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Elise L. Chu

Exploring Curriculum
as an Experience
of Consciousness
Transformation

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To my profoundly beloved parents.

In memory of my dearly adored husband.

*And, for all my teachers, embodied and bodiless,
who have touched me deeply and changed me.*

FOREWORD

When Elise L. Chu invited me to supervise her master's thesis, I had little idea of the conversation that would ensue. As someone who had excised questions of spirituality from my own consideration of curriculum, Elise's work compelled me to acknowledge the "moreness"—otherness and transcendence—that characterizes our human being in the world (Huebner, 1999). I learned that this did not require that I shun reason but rather that I acknowledge those reasons for living that reason knows nothing of. Inspired by Huebner's evocation to "dwell faithfully in the world" (p. 403), she invited me to consider the ways in which the languages offered by religious and spiritual traditions, with all their various idiosyncrasies, could contribute to the rich and "complicated conversation" that is curriculum (Pinar, 2012).

This text that would eventually become her outstanding master's thesis and shortly thereafter this book issues a similar invitation to its readers. Elise not only engages in a conversation between science and religion—between contemporary thought and ancient wisdom—but also illustrates the significance of that conversation for a rich understanding of curriculum as consciousness transformation. Beginning with powerful stories of early spiritual experiences, she guides us through her own journey of consciousness transformation via the study and practice of Buddhism. It is a path full of tension and possibility—ultimately involving a conversation between Buddhism and quantum physics—a language, she believes, that integrates ancient wisdom and contemporary science. We need both, she argues, for the "re-spiritualization of curriculum." In hermeneutic fashion, she understands the importance of preserving and nurturing such

“a double vision”—“keeping both the whole and its parts, faith and reason, wisdom and method, or the ultimate and phenomenal aspects of reality in sight.” It is only in the middle or the in-between, she asserts, that multiple meanings of life, and their interplay, can emerge and be engaged.

In so arguing, Elise embraces and advocates for a form of life that lives alongside the dominant rational norm—driven by the either/or thinking of faith *or* reason—but which refuses to succumb to or be actualized within its terms. Refusing—as in I’d prefer not to—to impose a new norm on any life—as is often the case with religious or scientific enculturation—Elise gestures toward a way of living that in its in-between-ness gives itself and makes itself a form (Agamben, 2000, p. 105). It is an experimental way of living as it keeps the question of truth, and our relationship to it, open. It is a form of life that might be characterized as elliptical—an experience of movement and of the provisional (Berlant, 2015)—precisely because of its openness and potentiality. An ellipsis indicates a gap where meaning may be implied but remains unspoken; it may signal something that is beyond words (a plenitude or ‘moreness’); and it may gesture toward the yet unfinished (Clarke & Phelan, 2017).

Real conversations, in Jardine’s (2008) sense, are also elliptical. They leave us lost for words as we “hesitate” and “cup our ears” to hear the other, but also to listen to those ghostly discourses that haunt our thinking and being (p. ix). We become self-conscious, “sensitive and sympathetic readers,” as Elise expresses it, of the limits and possibilities of an array of languages and symbol categories that shape our encounter with one another and the world. In real conversations we sacrifice a little of our long-held prejudices and expose ourselves to the influence of something other, even if temporarily.

When Elise first entered my office I had little idea of the gifts she bore; nor in her humility, I wager, did she. Cut from the cloth of Western rationality, I was confronted by a student with “an open and appreciative mind” who had the courage to think in spaces I had long ignored. With Elise, I learned so much more than I ever taught...

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Throughout my life, I have had the good fortune to learn from many respectable and caring teachers. My gratitude to my father-like mathematics

teacher, the late Prof. Guan-Aun How, is immense and can hardly be expressed well in words. Prof. How has been highly esteemed and adored by his students. His compassion and thoughtfulness were reflected in his teaching that featured turning highly obscure and complicated mathematics into step-by-step illuminating and intriguing reasoning which guided us through various conceptual barriers and burst open the beauty and power of mathematics—leaving us with awe, wonder, and profound joyousness. His fabulous teaching aroused my enthusiasm in Abstract Algebra and shaped my ways of thinking and teaching. From my university days onward, he had constantly encouraged me to do further studies and to ask him questions. Every time I visited him to ask questions, I was moved by his delightful, welcoming, and thoughtful tutoring and inspired by his uplifting encouragement. Just after I had graduated, I was working as an administrative assistant within the department of which he was the chairperson. He always tried to take on as many works as possible on his own in order to give me more time to study, and when he did require my help, he always came to my office in person instead of calling me to his office. I remember one occasion on which he came to my office. I was too busy concentrating on a math proof to notice his presence, so he just waited patiently until I noticed him on my own as he was so caring and thoughtful and did not want to interrupt my thinking process. Without him, I would never have fully appreciated the profound beauty of mathematics and nor would I have grasped the essence of great teachers when I was learning to become a teacher.

