

Stepping off the pedestal

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“A scholar who cherishes the love of comfort is not fit to be deemed a scholar.”

(Confucius, *The Analects*, ch. 14)

Tian tian xiang shang (天天向上) is a Chinese saying by Mao Zedong which means *making progress every day*. It was used to motivate children in the 1950s. Ironically reusing the saying, Hong Kong based experimental artist Danny Yung created a conceptual comic in which a boy, Tian Tian, asked an unending barrage of critical questions. Tian Tian is minimalistic, with a finger pointing up, his head and eyes looking to the sky. In an interview with the Chinese non-governmental organization *Human Rights in China* in 2012, Danny Yung explains that Tian Tian is a symbol for the close relationship between critical thinking, creativity and advocacy. On many occasions small three-dimensional models of Tian Tian have been distributed to artists and school children for them to write or draw creatively on them as if they were blank pieces of paper. By so doing the artist loses his privileges of owning the work of art, *stepping off his pedestal* as the ‘supreme’ creator. Tian Tian allows at the same time both creators and viewers to rethink their own perspectives on direction, position, narrative framework and communication structure (esplanade.com, 2010).

While reading the superb volume entitled *Meanings and Motivation in Education Research*, edited by Margaret M. Baguley, Yvonne S. Findlay and Martin C. Kerby, the figure of Tian Tian came to my mind. The insights and perspectives that the book provides correspond to the feelings and kind of reflexivity that Danny Yung is trying to infuse in his audience but also in himself by shifting the power relations between the artist and his audience. Just like the hundreds of diverse versions of Tian Tian that have been produced by well-known artists and students the volume reminds us that research could/should be compared to a never-ending *journey*, of which the 23 international authors depict its complexity. Guiding us clearly through many and varied journeys the book follows a very well thought of structure. To start with the authors reflect on the central and polemic concept of identity in research, coupled with reflections on the world ‘outside’, then they tell us about the ‘politics’ of conducting research and finally the authors problematize the influence of institutional practices – especially in our neo-liberal universities – and personal conditions. Venturing another comparison to Tian Tian one could imagine that every research project resembles decorating or creatively working on the figurine – a complex three-dimensional blank page.

The fact that the volume insists on taking into account the personal experiences, interests and motivations of educational researchers is very stimulating. As Confucius reminds us at the beginning of this commentary, scholars should not always feel comfortable with their work but they should enter research with certain discomfort and, in a sense, some degree of ‘pain’ or as Ali Black puts it in the volume: “enter risky territory”. This is what the first section of the volume does. Lee Schaefer, Sean Lessard, Saffron Panko and Nate Polsfut demonstrate skilfully that “Your identity [as a researcher and a person] is like your shadow: not always visible and yet always present” (Cercignani, 2014). Discussing the multi-layeredness and the ontological and epistemological commitments of narrative inquiry the authors reflect on their own

stories of coming to this research method and on their relationships with the 'researched' – like Danny Yung, transforming the usual hierarchy between the creator and his audience. In a similar vein the chapters by Viv Wilson and Ali Black discuss the intricacies of 'multiple' identities in relation to institutional recognition. They show that combining identities such as researcher/teacher educator and researcher/mother may be difficult in some contexts. Such elements can often lead to representatives of these groups being treated differently, looked down upon and even be patronized and missing opportunities in academia such as promotion, prestige and recognition. In my context, Finland, teacher educators have had to fight to get some sort of recognition as scholars since departments of teacher education joined universities. The rhetoric of 'research-based' teacher education has been sold abroad and made the success of Finnish education. Yet many Finnish researchers in educational sciences still consider teacher education not to be involved in 'serious' research while some teacher educators are actually critical of Finnish teacher education "bowing to science" and "turning its back on practical schoolwork" (see Säntti et al., 2014). Identity is always a viewpoint... also in research. I thus agree with Wilson that teacher educators should be more actively engaged in constructing their professional identities, while allowing for leeway in doing so. In her chapter Ali Black goes even further by suggesting: "It is time to stop communicating the message that being professional requires distancing ourselves from our inner lives. It is time to 'let our life speak' (Palmer 2000)." Some fields of research have practised such principles for quite a while. That is the case for example of anthropology. In her 'memoirs', the Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan (2012: 25) explains how she resorted to the personal when she was writing a report on the situation of girls for government officials in Bhutan. She writes:

I had been engaged to do a study on the situation of the girl child in Bhutan and had to present my findings to key government officials before writing my report. One of the tricky findings had to do with the problem of rape: it was reported in many parts of the country and in various schools. I told the officials what I knew, and some were enraged. "How can you speak of rape, when we don't even have the word!" exclaimed one man. I sensed there and then that I could be kicked out of the country and without knowing what I did, I started telling a story. It was a real-life story of what had happened to a woman I knew well. The officials' attitude changed. I could feel how the story resonated with what they knew or themselves, and they said, "yes. It's true what you say."

