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Becoming a Conscious Chinese American Researcher: An Application of the Testimonio Methodology

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Abstract

In this commentary, I describe my experience as an immigrant Chinese American woman in coming to consciousness in my research, teaching, and leadership. Drawing from both the critical theories of Black and Latina scholars, I use testimonio methodology to narrate this story. Three vignettes provide evidence of my transformation from being unconscious and invulnerable to becoming conscious and vulnerable. I argue that transformation of systematic racism, oppression, and marginalization begins within the individual through the Chinese concept of learning for the sake of the self (weiji zhixue 為己之學) with implications for the collective through shared testimonio.

Methodology

Vignette 1: Philadelphia, PA: September 2011:

Eager to implement a course that I spent the summer improving on, I opened my PowerPoint and started explaining the different types of experimental designs to 21 anxious first-year doctoral students. I stated that true experimental designs offered the most control over confounding variables compared to other experimental designs. I asked my adult students, educators, and educational leaders what might be confounding variables in a research study where the focus was to see if a new reading program improved struggling readers' reading proficiency? I looked around the roomful of White, Black and Brown men and women students. Most lowered their gazes. One White man met my gaze. He offered that confounding variables are variables that also influence the outcome of the study but are not the focus of the study. A White woman followed up with maybe things like family background and teacher quality? I responded that's right, variables such as teacher qualification, teaching skills, family background were variables that might influence the reading scores of struggling readers but were considered "confounding" because these variables might interfere with the impact of the new reading program on the reading scores of struggling readers. I looked around and saw most students nodded their heads. I concluded by stating with authority that the federal, state, and funding agencies prefer evidence generated from the true experimental designs and consider this type of design as the "gold standard." At the end of the class, I thought it went well because it was organized, orderly, and all my teaching objectives were met. That year, when my colleagues observed my courses, they wrote, "Dr. Wang's class was well organized, professionally managed." "Dr. Wang has an impressive grasp of her subject matter area, and she is generally quite adept at communicating what she knows to her students. Her course, as well as her lesson, is characterized by organization and intentionality, so much so that students remain engaged in a subject matter area that usually is very anxiety-producing." I felt validated by these external evaluations by my White male peers.

The above experience illustrates what I used to value in myself as a teacher of research methodology in my small department at a mid-sized university in the northeast. I research and teach on educational assessment and quantitative and qualitative research methods. I was proud to be trained so thoroughly in quantitative research with a couple of qualitative courses mixed in. My teaching goal was to help EDD students understand quantitative research designs, survey development, and descriptive and inferential statistics. I believed there was only one way to determine if a new intervention/program worked or not for all students. It was through the gold standard or evidence generated by experimental studies. I learned this knowledge through my doctoral program at the University of Pennsylvania. I was taught by White male scholars who helped launched the Campbell Collaboration in 2000, a non-profit organization that promotes evidence-based decisions and policy through a systematic review of evidence generated from experimental studies. The research that I produced investigated the Black-White achievement gap, school effectiveness, and teacher effectiveness. I was happy to follow in the footsteps of my professors rather than question the application of their teaching to my experiences as an immigrant Chinese American scholar and teacher.

My parents immigrated to Taiwan from different parts of China in the 1940s. After seeing Taiwan's educational system where only the top 15 percent could graduate from decent colleges, they decided to immigrate to the United States to provide their five children a chance to become college graduates. We arrived in the United States in the 1980s as part of the wave of multinational "Asian American" immigrants that grew from less than 1.5 million in 1970 to 11.9 million in 2000 (Chen, Gee, Spencer, Danziger, & Takeuchi, 2009). To make this work financially, my father stayed behind in Taiwan to provide for the whole family. His business in Taiwan made more money than any job opportunity he could have gotten in the United States as an immigrant Asian man. Unfortunately, he forgot to take care of his health while working to support us. He passed away within five years after we arrived in the United States. My mother became a widow and a business woman overnight. She returned to Taiwan and took care of the family business so that the five of us could remain in the United States and finish our parents' dream of becoming college graduates. We all graduated from college; my brother went on to get his master's degree, I went on to be the first in the family to finish a doctoral degree. Looking back, I remember taking turns on the international phone calls with my mother where I reported about my school progress and my basic needs. I kept my report brief as calling internationally was expensive and every second counted. I also remember my mother telling me to try to assimilate by working hard at school, minimizing my differences by keeping my head down and not standing out too much. I followed her suggestions through my education and most of my career. I enjoyed being a quantitative educational researcher. I find it comforting and felt invulnerable when I could write papers to discuss my findings as the single normative pattern confirmed through inferential statistics based on data collected from a large body of nameless subjects. As Ruth Behart (1996) wrote, "The worst that can happen in an invulnerable text is that it will be boring." (p. 13). I was comfortable being a boring but well-researched space for a long time. This space allowed me to hide my differences from my White colleagues in the department and the field. This complacency was shaken by the rise in anti-Asian violence during the pandemic.

