have desire

So that you may observe its manifestations.

Both of these derive from the same source;

They have different names but the same designation.

Mystery of mysteries,

The gate of all wonders!

Lao Tzu, Chapter One, p. 59

That same source is the intersubjectivity—the human knowing about the world—the “mystery of mysteries” and “the gate of all wonders”.

Chuang Tzu elaborated such intersubjectivity in human knowing in the Taoist tale usually entitled the Happiness of Fishes. In *Wandering on the way* (Chuang Tzu, 1994), the story goes like this:

Master Chuang and Master Hui were strolling across the bridge over the Hao River. “The minnows have come out and are swimming so leisurely,” said Master Chuang. “This is the joy of fishes.”

“You’re not a fish,” said Master Hui. “How do you know what the joy of fishes is?”

“You’re not me,” said Master Chuang, “so how do you know that I don’t know what the joy of fishes is?”

“I’m not you,” said Master Hui, “so I certainly do not know what you do. But you’re certainly not a fish, so it is irrefutable that you do not know what the joy of fishes is.”

“Let’s go back to where we started.” Said Master Chuang, “When you said, ‘How do you know what the joy of fishes is?’ you asked me because you already knew that I knew. I know it by strolling over the Hao.” P. 165

Like most Taoist tales, the meaning in this story has been interpreted and debated over the years at home and abroad, but most see it as a view of intersubjectivity. In this story, Master Hui was questioning Master Chuang’s intersubjective knowing about the fishes’ joy, but was caught, humorously, knowing intersubjectively about Master Chuang in Hui’s questioning itself.

In *The Tao of physics*, Capra put the Taoist intersubjectivity in a way that is very accessible for the modern English-speaking world. “Opposites are abstract concepts belonging to the realm of thought, and as such they are relative. By the very act of focusing our attention on any one concept we create its opposite....that good and bad, pleasure and pain, life and death, are not absolute experiences belonging to different categories, but merely two sides of the same reality; extreme parts of a single whole ” (1975/1991, p. 145). Beyond the earthly opposites lies the

eternal truth—the dynamic balance between the opposites—the Tao (Capra, 1975/1991, pp145-147).

Martin Buber, one of the greatest modern thinkers and philosophers, also identified the Taoist intersubjectivity as a dialogical ontology. He depicted characteristics of human relations as *I* and *Thou* and *I* and *It*. In *I* and *Thou*, there are two equal subjects, whereas in *I* and *It*, there is one subject—*I*, and the other one is perceived as an object—*It*, being used to serve the purpose of the *I*. Beyond the two equal subjectivities in *I* and *Thou*, he pointed out “the between” as an intersubjective “ontology” and believed that possibilities for crystallization of cultural creativity and social regeneration would most likely appear in situations where various opposing elements or components of culture come into contact with each other through constant reciprocity and tension (Eisenstadt, 1992, in Buber, pp 10-11). Buber’s dialogical ontology and his belief in its possibilities cohere with the experience of Jennings and myself, and offered us an interpretation of the puzzle of long time as why such intersubjective relation occurred between Jennings and me—two individuals from opposing components of the Chinese culture.

A Chinese-Canadian American Story of the Buberian Intersubjective Becoming

In his later stage of writing, Buber deepened the ontological base by discovering the two basic movements of human in *I* and *Thou* relations. The clearest and most systematic treatment of this new stage, as identified by Friedman (1965, in Buber, pp. 20-21) is in his essay entitled *Distance and relation* (1965, pp. 59-71). In *Distance and relation*, Buber distinguished two movements in establishing dialogical human relations. The first is “setting at a distance”, the second “entering into relation”. He believed that the presupposition of entering a dialogical relation is to establish a distance from the person. Such a distancing is to withdraw from the

pragmatic needs and wants and to set the person as an independent opposite, which is equal to *I*. The second movement is to relate to the independent opposite, to that person's specific experiences in connection with time and space. These specific experiences may make present situations in which *I* could imagine what *Thou* experienced as if *I* were *Thou*, who is "becoming a self with me". When such self-becoming is known to and recognized by *Thou*, the dialogical relation is completed.

I found Buber's framework in *Distance and relation* particularly meaningful in my conceptualization and articulation of my narrative inquiry about my cross-cultural experiences in the US context.