Wikan concludes her narrative by adding that "There is nothing like the human touch to enhancing anthropology's relevance." Emotions, feelings and life experiences must find their ways into education research too and liberate us from repressing our subjectivities. By revealing how personal and professional identities can inform one another in research, the volume under review shares the same vital endeavor.

The editors of the book have decided to include researchers at varying stages of their research career in this book. This important aspect of the volume is nicely reflected in the section entitled *Conducting education research* which reveals the multifarious choices that education researchers have to make when choosing methods and methodology. One important aspect of this section is the fact that the authors all agree with Barone's comment that "the general population should never be imagined as a homogenous mass, nonvariegated by cultural background and personal life

experiences” (Barone cited by the editors in their introduction). The discussions in which Julia Myers and Roslyn Cameron engage respectively in relation to the qualitative/quantitative continuum and Mixed methods research reflect the sort of reflexivity and evaluation of approaches and their values that should be expected of education researchers today. These two chapters will be of great help to novice researchers but also – and why not? – to us all researchers who are trying to step off our pedestal. The chapters on Malaysia (Fariza Puteh-Behak, Farah Mohd Khaja and Ramiza Darmi) and Scottish education (Christine Forde) remind us of the importance of contextualising education research in order to be able to enter into dialogue, potentially learn from each other and adopt/unlearn certain ways of doing research.

The final section of the volume, which derives logically from the previous discussions on identity and conducting research, has given me a lot of food for thought but also convinced me that we need to be increasingly critical of the structures that frame research in education. The criticisms that the authors offer of their neo-liberal tertiary contexts speak to us all: the ‘new’ entrepreneurial spirit of universities (Baguley et al.), outcomes-based and measured outputs, an over-emphasis on quantitative fields, the symbolic violence of prioritization of research areas, impositions of techniques and technologies on researchers (Kerby et al.). Some authors propose counter-narratives to these ‘evils’. For example, in the last chapter, Karen Trimmer deals with principals taking risks by defying decision-makers and opting out of imposed rules and regulations. This last chapter leaves us with a positive feeling. More of this is needed in our globalized systems of higher education. And more than ever Edward Said’s warning should be listened to:

“Nothing in my view is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principles position which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you need the approval of a boss or an authoritative figure; you want to keep a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate; your hope is to be asked back, to consult, to be on a board or prestigious committee, and so to remain within the responsible mainstream; someday you hope to get an honorary degree, a big prize, perhaps even an ambassadorship. (...) if anything can denature, neutralize, and finally kill a passionate intellectual life it is the internalization of such habits.” (Said, 1993: 100)

I couldn’t help thinking about my context again when I read the last section of the volume and re-read Said’s *Representations of the Intellectual* (1993). Finland has been at the centre of attention globally for the past 10 years thanks to the famous – yet contestable – PISA studies. This global interest – which I call a *fata morgana* – has led to Finnish institutions of higher education doing ‘education export’. When one starts selling a system of education in order to make money, one has to play the games described by Said: “you do not want to appear too political” (for fear of losing customers); “you need the approval of a boss or an authoritative figure” (for fear of losing your job); “your hope is to be asked back, to consult (...)” (for fear of dropping in international rankings where everything ‘international’ counts). Many Finnish scholars have happily played this game worldwide, losing any sense of principles and ethics. A few days ago I was reading two articles about Finnish education involving the same Finnish ‘guru’, who was visiting professor at the prestigious Harvard School

of Education at the time of writing. The two articles were published in different languages (English and Finnish). The ‘guru’, Pasi Sahlberg, authored the one in English. A feeling of schizophrenia entered me when I read the articles. The article in English was published on the CNN.com website and was entitled *Why Finland’s schools are top-notch* and bragged about the Nordic country’s system of education (Oct. 6, 2014). On his Twitter account, Sahlberg proudly announced that: “Over 42k Facebook likes & 4500 comments (of all kinds) in 5 days on my CNN op-ed Why Finland's Schools are Top-notch”. 6 days later, an interview of Sahlberg was published in Finnish in Finland’s only national newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*. In the article, the Harvard professor warns Finns about the potential demise of Finnish education and criticizes many of its aspects. Why such a chasm between the piece on CNN and the one in Finnish? Whose imperatives are being strategically tampered with here? Are Sahlberg’s professional, institutional and ideological identities torn apart in these two different contexts – two different ‘markets’?

The volume *Meanings and Motivation in Education Research* gives us a rich picture of current discussions in educational research especially in relation to researchers’ identities, the ways they conduct research and most importantly the impacts institutional and personal politics have on their work. The volume also gives us reason to explore new ways of thinking about research in the early 21st century. The symbol of the artistic creation Yung’s Tian Tian appears to be well suited to offer a parallel for the close relationship between critical thinking, creativity and advocacy in research. Just as it has allowed hundreds of people to reconceptualise their understanding of art this excellent volume urges scholars to “form [the scientific mind] by being reformed” (Bachelard, 1938) and to step off their pedestals...

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