In addition to Prof. How, my gratitude to my MSc supervisor, the late Prof. Seong-Nam Ng, is equally profound. I admire his integrity and excellent mathematics capacity and deeply appreciate the expanding experience of delving, with his guidance, into Non-Associated Rings (a branch of mathematics related to quantum theory)—extremely complex and abstruse, yet stunningly beautiful and powerful. While Prof. Ng was a taciturn man, he had a deep concern for his students. I gratefully appreciate his encouragement to advance to a PhD program and his offer to recommend me to another professor at National Taiwan University to continue my study. I also cherish in mind his kindness in managing to write a reference letter to UBC for me while he was in hospital, and he only let me know his condition after he had submitted the reference letter. While, to his disappointment, I did not continue my math study due to health problems, I know, with faith, that he must be very happy to know that I am currently in a doctoral program learning from many great teachers. As does Prof. Phelan, both Prof. How and Prof. Ng held equality as a presupposition to

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My immense love, affection, and gratitude to my parents are beyond words; I can never thank them enough. Their profound and endless love and care is always the most significant source of my courage and perseverance. I also wish to express my profound gratitude to my parents-in-law, my brother, sister, and siblings-in-law for their heartwarming care and support. My heartfelt gratitude also goes to my family-like friends Dick and Lina for their constant warm care and support; to Ru-You Dharma Master and Ling-Yin of Huizhong Temple for their beautiful demonstration of the union of compassion and wisdom in daily life, I am very grateful for having wise and caring mentors like them on my way to learning to walk the Bodhisattva Path; to my late husband's faithful friends Blake, Yong-Long, Yao-Wei, and Chang-Yong for their warm friendships; to my young but sage friend Alexis for his constant encouragement and heartwarming friendship; also to Bruce for his generous sharing of publication experiences, and to all my other

warmhearted PhD program cohorts for their various support; to Yuliana for her warm friendship and selfless sharing of thoughts—the first time I heard of Nietzsche’s three metamorphoses was from her; and to my many other respectable teachers and friends in Taiwan and Canada. My heartfelt gratitude also goes to the reviewer of this book for his/her very kind encouragement, penetrating reading, and insightful suggestions for improvement. I also want to express my heartfelt gratitude to Linda, Hemalatha, and the whole editorial and production team of Palgrave Macmillan for their professional insights, brilliant work, patient guidance, and warm support.

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PROLOGUE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

I am currently a PhD student in Curriculum Studies at the University of British Columbia under the supervision of Prof. Anne Phelan. My major in university was Applied Mathematics, my study and research interest in MSc program was Abstract Algebra, precisely Group Theory, Coding Theory, and Non-Associative Rings. This book is a revised and extended version of my MA thesis, also under the supervision of Prof. Phelan. During my study in the MA program, Prof. Phelan's profound wisdom, as well as her pedagogical thoughtfulness and watchfulness, had opened for me a nurturing space that allows all aspects of myself—including my interest in mathematics and science—to unfold and reintegrate, and made this educational research process simultaneously a playful and meaningful self-transformative journey. While the readers would not consider the main body of this book to be autobiographical, I agree with Smith (1999) that “all writing is in a sense autobiographical” (p. 43), and hope that this autobiographical note would provide the readers a glimpse of my own *currere*—my “running of the course” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008, p. 515)—regarding how my life history and experiences, academic training, intellectual development, and spiritual growth shape each other, and shape this book.