Vignette 2: Philadelphia, PA: March 2021

Today six Asian women were killed in the shootings at three Atlanta area massage parlors… when I heard this tragic news, I experienced grief and anger that these Asian women who were defenseless, working, and non-violent were the targets of the shooting. When I heard that an

unemployed elderly Chinese immigrant who collected bottles in the Harlem neighborhood ended up in a coma after being severely beaten by an ex-felon on parole, and other anti-Asian hate incidents targeting mostly the weak and the defenseless that occurred throughout the United States, I experienced disbelief and fear. I feared driving to cities such as Philadelphia and New York City because I matched the profile of the typical victim—being a short, middle-aged, defenseless Asian woman. I refused to run any errands on my own and asked my husband or teenage sons to accompany me. I finally saw clearly that even though I am a U.S. citizen, have lived in the United States for over 35 years, married and gave birth to two children in the United States, I will always be seen as a perpetual foreigner from Asia. I also realized that if I stayed in my comfort zone, which was to keep my head low, do my work, and remain silent about my feelings about what was happening to Asian Americans, I accepted that we Asian-Americans are helpless and have no voice. I decided it was time to stop being passive, silent, and voiceless; I would be active, speak out, and develop a voice. But I wondered what does being active mean? What do I speak about? What kind of voice do I want to have? I then realize that because I have yet to speak up publicly, I was not conscious of what it means to be a Chinese American woman researcher, teacher, and leader. I looked around and realized I wasn't the only Asian American struggling to find a voice. Many of my Asian and Asian American colleagues and acquaintances from different disciplines and fields were also struggling. This was my personal awakening.

In addition to the pandemic, 2020 was a year when I suddenly found myself becoming the face and director of a thriving leadership program, and launching a new concentration on diversity, equity and inclusion. I was working with a group of faculty and an advisory board who were still reeling from the sudden separation of their beloved program director of ten years. One of my first tasks was introducing myself, my vision, and the new concentration to the university community and beyond. It was a challenge. I needed to come across as authentic, confident, and warm. I needed to highlight my differences as well as what this meant for the university. I had to look into myself and the experiences that shaped me.

I started by reflecting on my early immigration experiences and realized how profoundly those early experiences shaped my values, my identity, and how I saw myself as an American. Berry (2003) defined cultural adaptation as the process that immigrants experience upon immigration to a new country where they adjust to the beliefs and behaviors of the new dominant culture while retaining certain beliefs and behaviors of their culture of origin. Assimilation occurs when immigrants adjusted to the new culture with high adoption of the beliefs and behaviors of the new culture and low retention of beliefs and behaviors in one's culture of origin (Berry, 1997, 2003). Marginalization occurs with low adoption of the beliefs and behaviors of the new culture and low retention of the culture of origin (Berry, 1997; 2003). I assimilated at the request of my widowed mother. She wanted us to assimilate because she believed high engagement with the dominant White American beliefs and behaviors while minimizing the differences we acquired through our Chinese culture of origin would help us integrate easier into the American White society. Through the process of assimilation as a young immigrant, I learned to adopt the dominant White beliefs and behaviors as my own, I learned to see myself through the dominant lens, and I gradually assumed that I was White. This assumption was torn apart violently by the anti-Asian and Asian American hate crimes. I saw crimes were repeatedly committed against Asians and Asian Americans in various parts of the country because our skin color and features identified us as non-White and perpetual outsiders to the White Americans (Lee, 2015).

I embarked on a journey to educate myself on what it means to be a conscious Chinese American woman researcher. I wanted to learn about critical theories from my Black and Latino/x colleagues. I learned from Black critical race theorists (CRT) Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) that CRT confronts racism by validating experiential knowledge and ways of knowing emerging from Africana studies, ethnic studies, and women's studies to examine the role of race and gender in the production of knowledge. Dei (2013) further elaborated that "Racism already exists [in most society] and the anti-racist simply speaks to the nature and extent of the problem" (p. 4). He believed each of us has "a responsibility to both examine and forcefully challenge the new spins placed on racial stereotypes as the new 'normal' that are still anchored in Whiteness." (p. 7). I also learned from Singh (2019) that "for people of color, that first stage of racial identity development is often obliviousness about racism existing, which lasts until that first critical incident of being the target of a racist act or idea" (p. 4).