I came to teach multicultural teacher education classes in the United States of America and continued my cross-cultural narrative research. Reviewing students' multicultural autobiographies developed in my class, I was able to identify potential research participants whose cultural experiences were so different that opposites and tensions would likely occur. In that way my research could have a better chance to produce cultural creativity, as took place between Jennings and myself, and as is indicated in Buber's work. In the intersubjective narrative inquiry with Jennings, equal turn taking in our listening and telling of life stories played an important role in our intersubjective learning. To enforce such intersubjectivity, I believed an equal power relation between the researcher and the participants to be crucial. Professor-student relationships could not be equal in its power. Therefore I did not start narrative research with the students until after they graduated. In this way, research participants and myself would be more likely to overcome what Buber called "seeming" (1965, p. 76). We would be able to present ourselves more truthfully, as what Buber called "spontaneous being" (1965, p. 76).

I chose to contact 18 teachers who had been my students in a cohort teacher education program located in one of the nation's most diverse cities, where 98% of the city's residents were ethnic minorities. Cultural tensions were ever present and racial conflicts sometimes resulted in violence. Great was the difference between my students' cultural teaching environment and mine—homogeneous in China and subtle in Canada. Six teachers agreed to join me on this journey of narrative inquiry. As the saying goes, where there is a will, there is a way. The cultural difference between the six teachers and mine was great. There were three men and three women. Of the three men, one was a first generation immigrant from Nigeria; two were immigrants from Mexico, one came at age seven, the other at fifteen. Of the three women, one was American born white, another Canadian born white, and the third was born in America to a father of Grenada heritage and a mother of Irish tradition. In addition, every single one of them had different cultural experiences from that of Jennings, the Chinese-Canadian woman in the first story.

Working with this diverse group of teachers for two years, intersubjective learning took place between myself and each of them, and between themselves, to various extents and in different ways (Li, Cantero, et al. 2001; Li, Cantero, et al. 2002; Li, X. 2002b). Among all the participants, my intersubjective learning with Israel—the first generation immigrant from Mexico at age 15—made the most impact on our knowing.

During the semester when Israel was my student, I found him not very engaged. He was often absent, and missed one quarter of the classes. Most of the time when he was in class, he seemed to be absent-minded. From the few personal interactions with him in and outside of the classroom, I was under the impression that his absences and absent-mindedness may not have

come from any negative attitude towards the topics of the class, but from some other personal and/or professional over-commitment. His term paper—a multicultural autobiography—did not include a study of his own cultural experiences with social class, religion, ethnicity, gender, language, or exceptionality, nor did it contain a personal philosophy of multicultural education as required. What he wrote was a teacher story in the form of a rap lyric and a multicultural lesson plan, which was supposed to be a separate group assignment. He received a C grade from my class.

I contacted him as a potential research participant because of the teacher story he wrote, not knowing much of his multicultural experience. I was not expecting a positive answer from him. He surprised me by agreeing to participate, and even attended the first meeting with one of his daughters. At this meeting, my suspicion of his over-commitment was confirmed. During the day, he was teaching full-time a third grade class of 19 English learners and one mainstreamed white kid with a learning disability. In the evening, he taught an ESL class to the parents of his students. He had three daughters of elementary school age and was going through a divorce, and fighting over custody of his children. He was also working on weekends remodeling people's homes, which was his work before he came into teaching.

Immediately I warned him about the time commitment in our research. I also openly expressed, to him and the group, my admiration of his devotion to his students and their parents. I was particularly impressed by his “fighting over child custody”. I had a contrasting personal experience with my ex-husband, who claimed to “love” his (our) child but did not want any responsibility. I had since stereotyped men as irresponsible, but remained open to exceptions. I hoped if I could see enough exceptions, my stereotyping would break down. I compared him,

jokingly, with a “father goose” instead of a “father duck”. In my observation of the behaviors of these two birds, couples of geese were always together in their child-rearing activities, but not the ducks. I seldom saw a father duck with their ducklings, but noticed many single male ducks taking care of themselves only. He was not sure how to respond to my joke, but tried to emphasize how precious children were.

During the same meeting, I overheard him making comments about white Americans as “they whites don’t understand us”, and I found his school in close proximity to the school of the white Canadian born female teacher in our research. So I encouraged them to share their life stories as a group. They had a brief meeting and worked out a schedule to meet to exchange their multicultural autobiographies and to share their life stories.

Those scheduled meetings were never actualized during the two years of our research. I was disappointed, but not surprised. He missed all our group meetings except the first one, and did not write anything more than the rap lyric teacher story. I experienced constant difficulties communicating with him by phone, fax, or email. He forgot to inform his principal of my second school visit and was not able to gather consent forms for my videotaping of his class before my arrival. This meant after two-hours of driving through the notorious traffic in Los Angeles area, I had to turn around and get into the same nasty traffic again. Israel’s class was the only one of the six teachers’ for which I did not have a video taped record. I was calm, knowing his over-commitments.

