# Freedom, Interconnectedness, and Curriculum Attunement
## A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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WE ARE IN CRISIS TODAY, locally, nationally, internationally, and at the planetary level.[1] In today's crises, democracy, freedom, and interconnected life are under attack. While the U.S. Supreme Court and half of the state governments have been busy limiting women's reproductive freedom, religious education is allowed to use public funding. While the Supreme Court allowed the expansion of gun rights at the local level, mass shootings have constantly rocked the nation, including on school sites. As a woman protester said so revealingly: "How is it possible that an AR-15 has more rights in this country than a woman?" (Goodman, 2022) and, I would add, a child at school. Some people argue for limiting the government's power, while others are frustrated that the federal and state governments do not adopt measures to protect people. Worse still, for those who are marginalized, the government becomes a force of violence, as police brutality against Black lives demonstrates. While teachers are punished for critical teaching in many states, during the pandemic those who did not want to wear masks also protested the government mandate of wearing masks in the name of their freedom to choose. There are many contradictions in all these different directions. As it turns out, these contradictions have been inherent in the West's history of freedom, as Annelien de Dijn's (2020) historical study reveals.

On the other hand, while the freedom of nature has long been tossed out by human control, will a cap on human freedom be necessary for the survival of the planet and, in turn, the survival of humanity? What would it be like to exercise freedom without enacting the mechanism of domination over human and nonhuman others? Can freedom be nested? As we have seen from the pandemic, social movements, and political polarization, freedom means different things for different people: for example, freedom *from* internal and external constraints (negative freedom) or freedom *to* live one's own life (positive freedom). Scholars also make a distinction between Eastern and Western viewpoints of freedom (Ahmadov, 2008; Shaw, 2011), and Oded Balaban and Ana Erev (1995) have come up with 12 different categories of freedom.

Western freedom is considered a lighthouse for advocating for human rights and democracy in the world; however, it also casts a shadow onto other parts of the world. Living in

the shadows of freedom today, we not only need to think about how to struggle for more freedom to think, act, learn, and teach, we also need to make detours through history, culture, and nature by attending to our own inner shadow in order to open new vistas. The shadow in the Jungian sense is part of the whole and does not disappear but must be integrated into the individual and collective psyche (Wang, 2019). The shadow is the aspect that we do not want to see inside of the self, and we often project it onto others we reject, but the shadow can also be unrealized potential. Has the thread of interconnectedness, acknowledged more in other parts of the world, become the shadow of freedom in the West's long quest to conquer the self and the world? Is it possible to bring these two threads together in the daily practice of education?

Here I take a detour through Daoism and the West's history of freedom so that we might be able to approach the issue differently. Complicating the notion of freedom through the thread of interconnectedness in a cross-cultural perspective, I argue that, without being immersed in the life-affirmative stream of interdependence, freedom cannot elevate individuals or groups above the web of life. *Zhuangzi*'s teaching about free wandering in Chinese indigenous wisdom is about the possibility of being free *only* when attuned to the rhythm of the cosmos. Incorporating both freedom and interconnectedness, curriculum attunement in the daily practice of education requires attending to both the inner and outer work of teachers and students for new openings and new relationality. In the shadows of freedom, this paper invites the transformation of the red fire of rage inside of us into the blue fire of passion (Doll, 1995) that can sustain life, for us, for our students, and for the planet.

## Zhuangzi's Free Wandering

The first chapter of *Zhuangzi*[2] sets the tone for free wandering:

> If one rides on the natural spirit of heaven and earth, follows the changes of six vital breaths (*qi*), freely wandering in the infinite, what does the one need to rely on? The authentic person has no self, the spiritual person seeks no external achievement, and the sage does not have outer reputations. (*Zhuangzi*, Chapter 1, "Free Wandering")

In this key passage, the notion of free wandering follows and transcends time and space, rises above conventional value judgments and official success defined as accomplishment and status, and goes beyond ego-consciousness to become one with *Dao*. Different from the liberal Western sense of freedom, Zhuangzi's free wandering is not based upon the notion of an autonomous self, but on a person's ability to peel off social and cultural norms and cultivate free-flowing movement through non-instrumental attunement to *qi* (breath). Such an attunement is cultivated through practice, particularly aesthetic, meditative, and spiritual practices.

*Qi*, translated as breath or energy, is an important concept in Chinese philosophy. *Qi* exists in everything and everybody, and its circulation brings opposites of *yin* and *yang* together to reach creative harmony. Transformation lies in the movement of *qi*, not in any external force. In ancient Chinese cosmology, the universe unfolds in a self-generating and self-transforming process. *Dao* in Daoism is non-controlling, non-dominating, and non-possessive, as many passages in *Dao De Jing* convey. For example, Chapter 29 of *Dao De Jing* states, "Those who rule the world cannot succeed. Those who control it will lose it."

