

Education as Finding the Other in Self

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As Naoko Saito's essay, "Gifts from a Foreign Land: *Lost in Translation* and the Understanding of Other Cultures" notes, international education discourse often suggests that education should lead to mutual understanding of foreign cultures and learning from cultural difference. This stance is more hopeful than another common attitude: that there are inscrutable, essential cultural differences worldwide that are difficult, if not impossible, to bridge. However, within the mutual-understanding approach, one's experience of fear and alienation in visiting unknown and foreign worlds "tends to be obliterated," the essay claims. One's language as a means to comprehend the world and one's criteria of judgment are challenged in such contexts, creating a sense of loss. Yet through becoming lost and losing one's sense of centrality to the world, one can be deeply transformed and reborn — not just learn about difference, but learn about one's self in the world.

This reframing of cross-cultural education for awakening does not merely answer the question asked in the essay's introduction, of how hope can arise out of fear, when one becomes implicated in foreignness, in a strange land. It also observes how the other and difference can be found in oneself. While an encounter with cultural or foreign difference provides a sense of loss, you see yourself in a new way, as different and other, when you look through another's eyes. In *Lost in Translation*, the two Americans are thus reborn through seeing through each other's eyes, despite coming from the same "culture," in the ordinary sense of the concept, after losing their unitary and complete senses of their selves in Japan. By seeing a previously unknown other of her self, another side, a person can be awakened as she is transformed.

This view of how one encounters difference outwardly and inwardly takes us in a different direction from the apparent main goal of much cross-cultural education, of developing understanding across international borders. Yet I would argue that this redirection, in a sense, expands our view of international education rather than fundamentally challenging it, highlighting something that merely gets left out of less systematic representations rather than being obliterated. As Saito suggests, when one wants to learn, and the experience of difference is less immersive, one can avoid the experience of becoming significantly lost. Yet intentional enhancement of understanding as an ordinary aim of education can also provide for reorientation toward the world with space for personal transformation, albeit perhaps less deeply felt.

Here, I think of my students in Hong Kong, in my freshman class on globalization. It seems some of them become lost in my classroom, discovering strangeness and losing their unproblematic sense of self as I discuss how I, as a foreigner, see Hong Kong, enabling their rebirth through seeing through my eyes. In this case, as Saito describes it, they can be said to have received a gift from a foreign land through my eyes, which transforms their simpler self-images, regardless of my potential

chauvinism or wrongheadedness (that is, the important aspect is not that my view is right or wrong or good or bad). Other students may learn more pragmatically about globalization in my class. Yet by seeking to name the world and globalization from a new view, broadening their perspective from nothing, ignorance, or previous assumption, cannot these students also see their selves anew? Personal growth and transformation can take place in degrees, particularly given a view of philosophy as translation as a partially passive, tentative process, wherein one better aims at first than home base, as Saito elaborates. Rebirth is therefore a complementary rather than competing or challenging aim within a broader view of international education, given that education can also ordinarily be seen as a kind of enculturation.

Though it is not a primary concern of the essay, the politics of difference is significant to experiencing cultural education, and so it is difficult for me to ignore it in examining cultural or international education as a process. To experience a split self and identify an other in one's self, one arguably does not need to leave Hong Kong or the United States. Yet one must lose one's sense of unitary, known self. Feelings of bottomlessness, obscurity, and uncertainty create space for rebirth. Alienation or distancing one's view from one's previous experience of self is required. A splitting self can be found as one encounters or crosses levels of power within a cultural context. One can experience loss of confidence in one's lens at home when one's learned perspective is ignored or denied. The contemporary recognition of different experiences by race in the United States reveals dualistic, split experiences of self for many black Americans, and challenges to previously unitary, unquestioned, comfortable views of self for white Americans. Yet I fear such experiences of inequality and being oppressed or essentially challenged move people to both hopeful and fearsome states of rebirth. When the field is misty, as portrayed in Saito's essay, not completely known or seen in advance, how can we determine the best path to first base?

My campus advertises its international composition, but many of our students can be observed rejecting or resisting foreign influence in a way that would shock some people: for example, refusing to speak to a foreign student who sits beside them in class, even after being greeted. As higher education and class mobility become less attainable for young Hongkongers, might these students be seen as transforming in relation to their experiences of alienation? Or are they insulating themselves from a sense of loss and rebirth, distancing themselves from their view of university student-centered liberal arts education, a recent, American intervention? Again, I find it hard to distinguish insulation from transformation as a means of education as rebirth, as both can be seen as constructive processes, where dual senses of self can potentially appear.

"Gifts from a Foreign Land" does provide an alternative direction from that of contemporary international education discourse, in articulating alienating and awakening education as partly unintentional and passive. In this view, the student need not see herself as a student. In *Lost in Translation*, Bob and Charlotte are not in Tokyo to learn — and the primary learning that happens comes not from formal educational sources, such as the self-help tapes or Ikebana class. Outside any classroom, our work in understanding the world is described as an endless experiment,

in Stanley Cavell's reading of Henry David Thoreau, as we continually feel for the bottom of the pond without certainty or clarity.¹

By implication, a critique of today's typical global education frameworks is provided in the essay. That education should have as its goal the global citizen, equipped with more or less certain knowledge through simple translation across difference and dissemination of information, seems implicit in much educational discourse and practices. Why is such an incomplete or inaccurate view given? Perhaps in promoting internationalization, the necessity of getting lost is merely left out so as not to scare people. Or the story is told from the side of victors apparently resilient to alienation's darker, more problematic risks and challenges, some of which I have alluded to here. Here, I also think of the popularity of positive psychology in education today, which asks people to work to experience and express only happiness. From this perspective, people like me, who do not actually always experience international life and learning as a great blessing and object of undying gratitude and luck and privilege, are discouraged from noting how growth and rebirth feel bad sometimes, making even breathing difficult in the everlasting mist (which is also mixed with pollution, in Hong Kong). There certainly is, as Saito notes, a profound loss of foundations of self, other, and culture involved. Internationalization of self may be a gift, but it is one that requires amputation of previously essential parts of self.

"Gifts from a Foreign Land" articulates how learning about others, culture, the foreign, and difference is also learning about the self. This clearly requires a broader conceptualization of international and cultural education. The outcomes of such educations are not adequately seen as mere gifts, as Saito continues. As experience, education that develops the self cannot be fun or happy all of the time or easily laid out toward preplanned destinations. As transformation requires a removal of the comforts of home, while loss is experienced in mixed, often negative ways, transformative international education requires pain and fear. Justifying the negative and promoting a vision of bottomlessness and obscurity are difficult to do today, running contrary to internationalization discourse and opening up questions about the very nature of difference. Can we reform the completely positive dream, augmenting it with unknown and diminishing within it the superficially known? I thank Saito for her work in this direction, as understanding difference can be so much more than a simple language translation.

1. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).