During my three visits of his classroom, I was amazed by Israel’s dedication to the children, personal connection to the families and creativity in his instruction. He further surprised me by his commitment to our research on his own terms.

Often times, after I he failed to show up at scheduled meetings with the group, he would call me at home after 10 pm, and would offer to come to see me in person to make up for his missed meetings. All of our meetings had one agenda which was to sharing our life experiences. Therefore, Israel did not share his life experiences with any other group members, but me, more extensively than originally planned.

Our meetings usually began with discussing his busy day of teaching and caring for his children. From that, our conversation would go into his classroom instruction and mine, and his life experiences and mine. After our first meeting, we co-presented our work-in-progress at a conference. He surprised me for the second time by being the only one of the six teachers to be able to work out with the school administrators to travel out of state to present with me at the conference. That was less than one month after the September 11th tragedy when travel by air was not something most people would enjoy. During our second meeting, he was very excited to tell me how empowered he was as a teacher from our conversation in the first meeting and the conference. Unexpectedly, this second meeting became an in-depth conversation about his teacher story and mine, and our life experiences.

These surprising responses from Israel seemed to have pulled me away from my preconceived concept of him—that *It* in Buber's terms. Such distancing created an opportunity for me to see him as a whole person—the acceptance of his elemental otherness (Buber, 1965, p. 69).

The way by which we shared our teacher stories and life experiences was similar to that in my previous research—equal turn-taking and focusing on either a particular topic or time period (Li, 2002a, p. 51). Our teacher stories and life experiences were shared in the form of stories.

The vicarious and universal language of stories (Conle, Li & Tan, 2003) created many opportunities for us to imagine the other as *Thou* as “making personal present” of the specific joys and pains the other had experienced (Buber, 1965, p. 66). Our teacher stories and life experiences consisted of many opposing elements, setting each other as independent opposites (Buber, 1965, p. 63) knowing increasingly more of each other as a whole person. In addition, being able to know Israel from his own narrative of detailed otherness provided me with a language to conceptualize and represent his and my experiences.

My most influential teacher was someone who oppressed creativity in her drill-to-death kind of instruction, whereas Israel’s most influential teacher was someone who recognized his creativity from his rebellious misbehavior. My influential teacher taught me all the not-to-dos in teaching, whereas Israel learned from his teacher all the musts in teaching. I immigrated to the US from the North legally under the category of “outstanding researcher and professor”, whereas Israel crossed the border from the South illegally under the category of “illegal alien”. I am from a family of teachers and professors for many generations, whereas he is from a family of peasants of which he is the very first one, and the only one so far, to have received a higher education. I am a woman who believed in gender equity in education, whereas he is a man who considered a man macho for shouldering financial responsibilities for his family while a woman feminine for being obedient and quiet. I was becoming myself in contrast to Israel’s presence. So was Israel becoming himself in my presence.

I took field notes of our second meeting, and showed them to him, explaining that we could change or even destroy them if he wanted. He was thrilled to read my notes, made some clarifications and asked me to continue with the field note taking for all of our upcoming

meetings. In such a sharing, I made him aware that he was “becoming a self with me” (Buber, 1965, p. 71). In his confirmation of my note taking, he also made me aware that I was becoming a self with him.

In our remaining meetings, we read to him my notes taken from the previous meetings, and together we made corrections and clarifications. Such clarifications were similar to those in my graduate classes in Canada when I needed to explain the Chinese cultural and historical background for events that had taken place in my life. The difference was that this time, such explanation was reciprocated. We both needed the background knowledge about Mexico for me, and Canada and China for him. The cultural groups to which we had belonged were not at war in the sense that Jennings and mine had been. Tensions did arise when we touched the social-cultural and political issues facing Chinese-Americans--“the model ethnic minority” and Mexican-Americans—low achieving ethnic minority; gender equity and chauvinism; my upper-middle class background and his poverty family background; my academic English with a Chinese influence and his casual English with a Spanish influence. This time, I knew how to best work with such tensions, but did not know how Israel would handle them.

To my surprise, we both made deeper connections to our own cultures of origin through the clarifications, and remained truthful to the self and the other. Our teacher stories became more complete in contrast with one another’s and our ever on-going stories of teaching and living evolved to reflect more of our whole beings. The opposing elements in our life experiences led us to a deeper level of humanity—our commonality, like that between Jennings and myself. We unfolded (Buber, 1965, p. 82) into fuller beings in each other’s presence.