I was born and raised in a sedate country town in Taiwan, where the local folk religion—which comprises a blend of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—is the most popular system of belief. At the core of this folk religion are: reverence for the transcendent source of Nature and for the gods and ancestors; a belief in the moral reciprocity, the law of karma, the energy (Qi) that animates the universe, personal destiny, fateful

coincidence and potential relationships, and the existence of the six realms—six directions of reincarnation that include hell, hungry ghost, animal, *asura* (malevolent nature spirits), human existence, and deva (heavenly existence). My father was an elementary schoolteacher, and my mother was a kindergarten teacher, and both of them had come from farming families. In the countryside villages where my grandparents lived, as in many other rural villages in Taiwan, the majority of the inhabitants worship Guanyin bodhisattva (*Avalokiteśvara*, or Goddess of Mercy) in their home. Guanyin, meaning “perceiving the sounds (of the world),” is well known as a constant listener and a compassionate giver of fearlessness. During my childhood, I heard many touching miraculous stories of the manifestation of Guanyin bodhisattva during World War II.

Before my parents formally worshipped Guanyin bodhisattva at home, they worshipped Tudigong (Lord of the Soil and the Ground) as the guardian of the family, at their elders’ suggestion. When I was attending elementary school, although my mother had been piously offering incense and fruits to Tudigong daily for many years, she experienced a crisis of faith when she prayed in vain for a cure to my father’s health problems. Deeply frustrated, she addressed Tudigong, saying: “Do you really exist? Do gods really exist?” The next morning, at around 5 a.m., while my mother was sweeping the ground of the backyard while my six-year-old younger sister played nearby, my sister looked up to see a semi-transparent elder smiling at her; the figure, dressed resplendently in ancient clothes, bore a striking resemblance to the picture my sister had seen of Tudigong at the family altar, and she immediately called to my mother: “Mom, look! An elder!” When my mother turned around and saw the figure, she was severely startled and dropped her broom in shock. The elder looked at her kindly and said simply, “Devout lady, I am the Tudigong,” before fading away. This dramatic event greatly reinforced my entire family’s belief in religious doctrines and had a profound influence on our worldview.

However, in the educational context of Taiwan, religious language is forbidden, eliminating superstitions has long been a campaign, and existential inquiries are largely ignored. When I was a high school student, I strongly questioned the worldly values imposed on us. In my own efforts to seek out alternative values, what I found most appealing were biographies of enlightened monks, Buddhist poetry, D. T. Suzuki’s works on Zen, and William Blake’s poems. It seemed to me that these works suggested not only the existence of transcendental realities beyond our ordinary perception, but also different ways of being in the world. Yet, at that time, the nature of human existence and the meaning of life remained vague to me.

Another experience that further reshaped my worldview occurred in my third year of university when my mother was introduced to a prestigious and compassionate Taoist abbot, Miao-Zong Shifu, who had then been a medium of Guanyin bodhisattva for around 20 years, since 1968. Being famous for his omniscience and prophetic insights, in trance states, this selfless abbot was multilingual and could respond to people from around Taiwan and the world (including politicians, entrepreneurs, merchants, educators, agriculturalists, scientists, and astronomers) in their own languages and gave highly specialized guidance as well as prophetic insights. In my first encounter with this embodied Guanyin bodhisattva, I was awed and touched by his precise description of an unspoken prayer I had raised for my parents a few days earlier when I was in another city.

During the following two decades, my family and I were profoundly grateful for having countless similar awe-inspiring and heartwarming experiences of being heard, understood, cared for, and guided. One typical story took place around 15 years ago. One morning, when my mother stepped into the Taoist temple, the abbot, our deeply respected and adored Shifu, came to her and asked her if she had an elder sister who had passed away when she was still a middle school student. My mother was surprised and answered, “Yes! What happened?” Shifu continued, “Your sister came to my vision last night wearing a middle school uniform. She told me that she is your elder sister and she comes to seek bodhisattva’s help because your third elder brother, a government officer, is currently falsely accused of taking bribes and is going to be sentenced, but he can hardly redress the injustice.” My mother was startled because my uncle, who lived in another county, had never mentioned this to her. After experiencing this vision, however, Shifu arranged a meeting with my uncle. In that meeting, Guanyin bodhisattva came and drew a picture of the man who actually took bribes and had used my uncle as a scapegoat and then told my uncle that the last name of this person was Huang. My uncle could hardly believe it because it turned out that the person who framed him was someone he would never suspect—a colleague, his best friend. It was thanks to the compassion and wisdom of Guanyin bodhisattva that my uncle was finally able to effectively refute this unjust accusation.