Attunement to the movement of *Dao* is through *qi*, as *Zhuangzi* explains:

> Concentrating your heart. Do not listen with your ears but with your heart; do not listen with your heart, but with your vital breath (*qi*). The ears hear only the sounds, and the heart welcomes only what is pleasing to it. *Qi*, however, in its emptiness and stillness, is inclusive of all. Only *Dao* gathers in emptiness. The [purpose of the] fasting of the heart is to reach emptiness. (Chapter 4, "The Human World")

Emptiness is inclusive of all. Listening with the ears stays with the senses to obtain knowledge. Listening with the heart is better, as the heart is a Chinese concept that includes both intellect and emotions, but it still has preferential judgment. Listening with *qi*, however, goes beyond knowledge and judgment to reach the openness and spontaneity of emptiness that enables human freedom through interconnectedness. Such a whole-being listening suggests the interfusing of the human self with cosmic energy to dissolve both external standards and a fixed sense of the self and follow the movement of *qi*. *Free wandering* is also translated as *playful wandering*, and there is a strong sense of play rather than rigidity in this freedom (Ilundain-Agurruza, 2014; Kwek, 2019). "A playful freedom" (Ilundain-Agurruza, 2014, p. 329) becomes possible when the individual loosens their ego-boundary to attune their inner beings to the rhythm of the self-transforming cosmic process. Not taking the self seriously, one can play with the world.

Attunement to *Dao* also has the potential to integrate the subconscious. The parables in *Zhuangzi* mention various skillful artisans who can connect different layers of the psyches in their spontaneous actions to freely accomplish the task at hand. In particular, their ability to cultivate stillness within the self and to see the free space in an external object is important for connecting the *qi* inside and outside for spontaneous creativity to spring forth (Wang, 2021). These craftsmen do not try to control the situation at hand, but tap into the unconscious energy and claim they are only following *Dao* to craft magical products or performances. As Liu Zaiping (2016) points out, in *Zhuangzi*'s spiritual freedom, human consciousness and the subconscious are "mutually adapting, supportive, inspirational, rather than mutually manipulative, interruptive, or hindering" (p. 212), which makes integration an organic part of the process.

Free wandering is both a natural and a cultivated ability since it is inherent in humanity, but societal and cultural regulations suppress such naturalness. It is worthwhile to explain that naturalness does not refer to the natural world *per se*, but to the "self-so-ness" of the world, the natural patterns and principles of a self-generating cosmos. "Cultivated spontaneity" (Ilundain-Agurruza, 2014, p. 329) is a good term to capture the two sides of Zhuangzian freedom, and I would also say "educated spontaneity" to emphasize the role of education. Here, I highlight three aspects of Zhuangzian freedom as follows.

## Nonharming and Mutuality of Humanity-Nature Relationship

According to Lu Jianhua (2016), humans and objects can mutually fulfill each other's nature when the conventional utility gives way to the realization of the true nature of both. In doing so, humanity and objects form a nonharming relationship. Two examples at the end of Chapter 1 illuminate such a relationship.

The first example is the use of a big gourd. In the parable, Huizi talks about a huge gourd that he cannot use to carry water. Zhuangzi responds: "Why did not you think of it as a float that

can be tied with the waist and use it to freely wander on rivers and lakes instead of worrying that it could not hold anything?" The conventional use of the gourd is to cut it and then use it to carry water. Huizi cannot imagine a use outside of this utility and considers the huge gourd useless. In a twist of the lens, Zhuangzi fulfills the nature of the gourd in its free floating, and the gourd keeps its own shape while being used as a companion for a human's free wandering. With a free human spirit, objects become free and remain intact (*Zhuangzi*, Chapter 1, "Free Wandering")

The second example is a big, "useless" tree. In the parable, Huizi mentioned a big tree with a gnarled trunk and twisted branches. Since it does not fit into any measurement or rule, the carpenters pay no attention to it. Zhuangzi responds: "Why don't you plant it in an empty, silent space in the wilderness? There you can walk freely by its side and sleep carefreely beneath it. It will not be killed by the axe, so no harm will be done to it. Without usefulness, it does not suffer from harm, either" (*Zhuangzi*, Chapter 1, "Free Wandering").

In these two parables, Huizi intends to dispute Zhuangzi's free wandering as big words without any usefulness, and yet each time in Zhuangzi's response, he thinks outside of the box to go beyond the conventional measure of utility and restore the holistic nature of objects through human freedom. The big gourd, considered useless, becomes a companion to support human beings' free floating on the water while it remains intact without being cut open. The gnarled and twisted tree stays alive in a remote area to provide shelter and a resting place for those who are roaming. External things can fulfill their own nature without being damaged by human utility if human freedom does not impose its will but tunes in to the interconnectedness of life to let nature be. Such an insight is much needed in today's world, where climate change and environmental crises threaten the planet's survival. Human freedom is intimately linked to planetary well-being and cannot be exercised without rebalancing our relationship with the natural world. Whether or not human beings can still have a dwelling place on earth will depend on how we change the ways we relate to the planet.