Israel was a rebellious teenager in middle school in Mexico and was frequently penalized for behavior problems. I was an obedient first grader in China, a good student and expected to be so. Once he acted out in class again, and was sent to see the new principal. Once I made my teacher cry by rebelling against her drill-to-kill instructional technique. I was also sent to see the principal. Israel was proud of himself for making it all the way to the principal. I was concerned that my brother, who was also in the principal's office, would report to my parents and I would subsequently be disciplined. In front of a crowd of teachers and students, Israel's new principal requested him to repeat what he did in class. So he did and waited for some severe punishment and humiliation. Seeing my brother leaving for home from the principal's office, I stopped being stubborn, admitted to my principal my wrong behavior in class, and rushed home ready for some talk. To his surprise, Israel's principal announced to the whole crowd that Israel possessed a talent with performing arts and his creativity should be encouraged and cultivated. To my surprise, my parents smiled at each other. Ever since that day, Israel has tried to be creative. The day became a turning point in his life and the principal his most influential teacher. Ever since that day, the tears of my first grade teacher have stayed in my memory. I have tried to be everything but her in my years of teaching. That day became a landmark in my professional life and that teacher most influential.

Together, we learned that Israel was rebellious because of the disconnection between his family's social environment and that of the school. I rebelled because of the conflict between my upbringing and the teacher's particular way of teaching. We were common underneath the differences. Both of our countries of origin went through times of collectivism, in which individuality was suppressed. Educational philosophies coincided with the collectivism in the

societies. His principal stood out in that system whereas my parents' beliefs in education brought the contrast for me in seeing the oppression of collectivism. Both of our influential teachers planted seeds in our young minds to seek individuality and creativity in a society where our dreams could be realized.

To realize our dreams, we crossed the borders of nations and of cultures. I flew across the Pacific Ocean to a strange land; he was shipped over the border in enclosed trucks. I was a legal graduate student because of my education and social status in my home country; he was an illegal alien because of his lack of education and social status in his home country. We both experienced hardships and made it from the bottom of the social ladder in our host countries to the larger social norms—skilled professionals. From a respected professor with an “iron rice bowl” in China, I started as a live-in nanny in Canada, being paid under minimum wage. From a middle school graduate in Mexico, Israel started as a gardener, being paid under minimum wage. We both studied in our second language. My immigration status changed from a foreign student to a permanent resident in Canada in one year. Subsequently, I was able to work legally as an instructor of adult ESL classes and later as a teacher of bilingual programs in elementary and high schools. Israel had to remain illegal for over ten years until he became an emergency permit teacher in an urban school in Los Angeles. During the 10 years, he had contributed to the society a lot more than I had in one year's time before I obtained my permanent resident status. He volunteered many hours to community-building after the Los Angeles Riot in 1992, and he won the President's award for his outstanding contribution to helping California earthquake victims in 1994.

During his 10 years in the US, Israel never gave up his dream of pursuing his creativity. While establishing a home-remodel business and raising a family with three daughters, he completed his high school education in 2 years with honor and obtained a Bachelor's degree in sociology. During my 10 years in Canada, while teaching and raising a son, I persevered through my graduate studies and obtained both my Master's and doctoral degrees with various scholarships. As a mother, I endured the pain in leaving my 4-year-old son behind for three years before I was able to bring him over. As a father, Israel suffered the threat of possible separation from his daughters. To make the best out of life's given, I improvised my life (Li, 1991). Similarly, Israel possessed the ability to improvise and adapt, which I previously perceived and Bateson (1990) identified as women's quality in composing their lives. In my perseverance through the 10 years of immigration to Canada, I had my story of the fragrance of osmanthus blossoms to nurture me. In his struggle through the 10 years of illegal immigration, he had his own story about the color of the nameless flowers to nourish him. My story of the fragrance of osmanthus blossoms took place in my teenage years during my exile in a labor camp. His happened on his way crossing the border to the US. Children living in poverty in the labor camp in China gave me a priceless present by throwing layers of osmanthus blossoms into my room. The fragrance transformed my exhaustion from 16-hour backbreaking labor in the water padded-rice field fighting leeches to an immediate intoxication of life's given—the blossoms, the children, and the action they took to "make my day". Using his fingers, Israel removed a screw in the front of the truck, which was shipping him and many others over the border. The air coming through the hole left by the removed screw saved the life of everyone in the truck after five hours of travel in the enclosed trailer. Inhaling deeply the fresh soft ocean air, Israel peeked

through the hole and saw bright red flowers hanging over the cliff beside the interstate Highway 5. The sight of these red-colored flowers lifted Israel from the trailer to his dreamland of creativity and promise. I kept visiting the fragrance of my osmanthus blossoms in my dream and life; so did Israel with his nameless flowers.