Like many other believers, gradually my family and I developed whole-hearted faith and learnt to decode the wisdom implied in prophetic stanzas written specifically for each person by Guanyin bodhisattva, and learnt to recognize various forms of callings and responses from Guanyin bodhisattva and from the universe in everyday life (e.g., surprising

coincidences; striking words, scenes, and encounters; lucid dreams, intuition, and insights) which would later be reaffirmed by Guanyin bodhisattva who spoke through Shifu. I deeply appreciate this sort of training for maintaining faith and connection with Guanyin bodhisattva and am profoundly grateful for various heartwarming experiences after Shifu passed away. Foreseeing the supports I would need later in my life, Shifu and Guanyin bodhisattva thoughtfully gave me in advance many significant written prophetic stanzas and oral guidance that I did not fully understand their profound meanings and wisdom until many years later when I was facing challenging situations and having to make difficult decisions. I cannot thank Shifu and Guanyin bodhisattva enough for these crucial support that helped me adhere to my vocation and aspiration and persevere in my studies amidst all difficulties.

Throughout my transformation from a critical spectator to a respectful witness of this embodied Guanyin bodhisattva's awe-inspiring manner, deeds, compassion, wisdom, and supernormal knowledge (*Abhiññā*) far beyond human capacity, I developed a certain degree of spiritual discernment and a preliminary understanding of spiritual concepts and language, such as equanimity, selflessness, omniscience, prophecy, *bodhicitta*, great compassion, and transcendental wisdom. No longer did I consider spiritual narratives in the context of various religions as merely mythic fabrication, exaggerated rhetoric, unattainable ideals, or groundless superstition. In my university days and teaching career, my personal spiritual experiences motivated me toward texts such as Buddhist and Taoist scriptures and treatises, Jane Roberts' Seth books, Brian Weiss' books on past lives and reincarnation, Raymond Moody's research on near death experiences, Si-Chen Lee's research on finger reading and psychokinesis, Michael Talbot's book *The Holographic Universe*, and texts on various breakthroughs in contemporary physics. The knowledge acquired from the aforementioned literature, along with my corresponding personal experiences, greatly broadened my horizons and allowed me to contemplate the nature of consciousness and human existence, the meaning of life, and the essence and purpose of education from new perspectives.

The texts that are particularly worth mentioning are Seth books and *The Holographic Universe*. While some scholars might question the integrity of the whole Seth material due to its alleged origin through channeling, and personally I do keep some of Seth's ideas in suspension of judgment, overall, Seth material was illuminating as it opened up an expanded mental playground for me to freely and joyfully play with various

liberating ideas regarding the nature of human existence and reality. One interesting anecdote happened when I read about the advent of “the future Seth” and was puzzled by the mystery of time that suggested the coexisting of past, present, and future. In the same week when I was meeting with Shifu, unexpectedly I witnessed the debut of “the future bodhisattva” as if Guanyin bodhisattva was following my study progress and playfully responded to my confusion and curiosity. Years later, I joyfully learnt about Einstein’s special relativity, which suggests that “reality embraces past, present, and future equally and that the flow [of time] we envision bringing one section to light as another goes dark is illusory” (Greene, 2004, p. 132). Quantum physicist Brian Greene (2004) added that “all the physical laws that we hold dear fully support what is known as *time-reversal symmetry*” (p. 145), meaning, “in theory, events can unfold in reverse order” (p. 145).

My first encounter with *The Holographic Universe* was in 1997 when the Chinese translation of this book was published in Taiwan. As I read, I was extremely excited by the holographic paradigm of the universe (a prototype of the holographic principle of string theories), not only because of its theoretical beauty and its resonance with Buddhist philosophy, but also because it was reminiscent of a special experience I had in Grade 4 when I unusually woke up at midnight and found that the whole bedroom was stunningly filled with uniformly distributed floating and glittering clusters of light-flowers in shapes akin to enlarged 3D snow-crystals and in colors of green and purple. The clusters of light-flowers were flashing in a constant and peaceful rhythm, yet when I reached out my hands to touch them, they were empty, similar to the holographic projection of objects that I saw some years later in movies and other videos. After observing these gorgeous light-flowers for a while, I decided to wake my father and ask him what these were. My father soon woke up my mother too, but strangely, while I pointed here and there to show them the light-flowers, neither of them saw any. Even so, my parents looked very composed, and in their efforts to comfort me and to figure things out, they took me to the living room and then went outside to the courtyard, and I only found that the beautiful light-flowers were everywhere. As my parents didn’t see anything, they soon took me back to bed. The next morning when I woke up anticipating seeing the light-flowers, disappointedly they had all gone. Not long ago when I mentioned this event again to my parents, interestingly they confessed that in actuality they both were terribly frightened by me in that night; yet thanks to their love and wisdom, I have a lovely memory of

gorgeous clusters of light-flowers glittering stunningly in the rooms, in the tranquil moonlight, in my whole experiential world.