By watching House Judiciary Committee hearing on rising discrimination and violence against Asian Americans on March 18, 2021, I learned about the history of systematic racism against Asians and Asian Americans. I found the testimonials of two Asian Americans professors to resonate deeply. Dr. Erika Lee, Regents Professor of History and Asian American Studies, Directors of the Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, spoke about the 150 years old history of systemic racism and racial violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States. This history included mass lynching of Chinese immigrant men in 1871, massacred of Chinese workers in 1885, attacks on Japanese immigrants in 1906, attacks on Filipino immigrants in the 1920s, attacks on Korean shopkeepers and Lao and Cambodian refugees in 1987, racial violence against Muslim Asians post 9/11, leading to the current wave of racial violence against Asians. Dr. Hiroshi Motomura, Susan Westerberg Prager Distinguished Professor of Law and Faculty Co-Director of the Center for Immigration Law and Policy at the School of Law, University of California, Los Angeles, testified that the immigration laws have worked to favor White and primarily immigrants from western and northern Europe and have kept Asians out of the United States until 1965. He shared that like African Americans and American Indians, Asian Americans were considered racially inferior and unfit for U.S. citizenship for most of our country's history. Like African Americans and American Indians, Asian Americans were denied equal rights, barred from becoming naturalized citizens, prohibited from owning or leasing land and marrying Whites in some states, and subjected to social and residential segregation.

As part of this reflective learning journey, I knew I could no longer rely solely on the quantitative methodology to understand the knowledge I carry and transmit to my students and the field. I can no longer keep the subjectivity of my research. I needed to find a different methodology to help me organize and understand what I am experiencing and learning. My friend Suniti Sharma, a critical researcher (Sharma, 2014, 2021), guided me towards testimonio as a critical qualitative methodology. Testimonio, an account told in the first person by a narrator who is the real protagonist or witness of events (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012), has become a key genre for the expression of consciousness-raising among ethnic, indigenous, and/or marginalized women leaders (Behart, 1996, p. 27). As a methodology, Latina educators, researchers and scholars (e.g., Martínez-Roldán & Quiñones, 2016) have used *testimonio* to narrate their own stories and also challenge dominant notions of who can construct knowledge. They (re)claim *testimonio* as a text written by and for Latinas (or other marginalized groups) to theorize oppression, resistance, and subjectivity (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). I decided to use testimonio to better understand the ways that my lived experiences as an

immigrant (foreign born) Chinese American have mediated my work and identities as a teacher, researcher, and leader.

Through testimonio, I come to consciousness about my ethnicity and my culture. I believe this testimonio has allowed me to re(claim) the Chinese concept of learning for the sake of the self (weiji zhixue 為己之學) (Du, 2007, as cited in Berthrong, 2008, p. 432), and learning through the process of self-development, where, "we obtain a kind of intellectual intuition and…some sort of inner experience, which reveals something about our true and hidden selves. The true self can be understood as the common and deepest nature of human beings. It is hidden because people normally do not know it. The understanding of our true selves is also self-development into a profound person." (Chi, 2005, p. 270). I believe this type of learning (xue 學) eventuates in awakening (jue 覺) of the self (Berthrong, 2008, p. 432).

Vignette 3: April 2021 to Present Time, Multiple Locations

As one of the volunteer facilitators of the 2021 SRCD Town Hall, I was asked to help facilitate an online town hall for an "inward" look at policies, procedures, practices within SRCD that pertain to issues of equity, justice, inclusion, and diversity. It was a space for voices to be heard, and it fostered increased communication, transparency, and accountability of the society and its members. The SRCD is a multidisciplinary professional society that includes approximately 5,500 researchers, practitioners and human development professionals from over 50 countries. The 2021 SRCD Zoom Town Hall which hundreds of researchers of child and adolescent development participated focused on questions such as "What are overall reactions to the activities SRCD has been engaged, especially over the past year? What more would you like to see in the short term? In the long term?" Facilitators were also instructed to monitor comments and questions and to respond to rude/racist/discriminatory language/actions.... A different day and I'm in a back-to-back individual zoom session with one of my 12 dissertation advisees. The Asian American woman student needed help to understand how to connect the patterns she was discovering through qualitative coding of the personal stories that she collected from Black and Brown college graduates. We talked about being open to emerging ideas, using visualization to form a picture of what she was seeing from her qualitative coding, connecting the emerging qualitative codes to the integrative model for the study of developmental competencies of minority students…It's evening and I am in a zoom session where my adult students share their who I am story that connects their racial, ethnic, gender, family, and professional identities. I began the zoom session by sharing my story, '"Being a first generation Chinese American woman working in the field of higher education, I bring different perspectives (global, new comer, outsider & insider perspectives), systems thinking (linear, circular, analysis/synthesis), and creativity to the teams that I lead and the initiatives that I commit myself to. As I rise to positions with more formal authority, I become more aware of my personal biases, my relationship to system biases, and how I help the system perpetuate these biases. Through experience and research, I also learned how to break that pattern and create change through a project, a committee, a dialogue, and or a program one at a time. I am by no means an expert on this issue. I am comfortable being a Chinese American woman leader going through this life-long journey of learning and being."

