
**BETWIXT AND BETWEEN: THE POWER OF TEACHING
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF IMMIGRANTS**

ALAN KA LUN LAI

Abstract: What kind of power do immigrants have when they use English as a second language to lead/teach those with English as their native tongue? How do people like me who at one point was taking ESL classes approach teaching, especially to those with English as their native language? When exercising positions of authority in a dominant Anglo-Saxon environment in North America, how do immigrants of other cultures and nationalities experience the dynamics of power? While there is no shortage of literature addressing the need of multicultural and culturally responsive teaching, I am afraid that there is not enough attention paid to the situation where the teachers are immigrants. Although the literature in multicultural education is huge, there is a dearth of literature to address power dynamics as seen from the perspective of immigrants as teachers in this multicultural age. The bulk of the writings still places Caucasian (Euro-American) teachers at the center and argues for the need to diversify pedagogical approaches and understand other cultures in a culturally-mixed context of teaching. What happens, then, when these students from around the world become professors, teachers, leaders, and exercise positions of leadership in mainstream North America?

In this essay, I will try to identify the nature of this issue, through my personal experience and also point out the signposts for further research. As such, then, the genre and tone here is not confined to academic research. I have no doubt that more studies need to be undertaken in order to understand more clearly this side of multicultural teaching.

*Alan Ka Lun Lai is the pastor of Mount Olivet Lutheran Church,
North Vancouver, BC, Canada.*

A Personal Journey to the West

Despite earning a doctorate in a prestigious university in North America and using English very comfortably, I speak with an Asian accent. Compounded with my Asian skin color, there is no illusion that my ancestors are not from northern Europe. For four years, I have been teaching religious education in Canada. Currently, I am a full time solo pastor of a Lutheran Church in Vancouver. The church is an English-speaking church with most of its people having Germanic and Scandinavian heritage. Many of them assume that I would want to pastor a Chinese Lutheran church. But it is my desire, however, to participate in my denomination's mainstream and help the church to be multicultural. Part of my goal is to challenge the well-defined categories and create something new. This desire to participate in the mainstream as an immigrant provides a rich platform from which I experience the good, the bad and the ugly in a multicultural North America.

My particular motivation, as one might expect, grows out of my specific experience as an alien in more than one context. I was born and raised in Hong Kong when Hong Kong was still a colony of Great Britain. I learned English when I was young. As a young man, I possessed the kind of British passport that had prevented me from being a British citizen. China was not my country, nor was Britain. It took me a long time to realize that I was "homeless." My understanding of China as my homeland was weak. While I did not know about China's national anthem, I could sing *God Save the Queen* with gusto. After making several visits to China in the early eighties when China had just reopened its door to outsiders, I was glad that I had been born in Hong Kong. The alien in embryonic form had matured in me. Before I realized it, the colonial education has accomplished its task on me. During secondary school, all my textbooks except Chinese literature and history were in English, although all of the teachers were Chinese nationals using Chinese to teach (including the subject called English)! The only westerner in my high school was the Principal, Mr.

Halladay, an Englishman from Great Britain. At that point in my life, I thought what I had experienced was “normal”.

Those years of colonial education had turned me into a guardian of imperialistic thinking. In both subtle and not-too-subtle ways, I learned that westerners are more advanced, that Christianity is the only truth, and that a command of English will guarantee success in life. The ability to speak English well and to think like westerners enabled me to climb the ladder of power in both the East and the West. As a consequence, it has taken me years to unlearn the impact of colonialism on my life. From my experience, to use English to teach what we called “Caucasian” people represents the other side of power. This other side is not easily described because the experience of it is bitter-sweet. Part of the confusion points to the hidden (Eurocentric) cultural assumption of what teaching is about. While North America is presumably democratic in governance and welcoming toward immigrants, discrimination is still the everyday experience of immigrants.

When a teacher speaks with an accent to an audience of native English speakers, the dynamics of power shift from that of the teacher to the audience. In such a scenario, it is my experience that the audience has the power to “determine” whether they want to claim that person as their teacher. The teacher speaking with an accent in English provides students a false sense of superiority. The students might think they know more about what it means to be a citizen in North America. A student of mine once asked me to pronounce a word I said earlier. His manner suggested that I had “mispronounced” the word. I wonder how often a Caucasian teacher ever has received this kind of treatment. As I see it, this is an exercise of power in reverse.