## Inclusive of the Margin

With a radical approach to equality, Chapter 5 of *Zhuangzi* is full of parables of people who are crippled one way or another but are full of wisdom with self-confidence and spiritual freedom. They can go beyond constraints imposed by either nature or legal punishment and acquire exceptional inner strength. The contrast between their appearance and their internal richness indicates the importance of a spiritual life that transcends social norms and of an inner capacity for attuning to *Dao*. It is not so much that they make an extra effort to get better, but that they are able to get in touch with the nourishment of life that exists deeper under the appearance. This deeper dive into the undercurrents of life makes them disregard conventional judgments and freely go about with their own sense of integrity, unaffected by the external standard.

In a movement of reversal, just as the reversal movement in seeing the strength of the big gourd and the twisted tree beyond their conventional uses, Zhuangzi depicts how people with a lame leg, amputated toes, or a hunchback have advantages when they become attuned to *Dao* and acquire inner qualities that normal people cannot match. For example, a particularly ugly person becomes so popular that all others actively pursue his comforting company, or a crippled person provides wise counsel to a Duke who found him so appealing that non-crippled people begin to look strange. The arbitrary nature of judging who is good-looking or physically able is made evident in such a reversal. As Ilundain-Agurruza (2014) points out, Zhuangzi calls into question

how discrimination and biases divide the world "according to immutable essences" (p. 338) and endows crippled people with the spirit of free wandering—a high achievement that few physically able people can accomplish. Such stories not only show Zhuangzi's "deep compassion. More crucially, they turn the limiting condition into an opportunity that embodies competence and charisma" (p. 334).

This radical openness unsettles the boundary between the normal and the marginalized, and people who do not fit into norms can be freer in spirit because they can see through categories and divisions and are not bound by them but become unbound. In a sense, the freedom of the "handicapped" is made possible through accepting their unchangeable condition to work within the constraints and yet, by this acceptance, transcending the limits by calling into question the official, normative expectations. "Conceptions of normality" (Lai, 2021, p. 7) are deconstructed here. Thus, Zhuangzi's free wandering is inclusive of the margin and adopts multiple modes of working with constraints all at the same time.

## Working with Constraints

Karyn Lai (2021) defines "working with constraints" (p. 3) through both responsiveness and fit as the primary mode of Zhuangzian freedom. Working within or beyond constraints is among many specific responses one can adopt according to the circumstances, contingencies, and context. She argues that "'working with constraints involves a person's responding fittingly to a particular set of constraints, by employing their capabilities in the light of the situation" (p. 11). By prioritizing the mode of "working with constraints," I think the nature of Zhuangzian freedom as the exercise of "freedom-with" is made clear.

First, Daoism is a nature-based theory and practice (Miller, 2022). *Zhuangzi* acknowledges the limits of humanity and does not necessarily approach internal and external constraints as negative barriers to freedom, although it tends to strongly criticize the official and normalized rituals and regulations as impeding a free spirit. As the parables regarding the crippled people show, working with physical constraints to release potential means first the acceptance of constraints before the people can transcend them. Moreover, Zhuangzi's free spirit is radically open to what emerges in the process, without attachment to the predetermined destination, and this non-instrumental approach is compatible with the nature of *Dao* in its movement that does not possess, occupy, or dominate. To achieve non-dominating relationships with others and with nature, one has to empty out the conceptions and practices of social and political domination. *Zhuangzi* is well known for deconstructing Confucian morality and loosening up any internal and external fixations. So, there are various ways of working with constraints.

Second, working with constraints is a cultivated and improvised exercise, and the freedom to act spontaneously and responsively comes from an extensive time of practicing the alignment between the self and the world. Fitting in with the situation often involves meditation to fast the mind, empty out preconceived assumptions, and forget the self in order to go with the flow. Emptying the mind to cultivate stillness within leads to transcending external standards and social regulations and dissolving the boundary of the self for attunement. This sense of transcendence that starts from within is not the same as breaking away from the external constraints, and it often requires relinquishing internalized norms to work through constraints in a new way. In other words, this freedom beyond does not necessarily mean direct resistance but dwelling in emptiness to flow through constraints with flexible, situation-dependent responses. *Zhuangzi* humorously re-

appropriates the conversations between Confucius and his disciples to reveal how the Confucian moral, norm-oriented approach of governing only fails to convince any politician to take a different route, but working *with* constraints to let fitting responses emerge from the process can lead to others' willingness to change on their own initiative (Chapter 4, "In the World").

Lai (2021) gives an example of working with constraints through a swimmer who, to the anxiety of observers, swam under the waterfalls where no fish or turtles could swim. Nevertheless, he enjoyed it and was singing a song when he came out of the water. When asked about how he could do it, he replied:

> It is due to habit, and I have acquired this ability after a long time of practice. I can accomplish it because I go with the natural. Going in with the swirls and coming out with the eddies, I am following the *dao* of water and do not impose my idea, and that is how I can tread water. (Zhuangzi, Chapter 19, "Nurturing the World")

In this parable, the swimmer responded fittingly to the situation of cascade. Going with the *Dao* of water, the swimmer became attuned to the environment of the waterfall and could swim freely in what is perceived to be a dangerous situation. Such fitting responsiveness was both natural and acquired, as he had grown up along the water and practiced this ability to go with the water for such a long time that it had become part of him. This is a good example of working with the constraints to enact freedom-*with*, because without insight into how waterfalls work, the swimmer would not have the freedom to swim.