The vignette above illustrates who I am today. I am an immigrant Chinese American woman who is a full professor of educational leadership. I research reimagining teaching and learning interdisciplinary STEM education in the K-12 context and reimagining equity, diversity, and inclusive approach to teaching and learning. I teach educational assessment, quantitative and

qualitative research methods, dissertation proposal writing, social identity and belonging, and adolescent development. I am a foreign-born immigrant. Through acculturation and assimilation, I adopted the White privileged lens for most of my professional career to understand, research, teach and lead in a predominantly White higher education institution.

The recent anti-Asian violence shook me out of my complacency. I woke up and saw that I was lying to myself by believing myself to be invulnerable and White. My last name, the pigmentation of my skin, my immigrant status, and my slight accent all mark me as a foreigner, an immigrant, and an Asian. I saw more clearly how the model minority stereotype threats had affected me, my children, and the millions of Asian students going through the American educational system. This stereotype perpetuates the common belief of many teachers and school administrators that Asian students are problem-free because they are self-reliant, good with numbers, rule followers, and organized (Choi, 2008). My adolescent children are among the many Asian youths whose learning difficulties, organizational challenges, and mental wellness are more likely to be overlooked and seen as less important than other students' learning difficulties, organizational challenges, and mental wellness (Choi, 2008). Many of my Asian colleagues have also experienced this stereotype at their workplace. Their perceived organizational and technical skills helped them to be promoted to middle-level management positions. Still, their perceived deficit in communication and interpersonal skills created a bamboo ceiling that prevented many Asians from reaching upper-level leadership positions.

Coming to consciousness (jue 覺) about being a Chinese American woman researcher has made me realize that as a researcher, teacher, and leader at my institution, I could become an agent of change by learning, bridging, and supporting Asians, Asian-Americans, Black, Latino/x, Indigenous, and people of color. Through the courses I teach, I learned from students what it means to be a Black student and educator. For instance, I learned from my Black men students that they learned early on to smile often as a non-smiling face was often seen as threatening or challenging to White school teachers and administrators. I also learned from my Black women students that they learned early on that if they wanted to be acknowledged by White school teachers and administrators as "competent," they often have to work twice as hard to prove themselves as proficient as their White peers. Through discussions, I learned from my students to be open to knowledge that is subjective. Knowing that an education program caused a significant change in performance is no longer sufficient. Understanding how different groups of students experienced and grew from the program was equally important. Through the way I advise, I learned that advising is about being open to other forms of thinking. I learned that every student experience a different journey in developing their writing fluency and that some journeys could be circular, some could be linear, and some could change shape--and that is all okay as long as they arrive at their destination. Through discussions with colleagues and reading of critical methodology, I learned that critical methodology could be used to uncover patterns relating to equity, explore the lived experiences of people who are historically excluded or labeled as marginal, and narrate researchers' own stories while challenging dominant notions of who can construct knowledge. I also learned from my multidisciplinary and multiethnic group of collaborators that research is about being open to different ways of generating new knowledge and tools and making them accessible for use by diverse communities to maximize their potential impact.

Through testimonio, a critical qualitative methodology, I re(claim) the Chinese concept of learning for the sake of the self to understand and organize the old and new knowledge I carry and which I transmit to my students and the field. As I interact with people who look alike or different from me, I try to listen and learn (xue 學) about who they are and actively avoid relying on my

assumptions. As I encounter, see, or participate in racism, I challenge myself to pause, reflect, learn, and act. I accept I am vulnerable. I am a Chinese American woman researcher, teacher, and leader whose consciousness or wakefulness (jue 覺) is always in the process of becoming; the new researcher, teacher, and leader I have become is open to what it means to not know.

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