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China's Education, Curriculum Knowledge and Cultural Incriptions: Dancing with the Wind

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China's education, curriculum knowledge and cultural inscriptions: Dancing with the wind, by Weili Zhao. New York, Routledge, 2018, 222 pages, \$54.95 (Kindle), ISBN 978-0415787543

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A book whose form is loyal to its content, *China's Education, Curriculum Knowledge and Cultural Inscriptions* overturns so many received categories in and beyond educational studies, taking on comparative analysis, Deleuzian difference, Foucauldian genealogy, Agambenian philosophy, ancient Chinese texts, Confucian pedagogy, and contemporary Chinese educational thought. It overturns what it takes on in that it doesn't upend or obliterate them, but rather—to use one of Weili Zhao's favorite descriptors—explodes them. Explosive movements result from massive buildups in volume and releases of energy such that the exploded thing is fragmented and scattered across space-time. Zhao builds up volume and releases energy by deftly crisscrossing different literature, using one concept to put pressure on another, producing aporias, fissures, and limits. Vitally, it isn't just Zhao who does the exploding, but the concepts and knowledges themselves work on Zhao, creating encounters from which she can't exit without being fragmented and scattered herself, totally exposed. In this way, it's a book that one reads and is read by.

As a Chinese doctoral student in curriculum studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Zhao was blown into an aporetic encounter with wind-education. On a trip to a Chinese school, she noted an inscription on a wall that read, "school wing, teaching wind, and learning wind" (p. 3). She was familiar with these terms but hadn't truly encountered them, as "wind" effortlessly is made into a metaphor through interpretation and translation. When translating, Zhao was caught with the Chinese character for wind, *feng*. "Why is it wind, not water? Why do I naturally read them into teaching manners, schooling atmosphere, or learning styles, but not teaching-schooling-learning wind?" (p. 4). This aporetic moment was compounded by another, when she went to a dictionary from the Han dynasty, and looked up the definition of *feng*, which ends with the words, "Wind moves, insects get germinated and transformed within eight days" (p. 5). Although Zhao recognized the characters individually, she couldn't make sense of them collectively. How is it that the wind contains these movements, things, processes, time measurements? And, finally, how might this wind co-order Confucian pedagogy? These are some of the elements internal to wind (as more than a signifier) that combined together to explode the typical way Zhao thought of cross-cultural and comparative analysis.

So much comparative analysis amounts to what João Paraskeva calls cultural epistemicide, or domination of Western knowledge practices over those in underdeveloped countries in the Global South and East. Zhao locates this epistemicide in the New Cultural Movement in the 1920s, the decade in which "China's first modern curriculum system was established" (p. 33). Since then, Western pedagogical values have increasingly framed Chinese education, as terms like competency, autonomy,

professionalization, and student-centered learning are now commonplace today. Her first desire is to not fall into the philological trap, wherein a Chinese word is examined for or filled with its real meaning, rather than examining the being of the world. To do this, Zhao deploys a sophisticated and intricate archeological-historical mode of reasoning that productively betrays the cultural relativist stance (which holds that each culture should be viewed purely on its own terms), the application of Western frameworks and norms to an object outside the West, as well as the binary between them. Yet this betrayal is not a rejection but movement within a “conundrum:” As she says, “as long as discourse pairs like margin/periphery vs. center, West vs. non-Western operates within a binary-contrastive logic, the analytics may very well end up... reinforcing the oppositional boundaries” (p. 55). Crucially, this conundrum itself is permeable: “Porous interstices exist here and there that are possible to expand” (p. 55). The subject itself is one such interstice, and Zhao returns to China’s history in an originary way—not to search for origins but to search for what has not yet been thought. What Zhao is after is not what *really was* but rather the broader historical and epistemological conditions enabled by and structuring historical and contemporary educational thinking. In order to do this, the subject itself has to be open to change: “it engenders a transformation of the inquirer’s very mode of being, as the problematization often entails a suspension and transformation, not reproduction, of the naturalized viewpoints, presumptions, styles of reasoning with which the inquirer unavoidably starts and stands upon” (p. 65).

At this point, instead of taking you down the path of what Zhao found, I’d like to turn to Zhao’s primary pedagogical invention: Daoist onto-unlearning, and therefore to *how* she found what she found. She situates this as part of a response to the dominating logic of learning (Biesta, 2006), specifically as a contribution to theories of studying proposed as a form of educational life that suspends and renders inoperative learning (Lewis, 2017) and can be oppositional to learning and the capitalist-imperialist system it upholds (Ford, 2018). Rather than a block or interruption to or suspension of learning, Daoist onto-unlearning sees learning and studying as mutually informing, containing, and sustaining. “As a yin-yang movement,” she puts it, “*learning* and *study* are no longer divided, nor does one element preclude the happening of the other along the way. Instead, they support, ground, confront, transform, re-turn within dynamic bipolar yin-yang movement” (p. 173).

Learning is defined as the acquisition of pre-determined content, which is why it can be measured and evaluated. Ends drive learning. Studying is about means. When studying, ends are suspended and held in abeyance as the world opens up to otherwise than it is. Signs are freed from signifiers. What Zhao shows, however, is that the ends of learning need not be suspended or rendered inoperative while studying. In fact, we need not conceptualize the distinction between learning and studying this way at all. Studying could in fact provide an entirely new foundation—or, better, starting point—for learning: “*study*” could happen and regenerate its power at certain disruptive moments, like what I describe as aporia moments, when the Dao movement is reactivated and maintained toward a new re-turning and dynamic” (p. 173). Learning opened up to study, which in turn rekindled her inquiry. The key is to be open to these aporetic moments that inevitably come during the learning process, to this non-metaphysical germination that blows over the world. This isn’t a pedagogy that can be enacted or activated based on an intention, however, but an encounter for which one has to wait.

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