As Valmisa (2018) points out, the issue for Zhuangzi's relational freedom lies:

> not so much with the constraints imposed by given socio-material conditions as it lies with the ways in which humans function in relation to these constraints. Effective responses involve either changing the agent's relation to these constraints or, when possible and desirable, transforming constraints into freedom-conducive conditions. (p. 9)

Working with constraints enables the transformation of either inner or outer worlds, or both, through different ways of responding, and this mode of freedom can contain specific actions of seeking freedom-from, freedom-to, freedom-within, and freedom-beyond, sometimes simultaneously and other times sequentially, according to what the situation calls for.

Third, Zhuangzian freedom leads to changes in both the objective and subjective worlds, often in ways that the conventional viewpoints cannot see. His freedom is often characterized as subjective and spiritual, which suggests that it does not have an impact on the objective world. Contemporary critiques of Zhuangzi since the 1919 May Fourth Movement in China (Lu, 2016; Xu, 2013) positioned his theory as withdrawing from the world and divorced from social and political reality. However, Zhuangzi's conception of free wandering has a political component, and his approach is outside of the conventional moral, legal, and political forms and structures in his turbulent time. Without attachment to institutional regulations, free wandering "seeks out unsettled, ambiguous political relations and defies what is called upon by normative politics in consolidating the boundary between 'we' and 'them'" (Yu, 2020, p. 351). For Zhuangzi, the usual sense of politics as power struggles for control or the triumph of one side over the other is precisely what must be transcended to achieve inner freedom. In valuing the useless, deformed, and crippled, Zhuangzi's free wandering also has radical inclusion to unsettle political boundaries. By losing the self in free wandering, one achieves the ability to navigate political relations in adaptive and

situation-responsive ways without relying on any fixed formulas but with attunement to the interdependent nature of relationships. Ironically, his wandering makes inner freedom possible even with institutional constraints. In this contradiction between the inner and the outer world lies the strength of Zhuangzi's free wandering, as his inner freedom is attuned to the cosmic energy and interconnectedness of life and surpasses the external political constraints.

## Western Conceptions of Freedom

In her historical study of political freedom in the West, de Dijn (2020) argues that, although today most people tend to think of freedom as "the possession of inalienable individual rights, rights that demarcate a private sphere no government may infringe on" (p. 1), this is a modern notion that has shifted from the ancient Greek tradition of freedom as popular self-government. In the Greco-Roman democratic conception of freedom in which one should exercise "control over the way one is governed" (p. 2), individual freedom is embedded in collective freedom. As we all know, of course, there was a limit to such freedom, as slaves, women, and resident aliens were not allowed to vote, so the percentage of the population that was allowed to vote was small, but this foundation pointed to the possibility of extending self-government to everyone, which we are still fighting for in the contemporary era.

Although this notion of freedom was criticized by ancient elites as leading to anarchy and licentiousness, it was practiced in Greek city-states for centuries before it disappeared. It was revived by the European Renaissance and the eighteenth-century Atlantic revolutions (the American, Dutch, Polish, and French Revolutions), which also added the element of economic freedom as inseparable from political freedom. However, in the backlash against these revolutions, the critiques of democracy led to the discourse of liberalism, in combination with the earlier discourse of natural rights, splitting the notion of freedom into political and civic liberty, with civic liberty understood as "the ability to peacefully enjoy one's life and possessions" (de Dijn, 2020, p. 243). Moreover, political liberty and civic liberty were often pitted against each other, and the civic liberty of individual rights, often elitist, was advocated more as an antidote to the limitations of democracy. This change became a turning point:

> In the postrevolutionary period, the idea that human beings had individual rights was increasingly invoked to argue against any extension of democracy. Political actors came to insist that popular government, instead of being an indispensable foundation for rights such as religious freedom and property, posed a major threat to them. (p. 226)

Thus, direct democracy was changed into a liberal democracy that enhanced judicial systems, added balances and checks, and positioned individual rights—the rights of those who were rich and powerful—at the center as against government constraints. While the government was cast as under suspicion in this shift, actually it was the fear of the masses and their participation in governing that was the undercurrent. In short, the modern notion of individual liberty as against the constraints of the government actually originated from antidemocratic counterforces. The Cold War of the last century reinforced such an approach. Isaiah Berlin's (1958/1969) well-known distinction between negative freedom as being against government interference and positive freedom as being able to achieve one's potential cast positive freedom under suspicion of misuse by the government. In the contemporary age, many tend to forget that freedom is not about fighting

against governmental constraints, but about "the establishment of greater popular control over government, including the use of state power to enhance the collective well-being" (de Dijn, 2020, p. 345). Of course, this historical trajectory has not been linear or reductive, as democratic freedom has inspired civil rights movements, women's movements, and decolonizing movements globally.