When this situation happens, playing the “multiculturalism card” is not helpful or desirable. Minorities constantly feel the pressure to prove themselves worthy, competent, and sometimes, better

than others. While all teachers and professors have a bottom line when they enter the fray, the bottom line for minorities is higher. Since most of them, like myself, came from other countries and cultures, unlike our Caucasian colleagues, we feel the need to prove that we understand North American cultures and the ethos of the city where we are located. Immigrants constantly feel the need to prove they can do the job, and sometimes feel pressured to do more for a promotion.

Despite the growing literature in critiquing hegemonic assumptions and Eurocentric domination in North America, the room for negotiating what constitutes teaching as prompted by immigrants is small. North American societies have come a long way to eradicate discrimination; yet prejudice is still an everyday life experience. In recent years, I have learned not to underestimate the power of colonial education, Eurocentric assumptions, presumed practices and on personal, religious, and social developments. For me to think about teaching and leading people on anything, I constantly remind myself of the arrogance of unexamined assumptions and privileges.

Unmasking the Power of Colonial Education

In order for me to be an effective teacher, I need to be mindful of the colonial education that has formed a crucial part of me. Intellectually, I desire unmasking Eurocentrism; yet, it is easy for me to slide back to my former education as I think like an imperialist. When non-European immigrants were students, they often experienced a curriculum that is European in construction. When they become teachers in North America, they often experience an institutional system that does not take their culture seriously. Often, they are expected to teach and function the same way their Caucasian teachers teach and functioned. More often than not, in the name of fairness and uniformity, all teachers are judged according to an established, accepted pattern, as signs of competency. I believe that this is a

cause for alarm because it is precisely how colonialism works.

Colonialism, even when no longer based in a political system, needs to be nurtured and sustained by education. To make sure that Europe dominated, colonialists relied on the power of education to educate their subjects. Once the colonized ones domesticated the colonial agendas, the colonized then “owned” the oppression. In this way, dehumanizing activities would not be perceived as dehumanizing anymore. For example, selling opium to Chinese by Chinese is a far more effective way to promote addiction, because the level of suspicion from the colonized would be low. Any defense mechanism was nearly non-existent. The colonized could feel wonderfully happy even when they were being exploited – mission accomplished. The colonizers could go home, but the effects of colonization would live on. Thus, colonization and education are inseparable twins. In this way, educational structures and processes can be a dehumanizing instrument.¹

This matter of the use of education in a colonial context is an area that needs to be explored. Contemporary literature in multicultural education speaks volumes about the need to understand others, critique assumptions, and diverse pedagogical approaches. Such scholarly work is badly needed. However, it often appears much more compelling on paper than in actions. When I pick up a new book, especially on some topic in religion, the first thing I do is to turn to the bibliography. I am curious to see what kind of resources the author has used – a question of methodology. Is it diverse? More often than not, their lists have no Asian authors. For more than thirty years, there has been no shortage of immigrants earning doctorates from theological schools in North America. Yet, their ideas and contributions seldom reach the bibliographies and arguments of contemporary theological scholarship. To prepare church leaders for the

¹ For more on this point, read John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

twenty-first century, the church has an obligation to critique the hidden Eurocentric agenda and expose Christians to the theological literature of the wider world.

Such a critique will speak in ways that we might not imagine. Consider this story. My friend Eileen (not her real name) is a young church worker who came from Finland many years ago. Her husband is from East India. She told me this story:

When I first came to Canada three years ago, I worked as a youth worker in a very Canadian Caucasian Lutheran congregation. There weren't many first generation immigrants, and no visible minorities except for one Japanese woman whose husband was a Canadian. There were people who chose to ignore me because I was engaged to a man with dark skin. Johnny, my boyfriend, was ignored even more, and occasionally treated very rudely. I spoke English with a Northern European accent. One Canadian woman said to me once she could not understand my English. Needless to say, I didn't work there very long. Right now, in a different Lutheran congregation, I work a lot with immigrants in our congregation. I've been teaching English to a couple of mothers who came from Africa. For one reason or another, they haven't been able to take English classes, and so I've been visiting them at home and teaching privately there. In those situations it's been a great benefit that I'm not a native speaker nor a Canadian. I can understand their struggles with the language and the culture.

Although Eileen is a European and looks white, she is a first generation immigrant. Eileen works in a major North American city where most of the people are Caucasian. The church where Eileen used to work reflects the same demographic reality. Eileen's story proves the power of language. It also illustrates the amount of (or the lack of) interaction with cultural minorities as a factor determining how minorities are received. In this case, the lack of interaction

and understanding of others makes working as a leader difficult.