Keeping the color of the nameless flowers in his dream and life, Israel changed his career path to become a teacher. The osmanthus fragrance in mine, I, for the second time, uprooted myself from the newly familiar culture of Canada to the US. Inspired by President Clinton's call for educating children of working class and ethnic minority families to break the cycle of poverty, Israel decided to be a teacher—a teacher like his most influential one from Mexico. Following my personal, professional, and academic interest in cross-cultural experiences, I became a teacher educator again (the first 11 years of my career in teacher education were in China) to teach teachers in the US never to be like my most influential teacher in China. In the teacher education classroom, Israel and I met, although not in Buber's sense of genuine meeting between *I* and *Thou*. I was his *It*, and he was my *It*.

Israel was in my classroom for a semester. The only strong response he had toward my pedagogy was the teacher story. I visited his classroom three times and observed how he related to his students and their parents. He had a common cultural background with them and was able to communicate with them on a personal level. I had a very different cultural background from him and was not able to communicate with him successfully, except through the teacher story. The teacher story telling created a common living situation in which we became *Thous* for each other. I have since learned to maximize the use of stories in my multicultural teacher education classes and have experienced increasingly more genuine meetings with my students from

different cultures, more *I* and *Thou* relations. His teacher story constructed in my class affirmed, confirmed, and empowered him in his practice. He has since continuously reconstructed it while relating to his pupils, comparing his most influential teacher for his success with his modeling for his pupils. He wanted them to break the cycle of poverty.

Israel and I, the two *Its*, unfolded into each other's *Thous* in the experience of our research—a common living situation in which the two *Is* came into being “which cannot be built up in any other way” (Buber, 1965, p.70). In this common living situation, we suffered each other's pains, and enjoyed each other's joys. Israel came to our second conference presentation. This time, he drove across six states with his three daughters and a girl friend. He took a long but safer route, avoiding the state of Texas, since he had had many unpleasant encounters there during his 10 years of illegal immigration. I flew to the conference site, worrying about his girls and himself. Did they get into trouble again? Did they have a reliable car? Did they have car insurance? Israel, on the other hand, tried to call me many times but his cellular phone did not have interstate connection. He was only able to get in touch with me when they were close to the city where the conference was held. The first thing I told him was that the conference was not as important as the safety and happiness of his family and himself. The first thing he said to me was not to worry and that he and his family had had a good time together during the two-day drive. The worries, relief and joy were mutual.

Such mutuality was reached by transcending our *Is*, through our distancing from and relating to one another as *Thous*, experiencing each other's feelings, opinions, and perspectives. In our common experience of relating to one another in the research, we became able to imagine

each other's reality and we were aware of the becoming of each in the other's presence.

Therefore, we have established an *I* and *Thou* relation, and become fuller cultural beings.

Summary

Cultural anthropologists have studied culture in two major ways: group approaches and individual approaches. In this study, I have taken an individual approach to cultural study, because such an approach acknowledges individual uniqueness, minimizes cultural stereotyping, and simultaneously it opens a path for the individual to make choices, among various cultural groups, to reconstruct his/her cultural identity and transform cultures. Among many individual approaches, I have utilized narrative inquiry into the cultural identities of three individuals from various cultural backgrounds. The inquiry empowered and transformed the inquirers, and established cross-cultural relationships. It reconstructs both the inner and the intersubjective becoming.

Crossing the cultural border of social class, I became a *Thou* with Jennings while Jennings became an *I* with me. Such an intersubjective becoming recovered our deep roots in Taoism underneath our differences. Crossing the cultural borders of ethnicity, gender, and social class, I became a *Thou* with Israel while Israel became an *I* with me. Such an intersubjective becoming generated cultural creativity. The intersubjective ontology of Taoism and Buberism reconstructed my cultural identity as forever becoming in relation to people across cultural borders. Such becoming is beyond and in the between of the concept of Asian female scholar in higher education. All concepts arise in comparison and contrast. A concept about a person is not the whole person. Human understanding about the world in which we are a part is forever partial. So is my understanding of my cross-cultural becoming.

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