This historical understanding clarifies some of the confusion about the contested and unresolved nature of freedom in today's American society. The sweeping impact of recent Supreme Court rulings without the support of a majority of the American people is an alarming example of how the notion of individual rights or states' rights in the U.S. context can serve antidemocratic purposes. The individual choice not to wear a mask disregards its impact on others' safety and, while couched in "freedom of choice," is not so much about freedom as about an individual right that erodes collective freedom. The earlier conception of freedom connects individual and collective freedom through acknowledging the communal welfare, from which the sense of individual rights as the center of attention in the conception of modern liberty has deviated. However, today's liberal democracy often obscures the nature of democratic freedom.

On the other hand, I do not think the majority rule in democratic freedom is free from problems when legitimate minority rights are pushed away or when many participants do not practice their "freedom" for the common good. Using force to defend freedom when it is under threat started with the Greco-Roman tradition, which contributed to the Western domination of the world in later times. While popular self-government was a cornerstone of political freedom, freedom practiced internally as self-mastery has also been a thread of Western thought since the Greco-Roman tradition, although this thread was often embedded in elitist and rationalist tendencies, as Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoic philosophers were not fans of democratic freedom (de Dijn, 2020). However, I would argue that, without cultivating inner freedom within the individual, institutional procedures do not necessarily lead to a common welfare. A participant in my earlier life history project, Song, who majored in political science, through his cross-cultural journey between China and the U.S., realized that the efforts to build systems "to ensure the good part and eliminate the bad part" are futile, because "they are two sides of one coin" (Wang, 2014, p. 86). For him, there is no system—however refined—without limitations, and individual spiritual transcendence beyond forms of systems and rational control is more important. Ordinary people often have a higher level of transcendence through their lived experience without formal education than do those with more intellectual development, which can become an obstacle to achieving it. Paying attention to inner freedom is not necessarily elitist, but essentially important for education rooted in transforming an individual from within (Pinar, 1994).

Michel Foucault (1984/1997, 1985, 1986) goes back to the Greco-Roman tradition in his later work to regenerate the notion of the care of the self as a practice of active freedom for self-mastery, in contrast to the later Christian self-renunciation and the modern conception of the subject seeking essential truth. He points out that the nature of such self-mastery and self-determination was elitist, male, and rational through the control of passions, desires, and conduct, so he does not aim to recover this Greco-Roman notion *per se* but to question the modern Western conception of the human subject. While de Dijn (2020) makes the link between the anti-democratic tendency of cultivating personal freedom and the modern notion of the individual subject who possesses liberal rights, Foucault re-articulates subjectivity beyond scientific reason and turns to the body and the aesthetic for the possibility of self-creation.

Critiquing the modern subject with its central concerns with truth, transcendental essence, and rational agency, Foucault does not define freedom through identity building, but through nonidentity in intellectually, ethically, and aesthetically crafting one's own life and creating new

modes of subjectivity in an ongoing process (Wang, 2004). It is an open-ended approach, beyond the modern notion of free will, truth claims, and individual rights. The care of the self is not for the autonomy of the subject, or the independence of a free will, or liberation through rational agency, but as "an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to obtain a certain mode of being" (Foucault, 1984/1997, p. 282). As an exercise, freedom is not the property of the human subject, but is fluid in the circulation of power relations, and power is "the constitutive instability and possibility of the reversibility of power itself, of power's always potentially being otherwise, of its never being ultimately determined" (Golder, 2013, p. 18). Through his postmodern articulation of power as relationships, Foucault's notion of subjectivity is both constraining and freeing, constituted through societal constraints while at the same time having the capacity for constituting itself.

In this complicated, simultaneous movement, the human subject can transcend the system and yet at the same time cannot be completely free from it. In this sense, Foucauldian freedom works with the limits to release difference without relying on a metanarrative of liberation, which is fluid, productive, and capable of deconstructing the fixation of the grand political ideal. On the other hand, the necessity of a rupture with the self as the basis for transgressing external control in Foucault's freedom of self-creation still re-iterates the conception of freedom as against internal and external constraints, albeit in a fluid way, and thus still misses the link of "freedom-with."

Contesting the liberal notion of individualism, Judith Butler (2020) points out that vulnerability "should not be considered as a subjective state, but rather as a feature of our shared or interdependent lives" (p. 45). The equality of grievable lives in the global setting opens a space for "freedom as defined in part by our constitutive interdependency" (p. 24). This contest is consistent with the long-standing feminist critiques of the Western tradition of privileging rational control, masculine active agency, and the mechanism of objectification, as the fluidity and plurality of the female body disrupts gendered binaries and dominant modes of freedom (Kristeva, 1996; Smith, 2021; Wang, 2004). They advocate for a relational, non-dominating, and sustainable sense of freedom, in which challenging the limits is intertwined with responsibility for the other (hooks, 1994/2020; Ziarek, 2001).