Betwixt and Between: An Idea Minorities Teach

My reflections up to this point all sound negative. It is then time to consider some constructive possibilities. In the following, I focus on this question: What does it mean to teach when the teachers are immigrants who are being “identified” as “newcomers” of a community or society? The society might be ready to affirm the contributions of immigrants, but to accept them as teachers and leaders is another story. Sometimes, immigrants experience a social myth that says immigrants are not suitable for leadership in the mainstream. Any immigrants who desire to be teachers in North America have a strong cultural urge, through the media and the academic press, to conform to the establishment. Multiculturalism sometimes is being reduced to nothing more than just a nice political slogan. When it comes to learn how to teach as immigrants, I find Asian theologian Peter Phan’s works helpful.

Phan is a Vietnam-born American Catholic theologian, has earned three doctorates, and speaks several languages. Phan had no plan to leave Vietnam when the war broke out. But dramatically in the very last minute of evacuation, Phan boarded a U.S. military plane, and arrived in America. Phan worked briefly as a garbage collector in the United States before taking more studies in Rome and becoming a theologian. Phan’s life journey would make a good movie.

Phan was born just several years before Vietnam’s independence from France in 1954. Although the newly formed Vietnamese government at that time voted to conduct education anew so as to remove the colonial past, Phan was among a very small minority to receive a French education. This required Phan to use French as his “mother tongue.” Besides studying French literature and history, Phan also had to use textbooks approved by the French Department of Education that were being used throughout France and its colonies. His native

Vietnamese language was only the second “foreign language” in the curriculum. After all, it was taught in French! Phan writes:

I learned nothing of Vietnam’s history and geography and literature and art. Ancestors that gave birth to our nation were nameless ghosts to me; heroes that died to save my country from the Chinese and the French were total strangers; I could not name the mountains and the rivers and the valleys that were home for me and my people for millennia; and I could not recite any of the poems that from time immemorial nourished the souls and spirits of the Vietnamese people. Worse, I was subtly brainwashed to look upon anything Vietnamese as uncouth and barbarian, I was betwixt and between two cultures and worlds, belonging to neither and yet somehow being part of both.²

As a refugee to the United States, Phan’s method of doing theology can be described as “betwixt and between”—an idea he borrows from the late Asian theologian Jung Young Lee. Phan says, “To be betwixt and between is to be neither here nor there, to be neither this thing nor that.”³ The starting point of Phan’s methodology is the paradox of North American life as neither fully Asian nor North American. Culturally, it means not being fully integrated into and accepted by either cultural system. Asian theologian Fumitaka Matsuoka said such people become “liminal persons.”⁴ Linguistically, the betwixt-and-between person is bilingual but may not achieve a mastery of both languages and often speaks them with an accent. Psychologically,

² Peter C. Phan, “Betwixt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination,” in Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee, eds., *Journeys at the Margins: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in Asian-American Perspective* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 116-117.

³ Ibid., 113.

⁴ Fumitaka Matsuoka. *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995), 61.

the person does not possess a well-defined and secure self-identity but a desire for belonging. Yet, hyphenated people are also people who can transform both worlds.

This paradoxical way of being does not suggest a total disadvantage; in fact, being neither this nor that allows one to be *both* this and that. Accordingly, that gives immigrants the opportunity to fashion a new and different world. Phan says, “Like powerful undercurrents, the imagination thrusts the theologian into a new world or at least a different way of being in the world. It empowers the theologian to break out of the limits of the past and bring human potentialities to full flourishing.”⁵ Phan reminds us to do theology betwixt and between is to do theology at the margins – between East and West. It is about mutual criticism and enrichment.

Implications for Teaching

The idea of “betwixt and between” is helpful for us who try to teach in the world of Eurocentric assumptions. Phan’s work takes migration seriously. As migration constitutes the fabric of North American societies, the starting point for teaching must focus on the experience of re-settlement. Immigration has become the unique contour of North American life, and it has provided the existential condition for Christian ministry. A significant shift in North American immigration patterns now means that most newcomers come from non-European countries. Recent immigrants have been people from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, their non-European appearances make them vulnerable. A credible pedagogy that is derived out of the context of migration must be willing to stand in solidarity with the people who are in transition.