This experience made me realize that people could not only interpret the world differently, but also could literally see or sense the world differently. With this realization, I cultivated an open and appreciative mind toward various extra-sensory and spiritual experiences of others from diverse spiritual and religious traditions. One of the examples is Canadian indigenous law scholar John Borrows' (2010) work *Drawing Out Law: A Spirit's Guide*. In this book, he skillfully weaved theories and stories regarding how he was guided by spirits in drawing out law. The stories start from his recurring dream about four hills—a metaphor of four hills of life or life's seasons—that “represented many teachings about how to live in balance with the world” (p. 4). In ways much like Borrows', on the affection level, my “holographic light-flowers” experience and other spiritual experiences have guided me through my scientific and existential inquiries that conjointly shaped my educational thinking. Yet, in the current educational landscape, particularly in “curricula immunized from the human condition and devoid of story, attachment and meaning” (Phelan, 2004, p. 12), too often we easily dismiss “lived experience that [does] not fit inside the dominant molds of rationalism” (p. 11); such experience could be “the lure of the transcendent” (Huebner, 1985a/1999, p. 360) which points to “the fissure in human knowing, the openness” (Huebner, 1985b/1999, p. 349) that signifies infinite transformative possibilities. In such a curriculum, we also become oblivious to the wisdom that in our authentic existence as being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927/2010), the observer and the observed are equal (Bohm, 1980; Greene, 2004; Kumar, 2013), and that in this undivided dynamic wholeness (Bohm, 1980), the individual–world dialectic—wherein the world and the individual calls forth new responses from each other, wherein the observer is the observed and the observed is the observer, wherein cause is effect and effect is cause (Huebner, 1967/1999)—is one of the most significant sites for meaning-making.

During my career as a full-time teaching assistant and then a lecturer for first-year university Calculus, due to the absence of spiritual wisdom in the educational context, I encountered hundreds of freshmen every year who were struggling on their own in search of meaning both inside and outside the classrooms. While I was concerned about students' academic performance in their studies of Calculus, I was more profoundly concerned

about how the relentless power of the machinery of the education system drove everyone forward and left deeper questions of meaningfulness to the individual youngsters as “their own business.” As an educator, I questioned: Is this really none of our business?

In 2011, while personally practicing Buddhist philosophy and engaging with the holographic perspective of the universe, I enrolled in the MA program in Math Education at UBC. Despite my enthusiasm for existential inquiries, given my professional background as a Calculus teacher, at first I saw no alternative but to direct my research focus toward Calculus Reform. Fortunately, taking the course Introduction to Curriculum Issues and Theories taught by Prof. Phelan changed my conditioned impressions of what curriculum and education are and could be; the transformative power of this course also renewed my aspiration and changed my compromised life. With a new vision, I made the momentous decision to alter my program of study from Math Education to Curriculum Studies. To this day, I deeply appreciate Prof. Phelan, who opened for me new possibilities of pursuing my genuine research interests, articulating the formerly silenced voice, and living with authenticity.

As a beneficiary of the existential tradition of curriculum, I deeply appreciate the opportunity to undertake an investigation into the profound curriculum scholarship of Dwayne Huebner—“one of the most important minds the field of curriculum has known... [and] may well be judged by future historians of the field as *the* most important” (Pinar, 1999, p. xxiv)—as well as the works of other significant curriculum theorists. In the essay “Education and Spirituality,” Huebner (1993/1999) asked that if one dwells faithfully in the world, “what images of education, specifically curriculum, are possible?” (p. 403). He indicated that he spoke as one who tries to dwell as a Christian because it is his religious tradition and because he is more familiar with its many qualities, quirks, and its language (Huebner, 1993/1999, p. 403). He invited those in other traditions “to attempt the same, thereby enriching the ensuing conversation” (Huebner, 1993/1999, p. 403). As a response to Huebner’s invitation, I make such an attempt in this book and sincerely hope that this book will contribute to the curriculum field by enriching it with the language of Buddhism and quantum physics, a language that integrates ancient wisdom and contemporary science, informed by my personal spiritual experiences.

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