Moving between psychoanalytic and social/political theories, Butler (2020) asserts the necessary use of aggression and defines nonviolence as aggressive resistance against violence to pursue equality and freedom. Her recognition of vulnerability as a form of social relation and of the link between freedom and interdependency have profound implications for our in-depth understanding of the primary connection in human and planetary life as the tie *through* which human freedom is possible. Advocating nonviolence for more than a decade myself,[3] I agree with Butler that nonviolence is a force, yet I am not sure where her "rerouting aggression" (p. 27) *without transforming it* would lead us. As Butler points out, nonviolence is not helpful for morality, as part of the superego serves as the regulator of psychic aggression; however, I prefer converting aggression into a compassionate force through attuning to the energy of interconnectedness. Nelson Mandela's (2002, 2003) long walk to freedom transformed his viewpoints, and he walked out of prison leading South Africa on the path of truth and reconciliation. Interestingly, he fought for the right to start a garden in the prison where he had been confined for 27 years, and attending to the garden offered him "a small taste of freedom" in confinement (2003, p. 233). Here the freedom-from and freedom-to were intertwined in the mode of freedom-with the garden, where he could stay in contact with the positive energy of life to sustain his struggles. His pathway involved the transformation of aggression into a positive force of embracing freedom for *all*, including previous enemies. I would argue that it is in this transformation that the power of education lies.

I think that interdependency is *the condition* for life to be possible and to flourish, and it is our response to it (aggression, compassion, or indifference; compulsive self-sufficiency, pre-determined control, or relational freedom) that determines the nature of relational dynamics. As an educator, I also assert that responses should be educated ones, because conditions for compassionate responses can be created in curriculum and teaching, and possibilities for freedom can be cultivated in the ongoing struggles to transform both the inner and outer worlds. There is resonance between Zhuangzi's freedom and Foucault's freedom in their aspirations towards self-transcendence, and both convey a sense of going beyond conventional constraints, be they material or mental, internal or external. However, while such self-transcendence is seen as a break in Western freedom, Zhuangzi's personhood dissolves the self without breaking with the web—in fact, the possibility of going beyond constraints is *through* attuning to the interconnectedness of life. In other words, freedom-with is the primary mode but can include a variety of specific, fitting responses, such as freedom-to, freedom-from, freedom-beyond, freedom-within, to list a few. It also exceeds rationality and reason, which is often associated with the Western ideal of inner freedom following the Greco-Roman tradition of the care of the self. However, democratic conceptions of political freedom, which provide external conditions for the exercise of subjective freedom, are lacking in Zhuangzian freedom. It is at the intersection of internal and external freedom where I would like to speak about curriculum attunement.

## Curriculum Attunement

Building dynamic interactions between inner and outer freedom—a gap in the Greco-Roman tradition between elitist and public practices—is important for the field of curriculum studies. *Currere*, popularized though the Reconceptualization movement in the U.S. and curriculum studies worldwide, works at such a site, as the democratization of the inner world is intertwined with the democratization of the external world (Pinar, 1994, 2012, 2019a). Expansion of the internal space is intimately connected with creating a vibrant public life for subjective and social preservation and reconstruction (Pinar, 2019a). Maxine Greene (1988) asserted the dialectic of freedom decades ago in education: "It is through and by means of education, many of us believe, that individuals can be provoked to reach beyond themselves in their intersubjective space" (p. 12). Freedom beyond the self needs the support of a democratic community.

Madeleine Grumet's (1988) body reading, Janet Miller's (2005) post-structural feminist autobiography, Denise Taliaferro Baszile's (2015) critical race/feminist *currere*, and Shawna Knox's (2021) decolonizing *currere* provide specific gendered, racial, or intersectional pathways for embodying such a practice of freedom by building inner and outer connections. As William Doll's (2012) questioning of the notion of control in education through historical inquiry demonstrates, the mechanism of control for imposition and domination must be deconstructed from its root, and I argue such a mechanism underlies various forms of social violence and should be emptied out in Zhuangzi's sense of freedom-with. Particularly in a time of crises when we can easily blame external constraints for all the problems, shadow projections in both the individual and the collective psyches can be mobilized quickly and passionately to split the inner and outer worlds. It then becomes crucial that we insist on standing at the threshold between the inner and the outer to uncover possibilities through viewing both worlds and resisting aggression against "enemies" both within and without.

In my own lived experience of cross-cultural journeys as a student and as an educator, confusion and struggles have been abundant and so have revelations and awakenings. Those moments when I truly felt free were often moments *after* I felt connected, connected to the root of a big oak tree (Wang, 2004), to others, or to the flowing nature of stillness (Wang, 2014). In teaching, I felt connected to a creative flow when everything fit together, was attuned and interrelated, and when the relational dynamics of students co-creating with one another and with the world led to a sense of freedom in mutual exploration and intersubjective resonance. It is through connecting with the "living wholeness" (Aoki, 2005) of a unique situation and the dissolution of ego-consciousness that I feel free. While it is possible that my own cultural traditions predispose me to a sense of "freedom-with," the interdependence in the Jungian collective unconscious as the condition for life and the interdependency through which freedom is partially constituted in Butler's theory have become part of Western consciousness as well. Cultural differences lie in a different degree of the conscious recognition of interconnectedness that exists.

Attunement is often associated with sound, music, or aesthetic rhythms, but it is broader than that: Daoist attunement is through *qi*, the energy that connects everything and everybody. I use the term "attunement" to indicate that tuning in with the world requires tuning in with the self to come up with the most appropriate responses not only to fit in what the situation calls for but also to make new contributions to potential change in both the self and the world. The direction of influence is mutual as the environment influences as well as responds to human action. As Aoki (2005) argues, there is no need for attunement without tensionality, so attunement means harmony through "working difference" (Miller, 2005). Cultivating the inner freedom and relational freedom that contribute to the well-being of all participants is enabled by curriculum attunement to the creative tensions of human and ecological relationality.