Teachers who live betwixt and between thus function as “spiritual midwives” who are not afraid of yet-to-be-born concepts or of being “sandwiched.” Instead, they are wounded healers who help people to see alternatives with new eyes and help people integrate knowledge and

⁵ Phan, 66.

life with their hearts and minds. To be called a pastor, teacher or professor in some cultures means honor and respect. At the same time, teaching people to see the “underside of history,” using Gustavo Gutiérrez’s term, potentially can put one’s academic reputation in jeopardy; the minority teaching these things could be labeled, branded, misunderstood, discriminated and bullied. Teaching and living out in-between worlds is to be a life-long journey of awakening from darkness to light. It could be a refreshing position where teachers contemplate new ideas instead of settling in, or worse, being complacent. Immigrants learn not to lose heart for not being *this* or *that*, because their mission is not about maintaining *this* or *that* but to transform, create and to bring hope. Transforming the church is an on-going journey of faith.

A group of Asian women theologians and scholars provide us further clues on this issue. These scholars published a booklet called *Developing Teaching Materials and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Asian and Asian American/Canadian Women’s Theologies in North America* in 1999. This booklet is useful today not only for understanding the challenges facing Asian women professors teaching in predominantly white male-institutions, but also to grant some insights on how immigrants learn to teach.⁶ As these women scholars point out, they tend to be the lone voices in the academy and their institutions tend to undervalue their work. Regardless of discipline, chances are they face a canon of knowledge that reflects the European construction and most likely, it is regarded as fixed and universal.

One thing we can learn from these women scholars is the need to support each other’s journey through writing,

⁶ See *Developing Teaching Materials and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Asian and Asian American/Canadian Women’s Theologies in North America*. Final Report. A Teaching and Learning in Theological Education Project under the Teaching and Learning Small Grants Program of the Association of Theological Schools and a Teaching Theology and Religion Grant of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. November, 1999.

conferences and friendship. This is the passionate call to enter the forum, not evade it. These women scholars show us the courage to challenge the dominant view of self, the church, and the world. As written in the booklet, these scholars keep learning about various pedagogical practices. Over the years, they organize annual meetings where they encourage one another and share ideas. To teach as a minority demands one to know where the support groups are and where to find the kinds of resources available to teach anew.

Lastly, there is a constant urge to critique assumptions. In the field of adult education, Stephen Brookfield is one of those voices. Brookfield says assumptions “are the taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it that seem so obvious to us as not to need stating explicitly.”⁷ Assumptions provide a lens in which we see the world and ourselves, to interpret and to make meanings. It is like a map giving us direction and reason for actions. The map is taking shape in us gradually through years of education, learning from authoritative people such as parents, teachers, pastors, Sunday school teachers, counselors, coaches, etc. In our formative years, these people answer our questions and help us to explain the world. Their perspectives shaped our ways of seeing. Their values and thought patterns, which we seldom question, form the foundation of our beings. Assumptions are questions we do not ask anymore. Brookfield suggests that a way to expose assumption is to ask what happens when it is absent. Helping people to develop the habit of uncovering assumptions is to help them discern whether the map they have is still applicable. Some would be astonished to find their maps are in urgent need of updating.

But this kind of analysis should not be limited to teachers teaching in the classrooms. The church and its institutions need to apply the same spirit of self-

⁷ Stephen D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995), 2.

examination to their own practices and institutional culture. Miroslav Wolf calls this “Inverting Perspective.”⁸ In discussing welcoming others, Wolf says the idea of otherness is a two-way street, a reciprocal relationship. That is, if others are “other” to me, then I am an “other” to them. Wolf reminds us that otherness is not a neutral term when describing differences. Realizing reciprocity in our discussion of otherness gives us reasons to be interested not only in what we think about ourselves and about others, but also in what others think of themselves and of us.

Conclusion

In this essay, I give a glimpse of what it is like to teach from the perspective of immigrants. I share my own experience and provide some positive considerations for further reflection. In what I called teaching “betwixt and between” I borrow from Peter Phan, I suggest that in order for immigrants to excel as teachers, their performance in the classroom is only part of the story, how institutions exercise cultural sensitivity also matters significantly. Such a culturally sensitive environment involves acknowledging the presence of multiple cultural norms in the classroom and institutions. To do well collectively demands that all individuals involved exercise sensitivity toward difference and at the same time, possess the ability to recognize and honor other ways of beings and thinking. To be “betwixt and between” does not always mean one is being “sandwiched;” it also can exercise the potential to transform.

⁸ See Miroslav Wolf, “Embracing the Other,” in *The Princeton Theological Review*, vol. X, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 4-9.