Drawing upon George Grant's work, Pinar (2019b) explains, "Like revelation, attunement cannot be possessed or summoned; one decenters and waits, open—listening—to what lies beyond" (p. 261), and "freedom is enlisted in becoming open to that beyond" (p. 262). Attunement to the transcendent is also situated in what the moment and the context requires. Quietude and contemplation can create openings for subjective freedom, "an inner space of felt freedom wherein attunement becomes possible" (p. 269); thus, freedom and attunement mutually enable each other. While embodied, for Grant, attunement is towards God, for Zhuangzi, it is openness to cosmic energy in which immanence and transcendence are mutually embedded in each other. For curriculum as a complicated conversation, teachers' and students' attuned listening and participation in educational experience as lived open the potential for transforming the self and the social as well as curriculum itself. In Doll's (2012) terms, transformative and emergent curriculum cannot be centralized but must be dissipative, and its structure emerges through attuning to the interactions of all components.

For Zhuangzi, listening through ear or heart is not adequate; to follow *Dao* is to listen through *qi*. The quietude for emptying out preconceived assumptions, instrumental attachment, and possessive desires that is achieved through cultivating the stillness inside and reaching beyond is enabled by connecting with ever-changing cosmic movement. Following "what is revealed through attunement" (Pinar, 2019b, p. 375), one responds fittingly in order to work with the constraints and carve out new openings while not provoking more blockages. Zhuangzian freedom resonates with the three aspects of listening, quietude, and transcendence in Pinar's (2019b) curriculum attunement, although there might be different angles.

Curriculum attunement simultaneously attends to both the internal and external, the historical and imaginative, the explicit and implicit, and both the constraints and potential. At the

intersection between the inner and outer work, attuning to both constraints and the potentiality of the self and the world leads to their mutual transformation. The significance of the subjective presence in education against the context of cultural crises (Pinar, 2023) becomes even more urgent today. I believe that the root of curriculum lies in the cultivation of personhood that can exceed the established cultural and social norms. Getting in touch with relational dynamics also goes beyond the limits of individual subjectivity to provide improvised flexibility for creative directions in meeting entangled challenges. Curriculum as lived experience is historically and temporally situated (Aoki, 2005; Huebner, 1999), and future possibilities can be re-imagined by attending to the past, individual, and collective, and tapping into the inner abundance of time. This conference site also requires attuning to the history of the *JCT*/Bergamo conference as well as the history of curriculum studies as a field and diving into its inner complexity in order for curriculum studies to have a future. Attunement also attends to the unsaid or the implicit in individuals and institutions so that freedom can be carved out in the interstitial space for finding ways to work with explicit constraints. As Aoki (2005) points out, curriculum conversations across differences "must be guided by an interest in understanding more fully what is not said by going beyond what is said" (p. 227). Seeking freedom through the unsaid, the silent, and the gaps does not have to be explicit, but follows the contours of constraints to open the potential for improvised directions.

Such a simultaneous attending to both the inner and outer world does not mean that these two dimensions necessarily coincide because, on most occasions, they are in tension. Outer freedom provides external conditions for actualizing inner freedom, but inner freedom can exceed outer freedom to expand its limits. Ours is a time when we are called to rise above the turbulence in the external world, where it feels like everything is crashing down, but we must stand tall and be firmly rooted in human possibilities to expand the interior space for "sacred freedom," as Naomi Poinexter (2022) discussed earlier in this conference. The gathering together of inner freedom can expand the limits of outer freedom, not so much in the way of adding up individual components but in the sense of shifting relational dynamics (Doll, 2012). Attuned to the tensions between the inner and outer freedoms, curriculum and pedagogy are rooted in cultivating students' inner freedom and attending to relational complexity through intellectual, aesthetic, political, ethical, and spiritual experiences.

The inner and outer quest for freedom has rung through the field of education as clearly as a bell. For Maxine Greene (1988), freedom is "an opening of spaces as well as perspectives" (p. 5) to disclose possibility, to cultivate critical understandings and reflections, to overcome and engage in the praxis of shared becoming through dialogues, with the awareness that such a project is always uncertain and incomplete. Greene (1988, 1995) advocates engaging students in art, imagination, and aesthetic experiences to free their ability to "take the initiative in reaching beyond their own actualities, in looking at things as if they could be otherwise" (1988, p. 124), and in re-making a democratic community together.

bell hooks (1994/2020) approaches a pedagogy of freedom as both liberating from domination and creating new visions at the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and other layers of social difference, urging all of us:

> to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions. I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement that makes education the practice of freedom. (p. 12)

Echoing her passionate call, issues of identity and power and struggles against oppression in many different dimensions are on central stage in critical approaches to curriculum and education, for example, Nina Asher (2007), Paulo Freire (1970/2000), and Nichole Guillory (2021). These influential works are all powerful formulations of exercising freedom in education, and their applications are further deepened in today's backlash against critical race theory and LGBTQ rights, which are officially banned from many schools. Consistent with the notion of freedom as breaking away from internal or external constraints, we often hear a call for liberation from domination, for transgression of the boundaries, and about the importance of building a community.

An interesting question to ask is: Is there a place for accepting the constraints in Zhuangzi's sense of freedom-within as a mode of freedom-with? For example, is working *within the constraints* of climate change a fitting response? It is denying the constraints that makes it impossible to responsibly respond; blind faith in the human transcendence of the world has contributed to the environmental crisis. There is a cosmic and human virtue in working within constraints. We must re-learn the lessons of living with the natural world, which is much bigger than we are, through restoring a view of ecological interdependence. In social and cultural realms, recognizing multiple, specific modes of freedom through working within and with the constraints is also necessary. In decolonizing education (Grande, 2004; Hopkins, 2020; Patel, 2016), we not only need to thoroughly deconstruct the mechanisms of colonization, but we also need to listen to the indigenous voices that situate curriculum in history, land, place, harmony and balance, and ecological interrelatedness (Mankiller, 2011). Indigenous traditions in North America support educating the body, heart, and spirit of the whole person, whose inner landscape is intimately related to the external world, and living in synchronized relationships with nature (Archibald, 2008; Chamber, 2008). These insights, the wisdom, resonate with Zhuangzi's message that human freedom cannot be unrestricted but must be in tune with the life force of the cosmos.

We need to seek out new pathways of co-dwelling in the midst of tension, difference, and polarization. As discussed earlier, freedom-with as Zhuangzi's primary mode, contains diverse, specific responses: freedom-from, freedom-to, freedom-within, and freedom-beyond. So, all different forms of freedom should be exercised in education according to what specific situations call for, and Zhuangzian freedom adds dimensions that we have tended to neglect. As Jon Smythe (2020) argues, a cluttered mind and a cluttered curriculum can both benefit from an infusion of Daoist emptiness. Freedom in emptiness involves letting go of pre-determined expectations, biases and binaries, and external control, as well as following the flow of what emerges in the process of generative interactions in the classroom. It is this sense of freedom with interconnectedness that I think curriculum attunement must attend to.

Curriculum attunement to relational dynamics between and among teacher, student, text, and context leads to actualizing the potentiality of all participants without imposition. Attunement suggests creating pedagogical conditions for students to take initiatives, explore alternatives, seek possibilities, and question the given. By not forcing a particular direction, the potentiality of students' lived experience can be opened. In my own teaching, I've found that when students practice their freedom and when matching conditions are created, students can travel far beyond what I can imagine. The teacher's willingness to offer companionship to accompany students' exploration is an anchor for their free exploration. Perhaps the sense that "You are not alone" is more important than "you belong here" in releasing the potential for students to find a deeper sense of connectedness, not with the crowd, but with a sense of purpose, meaning, and commitment to our shared life. The teacher's critical self-reflexivity is also important. When pedagogical relationships have broken down, I examine my own inner world to understand how I have

contributed to the curriculum of difficulty and how I must integrate my own inner shadow rather than projecting it onto students who resist my teaching (Wang, 2016). Self-reflexivity must go deeper into subjectivity and the psyche to enlarge the interior space in order to make better connections with others so that we can co-create conditions for different perspectives to mingle, juxtapose, and integrate to generate new directions.

Attuning to history, culture, politics, nature, and personhood, curriculum as a practice of freedom embedded in interconnectedness embraces the starlight in the night sky, moves to the sounds of steps on sustainable paths, and playfully wanders in the world to enrich the inner space and enable alternative visions of public life for the mutual flourishing of society and the planet.

## Notes

**1.** This paper was the keynote for the 42nd Annual Bergamo Conference. My deep thanks to Professor Thomas Poetter and his team for inviting me. It brought back the memory of the first Bergamo Conference I attended in 1996, when William E. Doll, Jr., drove me and a few other students to the conference. He passed away five years ago in December, and I miss him and his optimism, especially in today's time of crisis. My heartfelt and profound gratitude to William F. Pinar for founding this conference and journal and Janet Miller for her tireless work on leading both for decades, to provide an open, transformative, and inspiring intellectual space for a complicated conversation that is curriculum. Acknowledging my intellectual debt, I also pass this gift to my own students.

**2.** There are debates about Zhuangzi as a person. I mostly use *Zhuangzi* as a book, but when needed, I use it as a person as well. All of the translations are my own after consulting Chinese texts of *Zhuangzi*. A Chinese version of *Zhuangzi* is listed in the reference list. Since there are many different translations, my citation gives the chapter number and title, rather than page number, which makes it easier to locate them in different translations.

**3.** It might be worthwhile to mention that the *JCT* editorial I wrote in 2010, "A Zero Space of Nonviolence," was the first of my publications that advocated nonviolence (Wang, 2010). Since then, I have worked on formulating nonviolence as a daily practice of education in multiple dimensions, with a book (Wang, 2014) and a dozen articles.

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